Bringing the Truth of Christ to Your Generation

Are you a believer wondering if you're part of a dwindling population? Do people who follow hard after Christ—and show it by their actions and attitudes—seem to be a vanishing breed? Do you get the feeling that we're living in a post–Christian culture? We're not announcing the end of the Church in America and the West, but there is much cause for concern. We have the evidence straight from the mouths of believers—many of them caught up in captivity to the culture.

Here at Probe, we have been analyzing both existing and new original survey data to obtain a better grip on the realities of born-again faith in America today. Although the evangelical church has remained fairly constant in size as a percentage of our population over the last twenty years, these surveys show its impact on our society has continued to decline as the percentage of non–Christians has grown considerably over the same period. We see two reasons for this change:

> *1. The increased acceptance of pluralism removes the felt need to share our faith with others. In our new Barna survey, almost one half of all born-again 18- to 40-year-olds believe that Jesus is one way to eternal life, but Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, etc. when followed well, will also result in eternal life.*
>
> *2. Captivity to the culture rather than to Christ's truth shapes believers' perspectives on nearly every aspect of life. The recent National Study of Youth & Religion, a survey of 18- to 23-year-olds, shows that only a quarter of those affiliated with an evangelical church have a consistent set of biblical theological beliefs and that less than 2% of them combine those theological beliefs with a consistent set of biblical beliefs on behaviors and attitudes.*

A combination of pluralism and cultural captivity eliminates both the reason for and the evidence of changed lives needed to effectively share the great news of the gospel of Jesus Christ. However, these problems are not unique to our time and country. In fact, these problems were key issues addressed in the letters of Peter, John and Paul back in the first century. In this article, we will use the writings of Peter to introduce Paul's response to this problem as laid out in the book of Colossians with special emphasis on Col. 4:2-6.

As advocates of apologetics and a biblical worldview, we often focus on 1 Peter 3:15, which exhorts us to always be ready to give a defense for the hope of the gospel to anyone who asks. However, Peter points out that our testimony for Christ, goes far beyond our ability to make a reasoned defense. In the first chapter of his letter, Peter provides an excellent description of the hope of the gospel. He makes it clear that only through the resurrection of Christ can we can receive eternal life. He then goes on to describe the ways that we are called to "proclaim the excellencies of Him who called us out of darkness into His marvelous light." Specifically, we are told to proclaim Christ through:

- *our excellent behavior (1 Peter 2:11-17),*
- *our right relationships with others (1 Peter 2:18–3:14),*
- *a verbal explanation of why we believe the good news (1 Peter 3:15-16), and*
- *sound judgment for the purpose of prayer (1 Peter 4:7)*

As our behavior and relationships cause observers to ask us to fully explain the hope that is driving these actions, we have the opportunity to speak the truth to them with words empowered by prayer (1 Peter 3:15-16). So Peter makes it clear that pluralism and cultural captivity are counter to the message of the gospel as portrayed in the lives of genuine

believers.

Given this message from Peter, let's take a more in–depth look at how Paul addresses this topic in his letter to the Colossians. In the first two chapters, Paul gives an in–depth description of what the gospel is and what it is not. In the New American Standard version, the reader is told to "set your mind on the things above" where we are living with Christ. Because we are residents of heaven, we need to consider our life on earth from that eternal perspective. From this point on in the letter, Paul lays out the same four instructions as Peter laid out on how we are to share Christ in this world.

In Colossians 3:5–17, we are given the standard for excellent behavior that our *new self* is being renewed to live in accordance with. As Paul makes clear in the first two chapters, this excellent behavior is not a qualification for heaven; after all, according to Colossians 2:9, the audience of believers is already "complete in Christ." Rather, the purpose of our excellent behavior is so the world can get a savory taste of heavenly living.

Then, in Colossians 3:18–4:1, Paul instructs us on the importance of **good relationships** in our families and at work. It is through our good relationships that the world can see the true meaning of "love your neighbor as you love yourself." As Paul points out, in all of these relationships "it is the Lord Christ whom you serve."

Paul then points to the remaining aspects of fully proclaiming Christ: through **our prayers** and **our words**. He addresses our prayer life as follows:

> *Devote yourselves to prayer, keeping alert in it with an attitude of thanksgiving; praying at the same time for us as well, that God will open up to us a door for the word, so that we may speak forth the mystery of Christ, for which I have also been imprisoned; that I may make it clear in the*

way I ought to speak (Col. 4:2-4).

First, we are to devote ourselves to **prayer**, making it a strong player in ordering our lives. I think that "keeping alert in it" gives us the idea that we are to be ready to take something to prayer at any time during our busy daily schedule. Prayer is not to be strictly relegated to a set prayer time, but rather a real–time, always–on communication with God in response to the interactions and challenges of our day. Paul also indicates we should not be praying as a rote habit, but rather with an attitude of thanksgiving, knowing that God hears and responds to our prayers.

Secondly, Paul gives us a consistent topic for our **prayers**: that God would open up a door for the word in the lives of those who need to hear. We may live a life characterized by excellent behavior and good relationships. But, if we are not praying that God will use our lives to open up a door for the gospel, then we are short–circuiting the purpose of God in our lives. Let me say it directly to you: If you are not seeing doors opening for the word through your life, perhaps you should ask, "What am I praying for? Am I praying that God will open up opportunities for me to share Christ with others?"

Note that in the first chapter of Colossians, Paul explains the mystery of Christ we are to "speak forth" saying,

> *. . .That I might fully carry out the preaching of the word of God, that is, the **mystery** which has been hidden from the past ages and generations, but has now been manifested to His saints, to whom God willed to make known what is the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles, which is **Christ in you, the hope of glory**" (Col. 1:25-27).*

We are praying for an open door to speak forth so that everyone can receive the promise of eternal glory through receiving Christ in their lives. In other words, we need to

actively ask God to give us entrée into others' lives to communicate the gospel so they can receive the riches of eternal life along with us. Do we really want this? It's a prayer God is sure to answer. If so, we're living according to a biblical worldview in one more essential way. If not, we risk the loss of succeeding generations.

