Islam and Christianity: Common Misconceptions Reveal Their Stark Differences

Muslims and Christians often misunderstand what the other actually believes about God and salvation. Don Closson attempts to clear up some of these misconceptions.

 *This article is also available in Spanish.*

In a recent meeting of evangelical leaders, anti-Islamic comments made by Christians in the Western media were denounced as "dangerous" and "unhelpful." Ted Haggard, President of the National Association of Evangelicals stated that "Since we are in a global community, no doubt about it, we must temper our speech and we must communicate primarily through actions."{1} Another prominent president of a Christian relief agency added that "It's very dangerous to build more barriers when we're supposed to be following [the] one who pulled the barriers down," an obvious reference to the sacrificial death of Christ. They also concluded that it was "nave" to merely dialogue "with Muslims in a way that minimized theological and political differences."{2}

So what kind of exchange of ideas is helpful between Christians and Muslims? We might start by beginning to clear up some of the common misconceptions that each hold about the other. This has become more important recently due to heightened religious passions since 9/11 and the war in Iraq. Muslims, both here in America and abroad, are highly suspicious of America's intentions in the world and some Americans see every Muslim as a potential terrorist who threatens our freedom and democracy. There are obviously reasons behind both of these perceptions. America does tend to favor Israel over its Arab neighbors, and Muslims have

committed atrocities against civilians around the world, but this only means that we must work harder at communicating clearly with Muslims when we have opportunity. The over one billion Muslims in the world constitute a large part of the mission field given to us by the Lord's Great Commission. We cannot turn away from them simply because of the difficulties we face.

That said, we need to realize that both Muslims and Christians hold to ideas about the other that are either completely wrong or merely too broadly applied. Some of these misconceptions are cultural issues and some are theological. Culturally, there are significant differences in how Islam and Christianity relate to society and government. Gender roles are also a source of confusion. Theologically, there is much to clarify regarding the respective roles of Jesus and Muhammad in each religious tradition. There is also misunderstanding regarding the origins and transmission of the sacred texts, the Koran and the Bible. Although the religions share commonalities—one God, the reality of a spiritual dimension, a universal moral order, and a final judgment—Islam and Christianity differ significantly in the details and in the most crucial issue of how one is justified before God.

Jesus and Muhammad

Let's look at some common misconceptions that people have about Islam and Christianity, beginning with how people often confuse the roles that Jesus and Muhammad play in their respective traditions.

Christians often make the mistake of equating the place that Muhammad has in Islam with the role played by Jesus in Christianity. Although Muslims believe that Muhammad is the final prophet from Allah, most do not teach that he was sinless. On the other hand, Muslims see Muhammad's life and example as near to perfection as one can get. One Muslim scholar has noted, "Know that the key to happiness is to

follow the sunna [Muhammad's actions] and to imitate the Messenger of God in all his coming and going, his movement and rest, in his way of eating, his attitude, his sleep and his talk…"{3} Every action of Muhammad is considered a model for believers. Some Muslims even avoid eating food that Muhammad disdained. At the same time, Muslims are offended at the term "Mohammedanism" sometimes used as a reference to Islam. It is not Muhammad's religion; he is only a messenger of Allah. Muslims believe that Muhammad's messages revived and reformed religious truth that had been lost.

Even so, any disparaging words aimed at Muhammad will be taken very seriously by a Muslim. As William Cantrell Smith once said, "Muslims will allow attacks on Allah: there are atheists and atheistic publications, and rationalistic societies; but to disparage Muhammad will provoke from even the most 'liberal' sections of the community a fanaticism of blazing vehemence."{4}

Muslims accuse Christians of elevating Jesus in an inappropriate manner. They argue that Jesus was just a prophet to the Jews, and that he heralded the coming of Muhammad as the seal of the prophets. The problem with this view is that it doesn't fit the earliest historical data we have regarding the life and teachings of Christ. There is considerable manuscript evidence for the authenticity and early date of the New Testament. In these early manuscripts, Jesus claims to have the powers and authority that only God could possess. These teachings and events were recorded by eyewitnesses or by second generation Christians like Luke who was a close companion to Paul.

What is missing is an early text that affirms what Muslims claim about Jesus. Muslims argue that the New Testament has been corrupted and that texts supporting the idea that Jesus is the Son of God were a later addition. But again, the burden of proof for this accusation is one the Muslim apologist must bear. However, they do not provide any evidence for when or

where the early manuscripts became corrupted. Muslims argue that the New Testament depiction of Christ and of his death and resurrection cannot be correct because the Koran teaches otherwise. Although Christians affirm the importance and authority of revelation, true revelation will be confirmed by history.

The Bible and the Koran

There is an inherent problem when we consider the nature and content of the Bible and the Koran. Both traditions claim that their book is the result of divine revelation, and both maintain that their books have been preserved through the centuries with a high degree of accuracy. For instance, when touring a local Islamic center, I was told by the guide that the modern Koran contains the exact words given by Muhammad to his followers with absolutely no mistakes. Christians maintain that the Bible we possess is 99% accurate and has benefited from over 100 years of textual criticism and the possession of thousands of early manuscripts. The problem is that the Koran and the Bible make contradictory truth claims about the life and ministry of Jesus Christ and what God expects from those who love and follow Him.

The Islamic view of the Bible is complicated by the fact that the Koran tells Muslims to accept both the Hebrew Scriptures and the *"Injil,"* or the gospel of Jesus, and even calls the "Book," or Bible, the "word of God" in Sura 6:114-115.{5} On the other hand, Muslim apologists argue that both the Old and New Testaments have been corrupted and contain little if any truth about God and His people. They contend that a lost gospel of Jesus has been replaced with Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.

This view contains a number of problems. The Koran calls the Bible the word of God, and acknowledges that it is a revelation from God. It also teaches that Jesus was a prophet and that his teaching has authority. Finally, when the Koran

was given by Muhammad it supported the New Testament of Muhammad's time by telling Muslims to go to Christians, who had been reading the Bible, to affirm Muhammad's message.{6} If this is so, we can assume that Muhammad believed that the Bible available in the seventh century was accurate. The Bible we use today is virtually unchanged from the Bible in the seventh century.In fact, it is probably more faithful to the earliest manuscript evidence. If the Bible of Muhammad's time was accurate, why isn't today's copy? Again, Muslims must do more than just claim that errors have occurred in the Bible, they must be able to show us when and where the errors occurred.

The Koran suffers from textual questions as well. Between Muhammad's death and the compilation of the Koran, some of what Muhammad had recited as revelation had already been lost due to the death of companions who had memorized specific passages.{7} Later, when multiple versions of the Koran caused controversy among Muslims, the Caliph Uthman ordered Zaid bin Thabit to collect all the copies in use, create a standard version and destroy the rest.

We have reasonably good copies of both the original Bible and the Uthmanic version of the Koran. However, both documents cannot represent revelation from God because the messages they contain cannot be reconciled.

Human Nature, Gender, and Salvation

Islam and Christianity view the human predicament differently. According to Islam, when Adam sinned he asked for forgiveness and it was granted by Allah. A Muslim author writes, "…Islam teaches that people are born innocent and remain so until each makes him or herself guilty by a guilty deed. Islam does not believe in 'original sin'; and its scripture interprets Adam's disobedience as his own personal misdeed—a misdeed for which he repented and which God forgave."{8} In fact, it is common among Muslims to see human failings as the result of

forgetfulness or as merely making mistakes. People are frail, imperfect, constantly forgetful of God, and even intrinsically weak, but they do not have a sin nature. As a result, salvation is won by diligently observing the religious rituals prescribed by the five pillars of Islam, reciting the confession or Shahada, prayer, fasting, divine tax, and the pilgrimage to Mecca.

The Bible teaches that Adam's sin has affected all humanity. Romans 5:12 reads, "Therefore, just as sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all men, because all sinned. . . ." Paul later adds that, "Consequently, just as the result of one trespass was condemnation for all men, so also the result of one act of righteousness was justification that brings life for all men. For just as through the disobedience of the one man the many were made sinners, so also through the obedience of the one man the many will be made righteous." We are made righteous not by doing good works but by faith in the substitutionary death of Christ on our behalf. Jesus bore our penalty for sin; he literally stood in our place and took our punishment.

Not only do Muslims and Christians have different views on human nature and salvation, but they also have dissimilar perceptions about gender. Although both religions teach that men and women have equal status before God, in reality the experience of women differs greatly under the two systems. The Christian doctrine of the Trinity, which Islam rejects, helps Christians to understand how women can be equal to men and yet accept a submissive role in the family. The incarnate Jesus took on the submissive role of a Son and yet he was still fully God. There is no similar doctrine in Islam that teaches role differentiation between men and women and yet encourages gender equality before God. Islam places men over women in a way that Christianity does not. Islam allows for polygamy, and while men can marry non-Muslims, women cannot. Muslim men can divorce with a simple proclamation, women cannot. And although

women have inheritance rights, they are always inferior to a man’s. Finally, Muslim women do not enjoy equal legal rights, and Muslim men are instructed to strike their wives if they are disloyal.

Religion and the State

How do the two traditions view the role of religion in society?

Christians in the West often view Islam through the lens of Western tolerance. In America especially, we are used to the separation of church and state, and assume that people everywhere enjoy such freedom. Many Muslims neither experience such separation nor see it as a good thing. For those who take the Koran seriously, Islam and Islamic law regulate all of life. The history of Islam supports the idea that the state should be involved in both the spread of Islam and the enforcement of religious duties by individual Muslims in Islamic societies.

Beginning with Muhammad, who was both a religious and political leader, down through the Caliphs and Islamic Empires, there has been little separation between religious and political law enforcement. Today in Saudi Arabia, the Committee for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice (*mutawwa’in*, in Arabic) patrol public places in order to enforce religious laws, particularly the dress and habits of women in public.

In fact, the ultimate goal of many Muslims is what might be called a worldwide Islamic peace enforced by Islamic law. When Muslims talk of Islam being a religion of peace, it is often understood that this peace will occur only when Islam rules the world with Islamic law applied universally. As Syrian born Harvard professor Bassam Tibi has written, “…the quest of converting the entire world to Islam is an immutable fixture of the Muslim worldview. Only if this task is accomplished, if

the world has become a ‘Dar al-Islam [house of Islam],’ will it also be a ‘Dar al-Salam,’ or a house of peace.”{9}

Unfortunately, Christianity has at times had similar views regarding the use of government to enforce religious laws. Between the fourth century and the Reformation, the Christian practice of religious tolerance was spotty at best. But the growth of the separation of church and state in the West, which greatly enhanced religious tolerance, has led to another misconception. Muslims often assume that everyone in the West is a Christian. When they see the sexual immorality, drug use, and decline of the family in Western nations, they assume that this is what Christianity endorses. Christians need to be careful to separate themselves from the culture in which they live and help Muslims to see that our secular governments and society have mostly rejected Christian virtues. It is also helpful to communicate to Muslims that becoming a Christian is more than believing certain things to be true regarding Jesus and the Bible. It is about becoming a new creature in Christ through the indwelling and power of the Holy Spirit. It is about trusting in the sacrificial death of Christ on the cross.