Finally, Paul addresses the importance of our **words** in fulfilling our purpose as followers of Christ:

> *Conduct yourselves with wisdom toward outsiders, making the most of the opportunity. Let your speech always be with grace, as though seasoned with salt, so that you will know how you should respond to each person (Col. 4:5-6).*

We need to be wise in our relationships with those who don't know Christ. The verse literally says we are to redeem the time spent with unbelievers. As followers of Christ, we have the privilege of taking the most temporal and earth–bound thing in the world, time, and converting it into something of eternal value through our behavior, our relationships, our prayers and the words we speak.

We are to make the most of each opportunity to season our speech with the grace of Christ. If our speech is regularly salted with references to God's grace in our lives, we can tell from someone's reaction how we should respond to them. If we are not looking for it, how can we know when God answers our prayers to provide an open door for the gospel? And why would we be praying for it unless we value what God is saying to us here?

In summary, we must make clear to upcoming generations of evangelicals that we have a consistent message from Christ and His apostles on these two points:

> *1. Jesus Christ is the unique Son of God and the only possible way to eternal life. Religious pluralism just*

> *doesn't work.*
>
> *2. We are called to live distinctly different lives—as captives of Christ not our culture—in our behavior, relationships, prayers and speech. Why? In order to be representatives of the good news of Jesus Christ in a world that desperately needs Him.*

If we choose to live our lives as if these statements are untrue, we have allowed ourselves to be deceived by the persuasive arguments of the world. Let's make the choice not to be taken captive and, instead, be bold and caring in proclaiming the truth for our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

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Boy Scouts and the ACLU: A War of Worldviews

Byron Barlowe, an Eagle Scout and Assistant Scoutmaster, assesses the battle with the values of the ACLU from an insider's perspective.

Traditional Mainstay As Good Cultural Influence vs. Liberal Legal Activists with Social Engineering Agenda

In a gang-ridden section of Dallas, 13-year-old Jose saw a Boy Scouts recruiting poster. That started Jose's improbable climb to Scouting's highest rank of Eagle and a life of beating the odds. He said this about Scoutmaster Mike Ross: "He was a father figure watching over me, the first time I felt it from

someone other than my [single] mom."{1}

In February 2010, the Boy Scouts of America, or BSA, celebrated a century of building traditional values into nearly 100 million youths like Jose through adults like Mr. Ross. The original Boy Scouts began in England in 1907. The Prime Minister said the new movement was "potentially 'the greatest moral force the world has ever known'." Yet surprisingly, there are those who would gut the movement of its culture-shaping distinctives.

In this article we take a look at the warring worldviews of The BSA and its arch-enemy, The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU). In his book *On My Honor: Why the American Values of the Boy Scouts Are Worth Fighting For*, Texas governor and Eagle Scout Rick Perry writes, "The institutions we saw as bulwarks of stability—such as the Scouts—are under steady attack by groups that seem intent upon remaking (if not replacing) them in pursuit of a very different [worldview]."{2} In a crusade to elevate the minority viewpoints of girls who want entry, as well as atheists and gay activists, the ACLU's unending efforts to ensure inclusiveness undermine the very Scout laws and oath that make it strong—commitment to virtues like kindness, helpfulness and trustworthiness. This is no less than a war of worldviews.

I ran through all the ranks from Cub Scouts to Eagle Scout, worked professionally with the BSA, and now serve as Asst. Scoutmaster. I have first-hand, lifelong knowledge of Scouting's benefits to boys, their families, and society. Nowhere else can young men-in-the-making be exposed to dozens of new interests (which often inspire lasting careers) and gain confidence in everything from leadership to lifesaving to family life. Scouting is good life skills insurance!

The pitched battle between the BSA and the ACLU embodies what many call the Culture Wars—battles that in this case reveal contrasting values like humanism vs. religious faith,

politically correct “tolerance” vs. more traditional, absolutist views and radical individual rights vs. group–centered freedoms of speech and association. The contrast is stark.

Conservatives relate most to Scouting. “Of course, the *Boy Scout Handbook* is rarely regarded as being a conservative book. That probably accounts for why the *Handbook* has managed to continuously stay in print since 1910. If it were widely known how masterly the book inculcates conservative values, it would, like Socrates, be charged with corrupting the nation’s youth.”{3}

Scouting is also good for culture. Harris pollsters found that former Scouts agreed in larger numbers than non-Scouts that the following behaviors are “wrong under all circumstances”: to exaggerate one’s education on a resume, lie to the IRS, and steal office supplies for home use. Scouts pull well ahead of non–Scouts on college graduation rates. The “stick-to-it” mentality that Scouting demands comes into play here and in other findings. Scouting positively affects things like treating co–workers with respect, showing understanding to those less fortunate than you and being successful in a career. “This conclusion is hard to escape: Scouting engenders respect for others, honesty, cooperation, self–confidence and other desirable traits.”{4} It also promotes the freedom to exercise a Christian worldview within its program, which provides a venue for transmitting a Christian worldview within the context of the outdoors and community service.

The absolutist morality of Scouting stands in stark relief to the moral relativism of our day and to the ACLU’s worldview. Wouldn’t you prefer to hire someone with Scouting’s values of trustworthiness and honesty?

The Battles, Including Girls Joining the BSA

The Boy Scouts of America celebrates its centennial this year, but its long-time nemesis the ACLU isn't celebrating. In fact, they and other litigants have maintained a siege against the BSA in court in order to transform key characteristics including Scouting's "duty to God," the exclusion of openly gay leaders, and Scouting's access to government forums like schools. "In all, the Boy Scouts have been involved in thirty lawsuits since the filing of the [original] case," many brought by the ACLU.{5}

The opening salvo was a string of lawsuits on behalf of girls who wanted membership, many brought by the ACLU. The primary legal issue regarding these kinds of cases is "public accommodation." The BSA's position is that refusing membership to certain individuals like girls and open gays is its right as a private organization. Freedoms of speech and association are at stake for the BSA. Indeed, the definition of freedom of association is "the right guaranteed especially by the First Amendment . . . to join with others . . . as part of a group usually having a common viewpoint or purpose and often exercising the right to assemble and to free speech."{6}

In the case of Mankes vs. the BSA, the plaintiff claimed that restricting membership to boys amounted to sex discrimination. Yet the court decided against the claim on the basis that "the Boy Scouts did not, in creating its organization to help develop the moral character of young boys, intentionally set out to discriminate against girls."{7} Even the U.S. Congress chartered separate Scouting organizations, one for girls and one for boys, not one unisex organization.