Notes

1. *The New York Times,* May 8, 2003, http://www.nytimes.com/2003/05/08/national/08CHRI.html?th
2. Ibid.
3. Geisler, Norman L., and Abdul Saleeb, *Answering Islam: The Crescent in the Light of the Cross,* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1993), p. 82.
4. Ibid., 80.
5. See also Sura 2:75 and Sura 5:46, 67, 69, 71.
6. Sura 10:94.
7. Ibin Abi Dawud, Kitab al-Masahif, p. 23.
8. Geisler and Saleeb, *Answering Islam,* p. 43.
9. Downloaded from NewsMax.com on 5/22/2003 at tinyurl.com/2tbwo6

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“Is There Salvation After Death?”

I have a question that I hope you can help me with. I have a friend that believes that salvation can happen after physical death. He says that he believes that Christ is the way to the Father but that can happen after death. Is there any scripture that says that salvation, through believing in Jesus Christ, must happen before physical death?

Thanks for your question. Hebrews 9:27 states that it is appointed to man to die once and then the judgment. This indicates that after death, there is the judgment, and there is no mention of a second chance. In Jesus’ parables of the kingdom, judgment follows after death. One example is Luke 16, Lazarus and the rich man. Immediately after they died, Lazarus was taken to Abraham’s bosom and the rich man to hell. Even in hell the rich man saw that he was wrong and sorry for his sin but could not change his outcome. I am sure if he had a second chance, he would not have been there. Parables like these indicate there is no second chance. Finally, we are saved by faith. Faith is defined in Hebrews 11:1 as “the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” Saving faith is exercised while on earth. When we are face to face with the Lord, we will no longer be exercising any kind of faith; we will see as 1 Corinthians states, “face to face.” So all scripture indicates judgment after death. The burden is on those who say there is a second chance after death. Where are the verses to uphold that view?

Thanks for your question. I hope this helps.

Patrick Zukeran
Probe Ministries

“Salvation Is By Grace, But We Have to Do Our Part”

Sue,

Thank you for being one who stands up for the principles that our Savior Jesus Christ taught. I applaud your efforts. I have a couple of questions from your article:

I read your “A Short Look at Six World Religions” and it said that many of Joseph Smith’s prophecies never came true. Which prophecies are those?

I also read, “Both of these religions teach salvation by works, not God’s grace.” I have been a member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints from 8 years of age, and I have always been taught that we are saved by the grace of God. However, salvation is not free. For example, if one chooses to not live the commandments that God has given, then how can he be worthy to live in the presence of God? Here is a quote from the Book of Mormon: “For we know that it is by grace that we are saved after all that we can do.” (page 99-100). Jesus Christ paid the price for our sins, but we must do our part to accept his atonement and live his commandments. Accepting his atonement is not enough. Through the grace of our loving Savior we can be redeemed from our sins and return to the presence of our Heavenly Father clean from all sin, again if we keep his commandments the best we know how. God the Father and His Son Jesus Christ are the perfect examples of mercy.

Have a good day and thank you for teaching the gospel of Jesus Christ, who is my best friend.

Hello _____,

Jesus is my best friend too! <smile>

> *I read your article "A Short Look at Six World Religions" and it said that many of Joseph Smith's prophecies never came true. Which prophecies are those?*

I cited a few of them in another response to an e-mail about my article. Your question prompted me to add a link to that article at the end of the one you read, but here's a direct link for you..

> *I also read, "Both of these religions teach salvation by works, not God's grace." I have been a member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints from 8 years of age, and I have always been taught that we are saved by the grace of God. However, salvation is not free.*

I would agree that salvation was not free for God, for whom it cost Him EVERYTHING. But it *is* a free gift for us. Please note Ephesians 2:8,9:

> "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast."

This scripture is diametrically opposed to Mormon doctrine. We cannot do anything to contribute to our salvation. Isaiah 64:6 says that all our righteousness is as filthy rags; what can we possibly give to God that will overcome the heinous sin of requiring the death of His Son to be reconciled to Him? If someone came in here and murdered one of my sons and then said, "Hey, I don't want you to be mad at me. . . let me do something to help me get myself in your good graces. Here's a nickel. . ." —Well, guess what? That wouldn't work! And it

doesn’t work with God either.

The question of obeying His commandments is a separate issue. Obedience for the person who has put his trust in Christ is a matter of bearing fruit and walking out the new kind of life (new heart, new motivation, new source of power) that Christ brings at the point of salvation. Obedience for the person who has NOT put his trust in Christ, but is trusting in himself to earn heaven on his own merit, counts for nothing because Jesus said, “Apart from Me, no one comes to the Father” (John 14:6). It would be like that person who murdered my sons saying, “But I’m keeping all the Bohlin family rules! I’m respectful to the parents, I take out the garbage on garbage day, I put my dishes in the dishwasher, I don’t let the dog sleep on the bed! I deserve to be a member of your family!” See how that doesn’t work either?

_____, I pray the Lord will open your eyes to see that trying to earn salvation with our paltry efforts—even WITH His grace—is a slap in the face of our God. He wants us to come to Him with empty hands and the realization that we do not deserve and cannot earn the gift of eternal life that comes ONLY through trusting in the Lord Jesus.

Warmly,

Sue Bohlin

It occurred to me as I read your response that we aren’t exactly talking about the same definition of “salvation.” How exactly do you define it, in the strict sense? By that I mean, tell me what salvation is and what it is not, as you perceive it.

I am really impressed that you realize we’re defining our terms differently. I want to make sure you get the best possible answer, so I’m going to ask my Probe colleague Michael Gleghorn, who has formal theological training, to answer that question, OK?

Michael Gleghorn's answer:

Hello _____,

Thanks for your e-mail. You ask a very important question. Indeed, entire books have been written on the subject. I will simply offer a broad sketch of some of the fundamentals of this important biblical doctrine.