C.S. "Lewis puts it this way in discussing the crisis of post-Christian humanist education: 'We make men without chests and expect of them virtue and enterprise. We laugh at honor and

are shocked to find traitors in our midst.’”{8} I believe that even the most committed feminist would inwardly hope for brave, virtuous men of integrity. That’s what Boy Scouts is all about: engendering young men with chests.

Underneath these battles lies an aversion to any kind of discrimination of supposed victims. The ACLU’s goals raise ethical concerns: when one individual or a minority seeks rights that are not in the best interest of the community at large, it leads to unintended consequences, like possibly shutting down good institutions like the Scouts.

It’s understandable why some girls would want to participate. However, given gender differences and the right to freedom of association, it seems best to restrict the Boys Scouts to boys.

The Battles over Gay Leaders (the Scouts’ Doctrine of “Morally Straight”)

A very contentious battle between the Boy Scouts of America and equal rights advocates revolves around disallowing openly gay leaders from joining the organization. “The BSA’s position is that a homosexual who makes his sex life a public matter is not an appropriate role model of the Scout Oath and Law for adolescent boys.”{9} Or as Rick Perry puts it, “Tolerance is a two-way street. The Boy Scouts is not the proper intersection for a debate over sexual preference.” He continues, “A number of active homosexuals, with the assistance of the ACLU and…various gay activist organizations have challenged the BSA’s long-standing policy.” {10}

The landmark Dale case featured a lifelong Scouter who discovered his gay identity only then to realize the Scouts’ policy against openly gay leaders. Eventually landing in the U.S. Supreme Court, BSA vs. Dale marked the end of cases in this category. The Supreme Court ruled 5-4 that state laws may

not prohibit the BSA's moral point of view and the right to expressing its own internal leadership.{11}

Ultimately, gay people could launch their own organization and any good Scout would recognize the right for them to do this. Even the courts have implied this view, again and again upholding the Scout's rights to operate the way they see fit. Why would it be improper for a private organization like the BSA to restrict leadership to those who share its values?

"BSA units do not routinely ask a prospective adult leader about his (or her) sex life," writes Perry.{12} This approach falls in line with the controversial "Don't ask, don't tell" doctrine of the U.S. military that's currently being challenged in court. Where members of the military may be concerned about the affect of another squad member's sexuality on its rank-and-file members, Scout units are concerned with the even greater influence of adults on the minds and morals of the children they lead.

A biblical worldview recognizes that belief that gay rights supersede traditional moral teachings springs from the fleshly, fallen state of man's soul. Romans 1 says humans "suppress the truth," and speaks out against unnatural acts in a clear allusion to homosexual unions. People—sometimes believers—fight morality as revealed by God through our conscience and stated moral law. The virtue ethics of the Scouts at least makes room for this morality.

Despite all the cases, "evidence of a planned, strategic legal assault on the Scouts didn't arise until the ACLU became involved, with cases that focused Scouts' 'duty to God.'"{13}

The Battle over "Duty to God"

Boy Scouts and Scout leaders are really into patches for our uniforms. One of the most beautiful I've ever owned is my Duty to God patch earned at the legendary Rocky Mountain Scout

adventure ranch known as Philmont. The requirements were minimal: take part in several devotions and lead blessings over the food. Nothing dictated which god to pray to, just a built-in acknowledgement of the Creator. This non-sectarian, undirected acknowledgement of God is classic Scout stuff. The program has long featured specific special awards for all major world religions, including Christianity. Scouting's Creator-consciousness can seem vague or even smack of animistic Native American religion, but troops chartered by Christian organizations like ours simply turn it into a chance to honor the God of the Bible.

This hallmark of Scouting is vilified by atheists and agnostics who would participate in Scouting only minus the nod to God. The ACLU has carried out a culture-wide campaign to cut out all mention of God from the public square, motivated by a warped value of self-determination.{14} Seeking protections from all things religious, the ACLU's activist lawyers have raised human autonomy up as the ultimate good. And the Boy Scouts are a tempting target to further this cause célèbre. From where do the ACLU's motivations spring? Apparently, from the ideology known as humanism, a philosophical commitment to man as the measure of all things coupled with an atheist anti-supernatural bias. But not even Rousseau, whose political theory emphasized individual freedoms, would likely have gone so far. In his view, the individual was subordinate to the general will of the people—and most people in American society agree that the BSA's values and impact outweighs any individual right "not to hear" anything at all of religion.{15}

When the BSA lays out its broad yet very absolute requirements, the most prominent and controversial are a "duty to God"{16} and a Scout's pledge to be reverent.{17} This in no way dictates which or even what kind of deity one's faith is ascribed to, but it sharply clashes with the ACLU's ideals of secularism and humanism. In effect, the BSA directly

challenges the sacred-secular split so prevalent today, where faith is to be kept totally private and godless science serves as the only source of real knowledge. As a result of this worldview mistake, religious commitments and the supernatural are relegated to the personal, subjective, and ultimately meaningless level.

One blogger opines about a duty to God passage in the original 1910 Scout handbook:

> *"A Scout is reverent toward God. He is faithful in his religious duties. He respects the beliefs of others." Such an earnest and irony-free worldview is naturally antithetical to the South Park-style mock-the-world moronity that pervades the culture. In a society that combines libertarian Me-ism with a liberal nanny state that suckles "men without chests," it is not surprising that the ranks of Boy Scouts are dwindling (Scouting is down 11 percent over the last decade). But we should be cheerful that an institution where self-sacrifice and manly virtues are encouraged manages to survive at all.{18}*

The ACLU was not involved in the first "duty to God" case against the Scouts. Yet by 2007, its "involvement in fourteen cases against the Boy Scouts had covered, cumulatively, more than 100 years of litigation."{19} The ACLU's view, according to Governor Perry, "is that if one citizen believes there is no God, they must be protected from public references to or acknowledgement of an Almighty Creator. . . . When they get their way, the ACLU enforces upon us the tyranny of the minority."{20}

Thank God the courts have not yet allowed this to happen.