In its broadest sense, the biblical doctrine of salvation is concerned with the idea of God's deliverance of His people from harm or danger. In the Old Testament, God's greatest saving act occurred when He delivered (or saved) His people Israel from their slavery in Egypt. This event is known as the Exodus. Thus, the biblical doctrine of salvation includes more than just "spiritual" deliverance, it can incorporate physical deliverance as well. The important point is that salvation, in the biblical sense, is ALWAYS THE WORK OF GOD—NOT MAN. Just listen to God's word to the prophet Isaiah: "I, even I, am the Lord; and there is no savior besides Me." (43:11).

This point cannot be emphasized enough—God is the One who saves. Even in the book of Judges, when Israel has many human "deliverers," it is God who appoints them and raises them up for their specific task. Thus, we repeatedly read statements such as the following in the book of Judges: "And when the sons of Israel cried to the Lord, THE LORD RAISED UP A DELIVERER for the sons of Israel TO DELIVER THEM" (3:9; emphasis mine).

And the psalmist also wrote: "Blessed be the Lord, who daily bears our burden, the God who is our salvation. God is to us a God of deliverances; and to God the Lord belong escapes from death" (68:19-20). You get the idea.

The Old Testament Scriptures provide much of the "theological context" for the New Testament doctrine of God and salvation. While some things are certainly "new" and different (see John 1:17, etc.), much remains the same. In particular, salvation

is still viewed as THE WORK OF GOD—NOT MAN. Think back to the end of Psalm 68:20: "to God the Lord belong escapes from death." Now listen to Paul in Romans 6:23: "For the wages of sin is death, BUT THE FREE GIFT OF GOD IS ETERNAL LIFE IN CHRIST JESUS OUR LORD" (emphasis mine).

In the New Testament, as in the Old, God is the only true savior of man. This salvation has been made available through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died on the cross for our sins. As Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15:3: "For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that CHRIST DIED FOR OUR SINS according to the Scriptures" (emphasis mine). Furthermore, Christ is the ONLY way of salvation. As Peter said 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" (emphasis mine).

Of course, if God is the ONLY savior and, as Jesus Himself said, "No one comes to the Father, but through Me" (John 14:6), clearly Jesus must be God. This is the teaching of the New Testament (see John 1:1-3, 14). It's important to point out, however, that Jesus is NOT God the Father; He is God the Son, the second Person of the Trinity. Of course Jesus is also a Man. (Although I cannot get into it right now, Mormons and Christians not only have a different understanding of the doctrine of salvation, we also have radically different conceptions of God. Pat Zukeran, a colleague of mine at Probe, has recently written an article on "The Mormon Doctrine of God."

The Bible claims that Jesus is the only savior, who died on the cross for our sins. But Christ's death is not merely a means of salvation from sin (as great as that would be in itself), it also makes available to man the perfect righteousness of God! Thus we read in 2 Corinthians 5:21: "He [God] made Him [Christ] who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him." Salvation not only includes the forgiveness of our debt of

sin, it also includes the crediting of Christ's righteousness to our account! In other words, Christ washes away the stain of our sin and clothes us in His perfect righteousness. Luther called this "The Great Exchange."

But how does this Great Exchange take place? By what means does it occur? What must one do to be saved? That was the question asked of Paul and Silas by the Philippian jailer in Acts 16:30. Paul and Silas responded by saying, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you shall be saved" (16:31). In other words, the jailer was told to BELIEVE (i.e. put his faith or trust) in the Person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ. The gift of salvation, like all gifts, must be received. It is received by faith alone. It is with this understanding that we must read Ephesians 2:8-9: "For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that NOT OF YOURSELVES, it is the gift of God; NOT AS A RESULT OF WORKS, that no one should boast" (emphasis mine). And again, in Titus 3:4-7 we read: "But when the kindness of God our Savior and His love for mankind appeared, He saved us, NOT ON THE BASIS OF DEEDS WHICH WE HAVE DONE IN RIGHTEOUSNESS, BUT ACCORDING TO HIS MERCY, by the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit, whom He poured out upon us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, that being justified by His grace we might be made heirs according to the hope of eternal life" (emphasis mine). Other aspects of salvation include, BUT ARE NOT LIMITED TO, justification (i.e. being declared righteous by God), adoption into God's family as His beloved children (Galatians 4:4-7), the gift of the Holy Spirit (Ephesians 1:13-14), and the gift of eternal life (Romans 6:23). Man receives all that is included in God's gift of salvation BY FAITH ALONE—PLUS NOTHING!

But do works play no role at all in the doctrine of salvation? Actually, they do! HOWEVER, WORKS ARE NOT A MEANS OF SALVATION! Rather, good works are a RESULT of salvation. Salvation is a gift of God, received by faith alone—plus

nothing! But one of the RESULTS of a genuine salvation experience is that the believer engages in good works. We recently looked at Ephesians 2:8-9 and Titus 3:4-7. But what comes after these verses? In Ephesians 2:10 we read: “For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.” Notice the progression of ideas in Ephesians 2:8-10. We are saved by grace through faith and not by our works. However, we were saved, in part, FOR good works! I’ll let you look at Titus 3:8 on your own, but the same order of ideas is present there as well.

By the way, this is James’ point as well in James 2:14-26. Some people think that this passage in James contradicts Paul’s doctrine of salvation by grace, through faith—plus nothing. But if we read this passage carefully, it is clear that James is not arguing that we are saved by works. Rather, he is making the very important point that GENUINE faith produces good works. Thus, if no good works are evident, it may be because the alleged faith is not genuine. And of course no one is claiming that a “pseudo-faith” can save; the faith that saves is GENUINE faith—and such faith leads inevitably to good works.

Two final points. First, we are not capable of judging the thoughts and intentions of others. Only God can do that. If someone does not appear TO ME to be engaging in good works, this is no proof that they are not truly saved. Only God knows their heart. However, it might be appropriate to ask that person to examine himself to see whether his faith is really genuine or not (see 2 Corinthians 13:5 for instance). Second, even the good works resulting from the genuine faith of a true believer are not really his own (in the sense that they originate and are carried out solely in his own strength). They also are the gift of God and can only be properly carried out in the power of God’s Spirit—NOT in the strength of the believer’s flesh! Although many verses could be quoted to this

effect, I will mention only two, Romans 8:3-4: “For what the Law could not do, weak as it was through the flesh, GOD DID: sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and as an offering for sin, He condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the requirement of the Law might be fulfilled in us, who do not walk according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit” (emphasis mine).

Please allow me to summarize the main points:

- Salvation is the work of God—not man.
- God offers man salvation as a free gift, based on the substitutionary death of His Son for our sins.
- Salvation includes, but is not limited to, such things as the forgiveness of sins, the crediting of Christ’s righteousness to our account, justification (being declared righteous by God), adoption into God’s family as His beloved children, the gift of the Holy Spirit, and the gift of eternal life.
- Man receives God’s salvation by faith alone—plus nothing.
- The object of our faith is the Person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ.
- Good works do not merit salvation, but genuine salvation results in good works.
- Good works are only “good” to the extent that they are done in faith through the power of the Holy Spirit. Thus, God Himself is ultimately the Author even of the good works which follow a genuine salvation experience.

I hope this helps. I also hope it makes sense. These ideas are some of the most essential elements of the biblical doctrine of salvation; they do not, of course, exhaust the subject. If the Bible is the word of God, we must pay very careful attention to the means by which God has made His salvation

available to us—neither adding to it, nor subtracting from it, but teaching it just as God revealed it to us.

Shalom,

Michael Gleghorn
Probe Ministries

"Can a Christian Lose His Salvation?"

I have been debating a Christian online about whether salvation is permanent, which I believe it is. I have seen many scriptures that show this is the case but the person I am debating has brought up two verses I have never looked at before and I dont know how to respond. The verses are 2 Peter 2:20-21:

> *"For if, after they have escaped the defilements of the world by the knowledge of the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, they are again entangled in them and are overcome, the last state has become worse for them than the first. For it would be better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than having known it, to turn away from the holy commandment handed on to them."*

I looked in a couple of commentaries as well as in *When Critics Ask* (by Norman Geisler and Thomas Howe) and they either said nothing about it or they didnt address the issue at hand.I have just within the last month or two started getting your newsletter and reading your articles/e-mail responses and I have been very impressed. So I was hoping that you could shed some light on this issue.

You have brought up a great question! The security of every believer is a critical issue in the Christian life. John 10:28-30 assures us that if we are given eternal life by God through Jesus Christ, no one can snatch us from the Father's hand. Romans 8:28-39 also guarantees that nothing in all of reality can separate us from the love of God in Christ.

With that said, there is the issue of the "apparent" problem passages. Of them, 2 Peter 2:20-21 seems a real nasty one. But upon reading the entire epistle from Peter, one can see that the people in question are false teachers. Peter's perspective, as that of Jude in Jude 19, is that these false teachers were not truly Christian. As Jude puts it, they are "wordly-minded, devoid of the Spirit." Most likely these teachers publicly professed Christ as their Lord, but their subsequent rejection verified their unchanged spiritual condition.

The Bible as a whole teaches that believers are securely held in God's hand. But let us be careful not to judge others because of what we see or don't see. Challenge one another in perseverance to bear fruit, but leave the final judgment to the word of God that is "able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart."

Thanks so much for your insightful question. God gives understanding to those who seek it as if searching for buried treasure and precious silver. [Proverbs 2:3-5]

Kris Samons
Probe Ministries

“I Struggle with Doubts”

Hello there – I have a question that I hope you can help me with. I am 38 years old and I have recently lost my second parent to cancer – and I am going through a time where I guess you could say I am re-evaluating my belief system. I was raised in the Presbyterian Church and currently attend _____ here in Houston. What I struggle with is occasional doubts lately and I find it really scary. I believe in God without question but I have trouble sometimes comprehending the resurrection and life after death……I want to believe and have a stronger faith that’s for sure!! The thing that bothers me is someone told me that doubts were blasphemy and that by having doubts you are calling God a liar and that I might not have ever truly been saved. Needless to say that has petrified me, however others have mentioned that doubts are normal…… I went through confirmation with the Presbyterian Church when I was 12 and hope that I am saved. I would really appreciate your thoughts on this!!!! You honor me by sharing your heart with me. Thank you.

Let me cast my vote with those who have assured you that doubts are normal. God understands that as puny-minded humans who are trying to relate to a God we cannot see, touch, or hear, we’re going to face areas we don’t understand! Often, what we experience is confusion, but some people label it doubt.

I think doubt is more in-your-face unbelief. “I know You’re there, God, but I question Your goodness to me so I’m going to do things my own way and pretend like You’re not there.” The way that Satan encouraged Eve to doubt God’s goodness in the garden of Eden.

There is a difference between being overcome by doubts and struggling with comprehending really huge mysteries like the resurrection. God understands, especially at a time like this

when you're grieving. (I am so very, very sorry, to hear about your parents' deaths. This is my first Mother's Day without my mother, who died a few months ago. It's hard, isn't it?)

Since you have internet access, you can get some very interesting information about the resurrection and life after death that will help strengthen and establish your faith in those areas. You can start reading at the Probe Ministries site (www.probe.org) and look in the "Apologetics: Reasons to Believe" section. Leadership University (Leaderu.com) also has some dynamite articles.

Concerning the statement that doubts are blasphemy. Well, no, they're not the same thing. People like you who are concerned that it is, are never guilty of it! Blasphemy is hard-hearted insult against God. I'm sorry that someone has burdened you with the false guilt of "calling God a liar." Now that would be pretty blasphemous, but simply experiencing some questions is usually an issue of not being sure of something. And that's a far cry from saying "God, You're a blankety-blank liar."