Pluralism Done Right

A fellow in my Sunday school sounded alarmed when I asked the

class to pray for a Scouting trip: “Isn’t The Boy Scouts a Mormon outfit?” Since Mormons use Scouts as their official youth program for boys, his experience was skewed. Yet, the BSA is a non-sectarian association that simply requires chartering groups to promote belief in God and requires boys to reflect on reverence according to their family’s chosen religion. *The Boy Scout Handbook*, (11th ed.) explains a Scout’s “duty to God” like this: “Your family and religious leaders teach you about God and the ways you can serve. You do your duty to God by following the wisdom of those teachings every day and by respecting and defending the rights of others to practice their own beliefs.” Note the genuine tolerance toward other religions. Even a pack or troop member cannot be forced by that unit to engage in religious observances with which they disagree.{21} This policy is the best way to handle a wide-open boys’ training program in a very pluralistic culture.

Many Christians talk as if any kind of pluralism is anathema, especially the religious kind, as if we should live in a thoroughly Christianized society that, for all intents and purposes, is like church. However, this is unrealistic. America’s Founding Fathers guarded against state-sanctioned religion.

God Himself tacitly acknowledged, even in the theocracy of the Old Testament period that living around His people were those of other religions. Jehovah didn’t force people to believe in Him. God was pluralistic in the sense of allowing man’s free will.

The Boy Scouts reflects this larger reality and it serves the organization well. It is not seeking to be a church or synagogue or temple. The BSA’s Scoutcraft skills and coaching, its citizenship and moral training, remains open to people of all religions. The BSA’s vagueness regarding “duty to God” is actually a plus for Christians interested in promoting their

own understanding of God and His world. Talk about a platform to pass along a biblical worldview! Think of it: Scouting's genius is that it combines outdoor exploits like regular camping trips and high-adventure activities with moral and religious instruction in the context of boy-run leadership training. Regular and intensive meetings with dedicated adults to review skills and Scouting's ideals provide ample time for what amounts to discipleship. Some of the richest ministry opportunities in my quarter-century as a full-time minister have been during Scoutmaster-to-Scout conferences in the great outdoors.

If you're committed to seeing the next generation of boys walk into adulthood not only as capable young men but with their faith intact, Scouting is one of the best venues out there. Hopefully, the ACLU won't be able to quash that.

Notes

1. *Readers Digest*, May, 2010, 138.
2. Rick Perry, *On My Honor: Why the American Values of the Boy Scouts Are Worth Fighting For* (Macon, GA: Stroud & Hall Publishers, 2008).
3. Carter, Joe, "The Most Influential Conservative Book Ever Produced in America," First Thoughts (the official blog of the journal First Things), posted February 8, 2010: http://bit.ly/fI8V9Z.
4. Perry, *On My Honor*, 163.
5. Ibid., 57.
6. Dictionary.com. *Merriam-Webster's Dictionary of Law*. Merriam-Webster, Inc. http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/freedom of association (accessed: April 21, 2010).
7. Perry, *On My Honor*, 59.
8. Lewis, C.S., *The Abolition of Man* (Macmillan Publishing: New York, NY) 1947, p. 34; as quoted by R. J. Snell, "Making Men without Chests: The Intellectual Life and Moral Imagination," First Principles: ISI Web Journal, posted Feb.

25, 2010: www.firstprinciplesjournal.com/articles.aspx?article=1380.
9. Ibid., 69.
10. Ibid., 71.
11. Ibid., 71-73.
12. Ibid., 69.
13. For a brief list of individual cases, some of which are being brought by the ACLU, see: www.bsalegal.org/duty-to-god-cases-224.asp.
14. Evans, C. Stephen, Pocket Dictionary of Apologetics & Philosophy of Religion: 300 Terms & Thinkers Clearly & Concisely Defined (Intervarsity Press: Downer's Grove, Ill.), 2002, p. 103.
15. The Scout Oath, quoted in reprint of 1910 original *Boy Scouts of America: The Official Handbook for Boys,* Seventeenth Edition p. 32, accessed 1-20-11 http://bit.ly/gaM5OM. (Note, the table of contents links to page 22, but page 32 is the actual location in this format.)
16. The Scout Law, 33-34.
17. Carter, "The Most Influential Conservative Book Ever Produced in America."
18. Perry, *On My Honor*, 64 and 66.
19. Ibid, 87-88.
20. Bylaws of Boy Scouts of America, art. IX, § 1, cls. 2-4, as quoted on the BSA legal Web site: www.bsalegal.org/duty-to-god-cases-224.asp.

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"How Can I Teach Pluralism

Wisely?”

I am teaching *Life of Pi*, by Yann Martel, in my Advanced Placement English class.

As an evangelical Christian working in a public school, I want to evoke discussion about pluralism as we read. The book does discuss Christianity (through the Catholic tradition), Hinduism, and Islam. The main character in the book explores all three and converts to Islam and Christianity while still a Hindu.

**I think this is the “ultimate pluralist” created by Martel. **

Keep in mind that my students are freshmen, and my definition of religious pluralism would need to be somewhat simple.

Whatever I teach focuses on whomever I teach. How can I, as a Christian teacher, probe their minds and hearts to think about deeper issues?

Thanks for writing. It’s great that you want to help your students think about pluralism. It’s probably safe to say that many teachers are quite happy with pluralism and wouldn’t think to challenge the notion.

Since you can’t promote Christianity, I can think of two ways to approach the subject: making clear the differences between the major religions, and talking about the nature of truth.

First, a lot of people say all religions are the same without knowing what they teach. It would be instructive to put up a chart or make a list of the beliefs of the different religions. For example, regarding God or ultimate reality:

- *Hindus are pantheists or polytheists.*
- *Buddhists are atheists or pantheists.*
- *Muslims are theists and unitarian.*
- *Christians are theists but trinitarian.*

There's a pamphlet called "The Spirit of Truth and the Spirit of Error" which you might find at a Christian bookstore that lists a lot of differences.

The point is that they teach contradictory ideas. How can they all be true?

If the students respond with the "it's true for them" line, ask why they think so? The only ways that could be so would be if 1) there really is no god; religion is just something people make up, or 2) there is a god, but no one can really know anything about him. Whichever of these they might believe, you can ask why they think so.