Truly saved people have doubts all the time. That's the first step to wrestling with individual issues of faith, and studying them to come out with a stronger faith on the other end. God isn't threatened by our doubts and questions. When we go to Him in simple faith, asking Him to help us understand truth and help us see things as they really are, He truly does answer. It may take a while, but He takes those requests seriously.

You said you were confirmed when you were 12 and you hope that you are saved. I am so glad you put it so bluntly, because I am delighted to be able to give you some very clear direction on this!

Quick question: what were you confirmed IN? Were you confirmed that yes, indeed, you were a Presbyterian, the way we confirm flight reservations? Or were you confirmed in your faith

because at some point before that, as you were growing up, you made a deliberate choice to put your faith in the Lord Jesus Christ?

He told Nicodemus that we must be born again. Just like when we were born the first time, that's a specific event at a specific point in time. In order to pass over from death to life, there must be a specific point at which we choose God over our own way, where we realize that Jesus died on the cross for our sins and we receive His gift of forgiveness and eternal life by saying "thank You!"

So my question to you is, was there a specific point at which you were born again? Being baptized as an infant doesn't do it, because that's not a decision that a disciple makes; it's more of a statement of our parents' intent to raise us in the ways of God. It's possible to go along, learning the catechism questions and having a lot of religious head knowledge ABOUT God, without ever embracing Him as our personal Lord and Savior. Have you done that?

If you have, YOU ARE SAVED FOREVER. If you haven't, then you aren't saved but you can be as soon as you choose to. I know several people who just weren't sure of a specific time and place when they chose to put their trust in Christ, so they chose right then and there and said to God, "God, I am a sinner and I need you. Thank You for sending Jesus to die on the cross in my place, and then raising Him from the dead three days later. I believe Jesus is Your Son, and I trust Him to save me from my sins and take me to heaven when I die." Then they KNEW they had trusted Christ and had passed over from death to life.

1 John 5:11-13 says,

11 And this is the testimony: God has given us eternal life, and this life is in his Son.
12 He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son

of God does not have life.
13 I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life.

I love the part in verse 13 that says, “you may KNOW that you have eternal life.” When someone showed that to me not long after I trusted Christ as a college sophomore, that was the point at which I knew for sure that I was saved—because the Bible said I could know! That was very cool for me, since I was raised just hoping that everything would be okay when I died but I couldn’t ever know. Now I KNOW!!!

Let me know what you think about all this, OK?

The Lord bless you and keep you.

Sue Bohlin
Probe Ministries

Myths Christians Believe – False Beliefs Exposed

Sue Bohlin identifies and examines some common false beliefs held by many Christians. These beliefs, which are countered by biblical scripture, range from considerations of angels to heaven to salvation to “God helps those who help themselves.”

Angels, Good and Bad

In this article we examine some of the myths Christians believe.

There are lots of misconceptions about angels and devils that come from non-biblical sources ranging from great literature

to films to the comic strips in our newspaper.

One myth about angels is that when a loved one dies, he or she becomes our guardian angel. While that can be a comforting thought, that's not what Scripture says. God created angels before He created the physical universe; because we know they sang together in worship and shouted for joy at the creation (Job 38:7). When believing loved ones die, they stay human, but they become better than they ever were on earth, and better than the angels. No angel was ever indwelled by God Himself, as Christians are!

An even greater myth that many people believe is the image of Satan as an ugly red creature with pitchfork, horns, and a tail who gladly reigns in hell. For this misconception we have several authors to thank, mainly the 13th century work of Dante's *Inferno* and Milton's *Paradise Lost,* written in the 1700s. The biblical image of Satan is of an angel who has fallen to irredeemable evil and depravity but yet can transform himself into a beautiful angel of light. (2 Cor. 11:14) He can make himself appear winsome, which is why people can be attracted to the occult. But Satan is not the king of hell. Jesus disarmed him at the Cross, made a public spectacle of him and the rest of the demons, and made him into a defeated foe destined for an eternity of torment in the lake of fire. (Col. 2:15, Rev. 20:10)

Another misconception about Satan that many people believe is that he is the evil counterpart to God. In C.S. Lewis' preface to the Screwtape Letters, he answers the question of whether he believes in "the Devil":

> *Now, if by 'the Devil' you mean a power opposite to God and, like God, self-existent from all eternity, the answer is certainly No. There is no uncreated being except God. God has no opposite. No being could attain a "perfect badness" opposite to the perfect goodness of God; for when you have taken away every kind of good thing (intelligence, will,*

memory, energy, and existence itself) there would be none of him left.

If I Do Everything Right, Life Will Work Smoothly.

A very common myth that many Christians believe is, “If I do everything right, life will work smoothly.” We seem to be immersed in an attitude of entitlement, believing that God owes us an easy and comfortable life if we serve Him. We expect to be able to avoid all pain, and we look for formulas to make life work. Frankly, many of us are addicted to our own comfort zones, and when anything disturbs our comfort zone, we feel betrayed and abandoned by God.

So when life doesn’t go so smoothly, we often jump to one of two conclusions. Either we must be sinning, or God is out to get us. The book of Job draws back the curtain on the unseen drama in the heavenlies and shows us that when problems come, it doesn’t have to be one of these two options. Sometimes things are going on behind the scenes in the heavenly realm that have nothing to do with our sin. And since God is totally good, it’s a lie from the pit of hell that when bad things happen, God is out to get us in some kind of cosmic sadistic power play.

Even when we do everything right—although NOBODY does everything right, not even the holiest, most disciplined people—things can go wrong. The Bible gives us insight into why it might be happening. First, we live in a fallen world, where bad stuff happens because that’s the consequence of sin. This includes natural disasters like hurricanes and tornadoes and floods, and includes moral disasters like divorce and abuse and murder.

Secondly, we live in a spiritual battle zone. Unseen demonic enemies attack us with spiritual warfare. God has provided

spiritual armor, described in Ephesians 6, but if we don't put it on, His armor can't protect us.

Third, we have an inaccurate view of suffering. We think that if we're suffering, something is wrong and needs to be fixed. But 1 Peter 4:19 says that some people suffer according to the will of God. That doesn't sound very nice, but that's because we often think the most important thing in life is avoiding pain. But God isn't committed to keeping us comfortable, He's creating a Bride for His Son who needs to shine with character and perseverance and maturity.

The Lord Jesus promised that we would have tribulation in this world. (John 16:33) The word for tribulation means pressure; it means we get squeezed in by trouble. Jesus said that in the world we would have pressure, but in Him we have peace. Life won't always work smoothly, no matter how well we live, but we always have the presence and power of God Himself to take us through it.

God Won't Give Me More Than I Can Handle.

People get baffled and angry when bad things happen, and it just gets worse when God doesn't make the difficult situation go away. We start wondering if God has gone on vacation because we're nearing our breaking point and God isn't stepping in to make things better.

The problem with this myth is that God is in the business of breaking His people so that we will get to the point of complete dependence on Him.{1} Brokenness is a virtue, not something to be protected from. When the apostle Paul pleaded with God to remove his thorn in the flesh, God said no. Instead, He responded with an amazing promise: "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Paul realized that his weakness was the very key to experiencing God's strength and not his own.

One of my friends ministered as a chaplain at Ground Zero in New York after the Sept. 11 attacks. She got so tired and exhausted that she knew it was more than she could bear. That's when she discovered that her exhaustion took her out of God's way and He could shine through her, ministering with His strength through her profound weakness.

I love this definition of brokenness: "Brokenness is that place where we realize that all the things we counted on to make life work, don't."{2} God makes life work. Formulas don't. Our own efforts don't. Trustful dependence on Him plugs us into the power source for life. And that often happens when we've crossed over the line of what we can handle on our own.

God Helps Those Who Help Themselves.

This myth has been repeated so many times that many people think its in Scripture. It's not. In fact, the truth is exactly the opposite. A heart full of self-dependence and self-reliance says to God, "I don't need You, I can do it myself. I can handle life without You." God honors our choices and the exercise of our will; He doesn't push His help on us. He waits for us to ask for it. He can't help those who help themselves because we're too busy *doing* to receive His strength and His help. It's like the way you can't fill a cup with coffee when it's already full of tea. Jesus said, "Apart from Me, you can do nothing." (John 15:5) But that doesn't stop lots of us from trying! The truth is, God doesn't help those who help themselves; God helps the helpless.

Two Myths About Heaven

The first myth is perpetuated by the many jokes and comics about St. Peter at the pearly gates. Many people believe that if our good deeds outweigh our bad deeds, St. Peter will let us into heaven. It doesn't work that way.

God has one standard for getting into heaven: absolute

perfection and holiness. The person who has sinned the smallest sin is still guilty and cannot be perfect and holy. It's like a balloon: once it's popped, there's nothing anyone can do to make it whole again. Only one Person has ever qualified for heaven by being perfect and holy—the Lord Jesus. When we trust Christ as our Savior, He does two things for us: He pays the penalty for our sin, which keeps us out of hell, and He exchanges our sin for His righteousness, which allows us into heaven.

Another myth is that heaven is like a big socialist state where everybody gets a standard issue harp and halo and we all sit around on clouds all day praising God in a never-ending church service. Doesn't sound all that great, does it?

Fortunately, heaven's a whole lot better than that. For one thing, the reason we think worshiping God for all eternity is boring is because we don't know God as He really is. We're like the six-year-old boy who declared that "girls are stupid, and kissin' 'em is even stupider." Kids don't have a clue how great love can be, and we don't have a clue how wonderful God is.

Heaven is no socialist state. There will be varying degrees of reward and responsibility in heaven, depending on the way we lived our life on earth. All believers will stand before the Judgment Seat of Christ, when God will test our works by passing them through the fire of motive. If we did things in His strength and for His glory, they will pass through the refining fire and emerge as gold, silver and costly stones. If we did things in our own flesh and for our glory or for the earthly payoff, we will have gotten all our strokes on earth, and our works will be burned up, not making it through the testing "fire."

There are different types of rewards in heaven: a prophet's reward, a righteous man's reward, and a disciple's reward. Some will receive the crown of life, or a martyr's crown, and

there’s also the crown of righteousness. Our lives in heaven will be determined by the choices, sacrifices, and actions of earth. Some will be very wealthy, and others will be “barely there.” You can check our Web site for the scriptures about this.{3}

Myths About the Bible and Salvation

Many non-Christians believe a myth that is accepted by a lot of Christians as well—that the Bible has been changed and corrupted since it was written. The historical evidence actually makes a rather astounding case for the supernatural protection and preservation of both Old and New Testaments.

As soon as the New Testament documents were written, people immediately started making copies and passing them around. There are so many copies in existence that the New Testament is the best-documented piece of ancient literature in the world. And because there are so many copies, we can compare them to today’s Bible and be assured that what we have is what was written.

The Old Testament scribes were so meticulous in copying their manuscripts that they were obsessive about accuracy. They would count the middle letter of the entire original text and compare it to the middle letter of the new copy. If it didn’t match, they’d make a new copy. When the Dead Sea Scrolls were discovered in 1947, they demonstrated that this collection of Old Testament scriptures has been faithfully preserved for two thousand years.