You may even want to back up a little and talk about truth itself. Talk about its exclusive nature. If it's true that I'm typing on a keyboard, for example, it has to be false that I'm typing on a tree or an elephant. Logic reflects the way the world is. A thing (like a keyboard) can't be another thing (at the same time and in the same sense). And, a thing can't both exist in reality and not exist. You can extend this to moral issues as well. Ask if it's okay for one set of parents to beat their child blue with rods when they don't get their homework done (or use another example they'll find horrendous). If they say it's wrong, say something like, "But it's true for them, then it's good."

You can also talk about whether it's important to make distinctions between true and false. This and the above are more preparatory kinds of things that make it possible for people to believe one religion can be true and others false. You have to relate these questions to real life. Talk about other things in their lives that have to be either true or false (including moral issues, if not religious ones). The main point is to get the students thinking about the nature of truth, using things in their world where they know true and false in the classical sense apply. That can raise in their minds a conflict. They're used to the "true for me" thinking,

but in their lives they don’t and can’t live that way. You can then relate this to the matter of religion.

Finally, they may talk more about social matters, about the need to respect all people. To this you can pose this problem. Ask what, say, a Muslim might think if you tell him you respect his religious beliefs even though no one can really know what God (or Allah) is like, or if you say that there really is no God, but that religion is something that people make up to meet their needs. Would a Muslim feel gratified and respected by this “inclusive” attitude? I know as a Christian it doesn’t make me feel more respected when someone claims that Jesus really isn’t the only way to God, because that is central to my beliefs. Students need to know that people can disagree about ideas without hating each other. Unfortunately, that idea (that disagreement equals hatred) is so often fostered today. To think someone is wrong means you hate them and will do harm to them. That’s all part of the tolerance nonsense being taught today.

If all this is clear as mud, write back and we’ll talk some more.

Rick Wade

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Making Distinctions: A Warning Against Mixing Beliefs

Cafeteria-Style Religion

You've probably heard the term "cafeteria-style" religion. This is the religion of "a little of this and a little of that." Beliefs are chosen from a variety of theologies or religions or philosophies because they seem right or appeal to us. Rituals or practices are chosen because we like them, they suit our tastes.

Sometimes this is a matter of Christians mixing the doctrines of various Christian theological traditions that results in an odd fit. But we won't be talking about that this week. More often, and what is of more concern to us, is the way Christians sometimes mix non-Christian beliefs with Christian beliefs.

I saw this illustrated in a story published a few years ago about a young woman who had been a Methodist but became a Baptist after studying Baptist theology. She'd clearly put some thought into her decision which I applauded. However, it turned out that, along with her Baptist doctrines, she also held the belief that Christianity isn't necessarily true for everyone. She was mixing Christian doctrine with a postmodern attitude about the nature of truth. Christians mix in a variety of false beliefs with true doctrine. Some Christians read horoscopes and take them somewhat seriously. Some base their ethical decision-making on what works. Some believe in reincarnation. And some, like the woman I mentioned, believe Jesus isn't the only way to God.

This isn't a new phenomenon. The apostle Paul faced the same kind of situation. Some Christians in his day were trying to mix Jewish and pagan beliefs into their Christianity. Paul discussed this issue in his letter to the church in Colossae. The second chapter of that letter will be the focus of our consideration (you might want to grab your Bible). In fact, may I be so bold as to ask you to read the chapter before you continue reading this? It's really more than a chapter:

chapter 2, verse 1, through chapter 3, verse 4. If you have more time, go ahead and read chapter 1 also.

Paul starts chapter 2 by expressing his desire for the Colossians, that they "may have the full riches of complete understanding, in order that they may know the mystery of God, namely, Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge" (v. 3). The believers needed to be clear on this so they would be able to spot "fine-sounding" but deceptive arguments that led away from Christ.

Greek Philosophy

What were the false doctrines being taught in Colossae? What was being taught was a mixture of elements of Jewish beliefs and Greek philosophy with Christianity. The net result was that Christ was diminished in His person and His work on our behalf. This is clear from the corrections Paul makes in chapter 2 of Colossians and from the strong Christological statement in chapter 1, verses 15-20.

Let's look first at the ideas imported from Greek thought.

From chapter 2, verses 21 to 23, we can deduce that people were being taught the pagan or Greek belief that physical matter is evil. "Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch!" People were taught to restrict themselves from certain pleasures that God didn't forbid. More importantly, if matter is evil, how could God come as a man in a physical body like yours and mine? If God couldn't become man, then Jesus couldn't be the divine Son of God. You see how that would be a problem!

The Colossians were also engaging in angel worship. Look at verse 18: "Do not let anyone who delights in false humility and the worship of angels disqualify you for the prize." Some Greek philosophers had taught that the One, or the ultimate being, was too pure to get close to evil matter. So there were

many levels of lesser beings between the One and the material universe. It was a simple step to associate angels with these beings. If people couldn't approach God, maybe they could these intermediate beings. Hence, angel worship.

Lastly, false teachers were promoting a special knowledge that apparently only a few had. Paul speaks of people puffed up with idle notions, in verse 18. He also mentions the "appearance of wisdom" in verse 23. He responds that in Christ "are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge" (v. 3). This knowledge is available to all who are in Christ, and provides no reason for our being puffed up (1 Cor. 2:16).

These three beliefs developed into what is called Gnosticism.{1} Paul saw this as a very grave danger. Why? Just because Christians might be deprived of some rightful pleasures? Well, that was a problem. But something much more important was at stake. Because of these beliefs, the person and work of Christ was diminished.

Jewish Beliefs

What was being imported from Judaism?

In chapter 2, verses 16 and 20 through 22, Paul cautions against a wrong emphasis on traditions carried over from Judaism including dietary restrictions, and the observance of religious festivals and the Sabbath. From this we can deduce that these things were being promoted by the false teachers. Apparently, from what Paul says in verse 11, they were also requiring circumcision.

Does this mean it is wrong to have traditions or to restrict our diet in any way? No, not at all. The point is that our standing before God is not related to such things. Christians are no longer under a legal code because Christ has taken it away and nailed it to the cross (v. 14). Paul wanted the Christians to know they were free from such things. Why? Well,

the most important reason is that such works *don't work* for getting us to God. There's no reason to carry that burden on our shoulders; God put it on Christ's who has done all that needs to be done.

Not only were such things incapable of getting the Colossians to God, they couldn't even accomplish the goal of reforming people. Look at chapter 2, verse 23: "Such regulations indeed have an appearance of wisdom, with their self-imposed worship, their false humility and their harsh treatment of the body, but they lack any value in restraining sensual indulgence." Paul doesn't just say that these things don't stand us in good stead with God; they can't even make us good people. Why? Because our root problem is our fallen nature. We can observe all the practices and rituals we want, but that won't change what we are inside. And what is inside will show itself as we sin again . . . and again . . . and again.

No, our problem isn't met by observing rituals or by putting our hopes in the wrong places such as in heavenly beings or in our special knowledge. It is met in Christ in whom we have all we need. Verses 9 and 10 read: "For in Him all the fullness of Deity dwells in bodily form, and in Him you have been made complete . . ." Literally, "you have been filled up." It is a passive verb. We have been given what we need in Christ.

The only way to God, given our fallen nature, is through Christ. The Colossians had turned back to worthless things. And these things weren't neutral in value; they served to turn the focus off of Jesus where it belonged.

Being Thinking Christians

What was and is to be done in response to this mixing of false with true? The solution lies in first knowing what is true. Speaking of Colossians 2 verse 2, nineteenth century biblical scholar John Eadie wrote this: "'The full assurance of

understanding,' [or "full riches of complete understanding" in the NIV] is the fixed persuasion that you comprehend the truth, and that it is the truth which you comprehend."{2} Why is that so important? He goes on to say that if we *don't* have the full assurance that comes from understanding, we will be more likely to abandon what we believe today for something new tomorrow; new ideas will chase away previously held convictions. If we are "'ever learning and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth,'" he says, 'then such [doubtfulness] and fluctuation present a soil most propitious to the growth and progress of error."{3}

The apostles wanted the members of the churches to understand Christian beliefs. "The fixed knowledge of these things," Eadie writes, "would fortify their minds against the seductive insinuations of false teachers," who mix just enough truth with falsehood to make their teachings believable.

Imagine Paul setting on his left side the false beliefs and practices being taught in Colossae and on his right, Jesus and His finished work. Pointing to his left he says, "You think matter is evil? Then [pointing to his right now] you might as well abandon Christ altogether, because it was His deity that made it possible for Him to obtain our salvation. You believe [pointing to his left] that worshipping angels will help? [Pointing to his right] Jesus, who is the exact image of God, God in flesh, to whom we have direct access, *created* the angels! [Pointing to his left] You think keeping all these rules will make you a good person? They don't! You just keep sinning. It is in Christ [pointing to the right] that your sin can be dealt with at the root."

We can believe in all manner of things in the current "true for me" way of thinking. But if something isn't true (in the classical sense), believing won't make it so.

Things to Be Aware of Today

The Christians in Colossae were guilty of folding in false beliefs with true ones. To avoid doing that ourselves, we need to be thinking Christians. We need to think *biblically*. The Bible is our final authority for faith and practice. Does the particular idea or activity find support in Scripture? We need to think *theologically*. If the Bible doesn't directly address a given idea, does it fit with what we *do* know about God, Christ, human nature, etc.,? We also need to think *logically.* We need to be able to think well, to spot contradictions between beliefs.

What false notions are we susceptible to today? I'll name just a few.

A major issue today is *religious pluralism*. We are tempted to follow along with our culture and think that Jesus is just one of several valid ways to God.

Subjectivism is a big problem that grows out of the skepticism of our age. If I can't know what's really "out there," I'll just have to form my own beliefs based on my own thinking, feelings, desires, and circumstances. But our knowledge is too limited and our sin nature biases us in ways that lead us astray.

Pragmatic religion is also a temptation. "Does it work?" we want to know. If so, it's right. We treat our lives like we would a machine: if what comes out at the end is good, then clearly the machine must be working correctly. This becomes an end-justifies-the-means way of living.

Therapeutic religion is also an issue today. It's God's job to make us happy. We think it's more important for pastors to be counselors than theologians. We want them to fix our problems and make us happy again.

Then there's *materialism*—a greater desire for wealth and

material possessions than for the kingdom of God and His righteousness. There's the temptation in an advertising age to *market* the gospel—fitting it to the sensibilities of the market rather than bringing those sensibilities under the scrutiny of the gospel.

Then there's *style over substance*—we're more concerned with being *hip* than with being *good*.

I could go on. Instead I'll invite you to look for a copy of Os Guinness's book *Fit Bodies, Fat Minds*{4} for a more extended discussion of these problems.

Even if you don't read that book, let me encourage you to become conscious of your beliefs, and to become settled in your mind about at least the very basic Christian teaching, namely, that in Christ dwells the fullness of Deity, that in Him we have been made complete, that we are made alive with him through faith. And be on your guard so that "no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy."

Notes

1. Curtis Vaughan, "Colossians," *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, vol. 11. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978. (Software; 166 in hard copy)
2. John Eadie, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Colossians* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1957), 111.
3. Ibid.
4. Os Guinness, Fit Bodies, *Fat Minds: Why Evangelicals Don't Think and What to Do About It* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994).

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“What’s the Difference Between Moral Relativism and Pluralism?”

Moral relativism and pluralism: I said they are, in effect, the same. The Unitarian academics smiled and suggested that I am unlearned on the topic. What say you?

The two terms are not necessarily linked. One could be a moral relativist and an atheist, which isn’t quite the same as a religious pluralist. Theologian John Hick is an example of a religious pluralist who accepts all major world religions as viable paths to what he calls the “Other.” However, he would reject the label of moral relativist, claiming that these belief systems cause followers to seek a good beyond themselves and that this lends to their behavior a certain ethical dimension not found in unbelievers.

The problem with John Hick’s system is in its rejection of what these religious systems claim to believe about salvation and humanity’s destiny in order to blend them into his pluralistic system. Harold Netland has written a helpful book for thinking through the problems of religious pluralism called *Dissonant Voices*.

For Him,

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Do All Roads Lead to God? The Christian Attitude Toward Non-Christian Religions

Rick Rood discusses the fact of religious pluralism in our age, the origin of non-Christian religions, and the Christian's attitude toward other religions.

Few facts have become more evident in our lifetime than the fact that we live in a pluralistic world and society. With the rapid increase in the transmission of information and the ability to travel on a worldwide scale has also come an increasing awareness that both our world and society contain a multitude of diverse and conflicting viewpoints on many different issues.

No where is this pluralism more evident than in the realm of religion. More than ever before, we are conscious of the existence of the world's many religions-not only the major religions of Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism, but also a host of smaller yet enduring religious movements.

According to the *World Christian Encyclopedia*, there are approximately 1 billion Muslims, over 650 million Hindus, over 300 million Buddhists, over 200 million followers of Chinese folk religion, in addition to the world's 1.6 billion nominal Christians. What is important for us to understand is that these figures are more than statistics in a book or almanac. They represent real people; people who are born, live, and die every day.

What brings this reality home even more, however, is the fact that an increasing number of followers of non-Christian religions are living in our cities, in our communities, and in our neighborhoods. Islamic mosques and Buddhist and Hindu worship centers can be found in every metropolitan area of the

United States.

As followers of Jesus Christ, what should our attitude be toward non-Christian religions and toward those who embrace them? Among those who are seeking to respond to this question, three distinct answers can be heard today. Some are saying that we must acknowledge that all religions are equally (or nearly equally) valid as ways to approach God. Though there may be superficial differences among the world's religions, at heart they are fundamentally the same. Often the analogy is used of people taking different paths up the same mountain, but all arriving at the same summit. This is the viewpoint known as religious pluralism.

Others, more anxious to preserve some sense of uniqueness for the Christian faith, yet equally desirous of projecting an attitude of tolerance and acceptance, are committed to the viewpoint known as Christian inclusivism. In their opinion, though people of another religious conviction may be ignorant of Christ—or possibly even have rejected Him—yet because of their positive response to what they know about God, or even due to their efforts to follow the dictates of their conscience, they are unknowingly included in the number of those who are recipients of Christ's salvation. The analogy is sometimes used of a person who receives a gift, but is unaware of who the ultimate giver of the gift may be.

A third viewpoint is known as Christian exclusivism. This is the viewpoint traditionally held by the majority of those who accept the Bible as their authority in spiritual matters. It is the view that though there are indeed truths and values in many other religions, there is only one saving truth, namely the gospel of Jesus Christ. This view is most naturally deduced from Jesus' well known statement: "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except by me" (John 14:6).

What should the Christian's attitude be toward non-Christian

religions and their followers? This is a question becoming more difficult to ignore. To answer this question accurately and fairly we must look into the way non-Christian religions began.

The Origin of Non-Christian Religions

There are, of course, what we might call "naturalistic" explanations of the origin of all religions. Those committed to a naturalistic worldview that denies the existence of God or of a supernatural realm see all religions as the product of man's imagination in some way. They might say that religion is the expression of man's fear of the overwhelming forces of nature, or of his desire to overcome death. While such naturalistic factors may indeed play a role in the development of some religious sentiments, they are hardly sufficient to account for the origin of all religious belief.

From the perspective of one committed to a supernaturalistic worldview, and particularly from the Christian viewpoint, there are several elements that may have contributed to the origin of non-Christian religion. First, where we find truth in non-Christian religion, we must attribute this to God. He is the source of all truth. We know that, in the beginning, the truth about God was universally known. And it is possible that remnants of this "original revelation" have survived in the memory of peoples around the world. It is also possible that some elements of truth were implanted in some cultures by ancient contact with God's people, Israel, with early Christians, or with portions of the Scriptures. We know, for example, that Islam owes a great deal to the influence of both Judaism and Christianity due to Mohammed's early contact with representatives of both religions.

Second, we must recognize that where there is falsehood or even a twisted perspective on the truth, this is the result of man's sinful nature in repressing the truth about God. Romans 1 states that man's nature is to suppress the truth about God

that is evident to him, and to substitute for it what Paul calls “futile speculations” (Rom. 1:21).

Third, we cannot deny the influence of Satan and his demons in inspiring “counterfeit” religious expressions and experiences. For example, Psalm 106:36-37 states that those who serve idols offer sacrifices to demons. The apostle Paul says the same thing in 1 Corinthians 10:20. And in his first letter to Timothy he attributed false religious teachings to “deceitful spirits” (1 Tim. 4:1). In his second letter to the Corinthians, he stated that Satan “disguises himself as an angel of light” (2 Cor. 11:14) and that he disguises many of his agents as “servants of righteousness” (2 Cor. 11:15). Satan often promotes what is evil. But he can just as easily promote a high level of morality or religion so long as it discourages people from recognizing their need for the unmerited grace of God, expressed through the death of Jesus Christ.

In summary, non-Christian religions can (1) represent man’s response to the truth about God that he knows. It can also (2) represent man’s attempt to suppress the truth and substitute his own speculations. Finally, it can (3) represent the deception of Satan, who replaces the truth with a lie.

Are There Many Ways to God?

Now we must turn our attention to a related issue concerning non-Christian religions, the idea or attitude called religious pluralism. Religious pluralism suggests that there are only superficial differences among the religions and that these differences are greatly overshadowed by their similarities. Thus, to this school of thought all religions share a fundamental unity that renders them equally valid as approaches to God.

Of course, the most immediate difficulty posed by religious pluralism for the Christian is that it compels him to deny any

claims to the uniqueness of Christ or of Christianity.

The claims of the New Testament that Jesus Christ is the unique Son of God and Savior of the world must be recast as mere exaggerations of the early Christians. It is impossible to embrace religious pluralism and hold to the authority of the New Testament when it speaks of the uniqueness of Christ and of the salvation He has provided.

Beyond this, however, religious pluralism significantly underestimates the differences between the teachings of the various religions. This can be seen, for example, in the differences between Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, and Christianity, with regard to their teaching concerning salvation. In classical Buddhism, the problem facing humanity is the suffering caused by desire. Since whatever man desires is impermanent, and ultimately leads to frustration and sorrow, the way to peace of mind and ultimate "salvation" is through the elimination of all desire-even the desire to live! In classical Hinduism, the problem facing humanity is our being trapped in this illusory, material world over the course of many lifetimes primarily due to our ignorance of our true identity as fundamentally divine beings! The solution to our dilemma is our recognition of our true divine nature. In Islam, man's problem is his failure to live by the law of God which has been revealed through His prophets. The solution is to commit ourselves to obeying God's laws, in hope that our good deeds will outweigh the bad. In Christianity, the problem is similar—our rebellion against the will of God. But the solution is much different. It is through faith in the sacrifice of Jesus for our sins, provided by God's unmerited grace. From these examples alone, it is evident that though there may be superficial similarities among the world's religions the differences are fundamental in nature!

Not surprisingly, most pluralists are unfazed by these differences in belief. They emphasize that in spite of these differences, if the various religions foster a common

“religious experience” or result in the moral and ethical improvement of man, this is enough to show that they are valid ways to God. The problem is that with regard to “religious experience.” Even here there are significant differences. And with regard to the moral and ethical effect of the various religions, this is something impossible for us to measure. For, as Jesus so strongly emphasized, morality is as much a matter of the heart as it is of action. And this is something only God can know!

We must conclude, then, that due to its denial of the uniqueness of Christ, and to its failure to take seriously the vast differences among the world’s religions, religious pluralism does not represent a valid point of view for the Christian.

Are the Followers of Other Religions Recipients of Christ’s Salvation?

A more subtle and attractive theory of reaching out to non-Christians is the concept called Christian inclusivism. Inclusivists hold that, though Christ is the unique Savior, nonetheless there are many people included in His salvation who are ignorant of this fact—even followers of other religions.

Inclusivists generally hold that Christ’s salvation is available to those who positively respond to the truth they have—whether it be through creation, conscience, another religion, or some other means. Such individuals are sometimes termed anonymous Christians.

There is no question that this is a very attractive approach to the problem of world religions. Inclusivism seeks to widen the extent of God’s grace while still preserving a commitment to the uniqueness of Christ. It must be acknowledged also, that God could have arranged things in this way if He had so chosen. The question is not, however, whether inclusivism is

an attractive position, or a logically possible one, but whether the evidence is convincing that it is true. And for the Christian, this means the evidence of Scripture.

Inclusivists generally recognize this and seek to find support for their view in Scripture. We will briefly look at one biblical example that is often used to support the idea of inclusivism—the case of Cornelius the centurion recorded in Acts 10.

In this chapter Cornelius is referred to as "a devout man, . . . who feared God," even before he heard the gospel. This is often pointed to as evidence that he was an anonymous Christian before believing in Christ. It must be remembered, however, that in the next chapter (specifically in Acts 11:14), it is clearly stated that though Cornelius was favorably disposed to God he did not receive salvation until he heard and believed in the gospel.

Other examples could be discussed. But in each case we would see that a good deal must be read into (or out of) the text to arrive at the conclusion that salvation can come to those who do not know Christ.

Furthermore, there are clear statements that it is necessary to hear and believe in the gospel to receive salvation. Perhaps the clearest is Romans 10:17, "So faith comes from hearing, and hearing by the word of (or about) Christ." Hebrews 9:27 also strongly suggests that this faith in Christ must be expressed before we die: "It is appointed for men to die once and after this comes judgment."

What then of people, like Cornelius, who do respond to the truth they know about God, but do not yet know of Christ? Is there no hope for them? Actually, the case of Cornelius provides a good illustration of what seems to be the biblical solution to this problem. Because he had responded to what he knew about God, God saw that he eventually received the

gospel—in his case through Peter. But it was only then that he experienced Christ's salvation and the forgiveness of sins. This principle was also well summarized in Jesus' statement: "To him who has, shall more be given" (Mark 4:25).

Based on our confidence in the faithfulness of God, we can be assured that the gospel will come to all those whom God knows would be prepared, like Cornelius, to receive it. And He has commissioned us to carry the message to them!

What Should Our Attitude Be Toward Other Religions?

In the course of this short discussion we have examined the attitude of religious pluralism, as well as that of Christian inclusivism. The former holds that all religions are equally valid. The latter holds that Christ is the unique savior, but that His salvation can extend to followers of other religions. In both cases, we concluded that the evidence in support of these views is inadequate.

The only remaining option is the attitude of Christian exclusivism—the view that biblical Christianity is true, and that other religious systems are false. This is more than implied in numerous biblical statements, such as in Acts 4:12: "And there is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men, by which we must be saved."

This is not to say, however, that there are no truths at all in non-Christian religions. There are certainly moral and ethical truths, for instance, in Buddhism. In Buddha's Eightfold Path, he appealed to his followers to pursue honesty, charity, and service, and to abstain from murder and lust. We should certainly affirm these ethical truths.

Likewise, there are theological truths in other religions—truths about God that we could equally affirm. These

may be more scarce in religions such as Buddhism and Hinduism. But Orthodox Judaism and Islam certainly share our belief in a personal Creator—God, though Christianity is unique in the monotheistic tradition with regard to the doctrine of the Trinity. There are even truths about Jesus that we share in common with Muslims—that He was a prophet of God, and the Messiah, and that He worked many miracles, though they deny that He was the Son of God, or that He died for the sins of the world.

We can, and should affirm these moral and theological truths that we share in common with followers of other religions. We must acknowledge, however, that in no other religion is any saving truth to be found. And as mentioned earlier, there is no other religion that presents the human dilemma, or solution to that dilemma, in quite the same way as does the Christian faith. In Christianity, the problem is not ignorance of our divine nature—as in Hinduism—nor simply our desire—as in Buddhism. The problem is our alienation from God and His blessing due to our failure to live according to His will—what the Bible calls sin. And the solution is neither in self-discipline, nor in revised thinking, nor even in moral effort. The solution lies in the grace of God, expressed in His provision of His Son, Jesus Christ, as a sacrifice for our sin. Salvation is not something we achieve; it is something we receive.

It is clear, then, that though there are superficial similarities among the world's religions, there are fundamental differences. And the most important difference is the person and work of Christ.

What should our attitude be toward followers of other religions? It is important for us to distinguish our attitude toward non-Christian religions from our attitude toward followers of those religions. Though we are to reject the religion, we are not to reject them by mistakenly perceiving them to be "the enemy." The biblical injunction is to love our

neighbors as much as we love ourselves no matter what their religion. Rather than viewing them as “the enemy,” we should see them as “the victims” of the enemy who are in need of the same grace that has freed us from spiritual slavery—in need of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

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