Many people believe that certain parts of the Bible have been corrupted or deleted, such as supposed teaching on reincarnation. However, this is just hearsay from people who do not understand how the canon of scripture was decided on. From the beginning of the church, Christians recognized the 27 books that make up the New Testament as God’s inspired word, and the writings that weren’t inspired were eventually

dropped. We have some great articles on our Web site that explain about the reliability of the Bible.{4}

Many Christians believe another myth: "I believe in Jesus, but surely God will let people of other faiths into heaven too." Many seem to think that being a "good Muslim" or a "sincere Buddhist" should count for something.

This does make sense from a human perspective, but God didn't leave us in the dark trying to figure out truth on our own. He has revealed truth to us, both through Jesus and through the Bible. So regardless of what makes sense from our limited human perspective, we need to trust what God has said.

And Jesus, who ought to know because He is God in the flesh, said, "I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except by Me." (John 14:6) No other religion deals with the problem of sin and God's requirement of perfection and holiness on God's terms. There may be many ways to Jesus, but there's only way to the Father. It's God's heaven, and He makes the rules: it's Jesus or nothing.

Notes

1. I am indebted to Dr. Al Meredith, the pastor of Wedgwood Baptist Church in Ft. Worth, Texas, for this perspective. Wedgwood Baptist was the site of the massacre the night of the "See You At the Pole" celebration when seven youth and staff members were killed and seven others wounded by a crazed gunman.

2. Jeff Kinkade, pastor of Reinhardt Bible Church in Garland, Texas.

3. "Probe Answers Our E-Mail: Help Me Understand Rewards in Heaven."

4. "Are the Biblical Documents Reliable?". Also, "The Authority of the Bible" and "The Christian Canon".

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“Do Babies Go to Hell?”

Do you believe that babies go to hell or not? Please support your answer with Scripture.

This is an issue that challenges or questions the justice of God. It is a legitimate question, and I must say at the outset we cannot give a total answer. But there are passages in the Bible which shed a great deal of light on the subject. I will try to address the ones that have come to my mind which I think bear directly or indirectly on your question of the innocence/accountability of children.

Generally speaking, we are asking the question, “What do children know and when do they know it? And the key issue here is one of comprehension of, or the understanding of the Gospel message. This is not only true for children, it is true for adults. When Philip saw the Ethiopian eunuch sitting in his chariot reading Isaiah 53, he was instructed by the Holy Spirit (Acts 8:29) to “Go up and join this chariot.” Philip asked him if he **understood** what he was reading. The eunuch replied, “Well, how could I, unless someone guides Me?” (v. 31). Acts 8:32-40 goes on to relate that Philip explained how this Eunuch could become a Christian. He responded and was baptized.

My point in beginning with this incident is because there can be no salvation without an understanding of the gospel message. We find Paul throughout the book of Acts reasoning, debating, contending with people so they might understand the message of salvation. And so children must be old enough to **understand** the gospel, which involves a comprehension of their

own personal sin and guilt.

This brings the next question: *At what age would that be?* I am sorry that I cannot give an affirmative answer since the Scripture never pinpoints clearly the exact age when this occurs. The Talmud from ancient times designated age thirteen for boys ("Bar Mitzvah,"—cf. *Judaism*, Arthur Hertzberg, p. 100) and twelve for girls ("Bat Mizvah"). This was the time when Jewish boys and girls became responsible for themselves and were to observe all the rituals, feasts, etc., incumbent upon them as members of the Jewish community. It was also the time when the boys were allowed (called) to read the Torah as full members of the worshipping community.

The confirmation services for the young which are practiced in all Catholic, Greek Orthodox, and some Protestant churches are based on the earlier Jewish traditions above. All of them, including the Jewish community, have traditionally set the "age of accountability at about age twelve.

It is also interesting that Luke records the incident at the temple where a twelve-year-old Jesus lagged behind his family and was found (three days later!) in the temple "sitting amidst the teachers both listening to them and asking them questions. . .And all who heard Him were amazed at His understanding and His answers." (Luke 2:46,47).

We can glean from other Old Testament passages additional insights:

1. I Samuel 1:22-18; 3:1-19: Hannah, married to Elkanah, was barren. She made a vow to the Lord that if He would give her a son, she would dedicate him to the Lord for lifelong service. God graciously did so, and Samuel was born. Hannah cared for him and told her husband she would not go up to the Tabernacle (at Shiloh) for the annual sacrifice (Day of Atonement) until she had weaned Samuel, saying, *"I will not go up until the child is weaned; then I will bring him, that he may appear*

before the Lord and stay there forever.” (1:22).

The weaning of Hebrew (and other ancient) children did not occur until two or three years, and nursing may have extended beyond to perhaps age five. Therefore Samuel was a very young boy when he was dedicated to the service of the temple. Hannah says on this occasion, “For this boy I prayed, and the Lord has given me my petition which I asked of Him. . .So I have also dedicated him to the Lord; as long as he lives he is dedicated to the Lord. And she worshipped the Lord there.”(1:27,28). We are also told in 2:11 that “the boy ministered to the Lord before Eli the priest.” Verses 2:18-21 indicate that the boy was visited each year by his mother, at which time she would bring him a new, little robe. Several years are indicated in this passage, including the fact that Hannah had given birth to three more sons and two daughters. We can conclude, since Samuel was at least three or four years old when initially brought to the temple, he would at least be nine or ten, and could have been even older (a teenager) when he had his visitation and call from the Lord in I Samuel 3:1-21. The critical verse in this chapter is as follows: “Now Samuel **did not yet know the Lord**, nor had the word of the Lord yet been revealed to him.” (v. 7).

So here again, Samuel could well have been around age twelve when this event occurred, an incident pointing out a demarcation in his life—of “not knowing” and then “knowing” the Lord.

2. Another passage which marks out this demarcation is found in Nehemiah 8:1-3. After Nehemiah and the Jews had rebuilt the walls of Jerusalem they gathered together in worship to hear Ezra the Scribe read the Torah: “And the people gathered as one man, . . .and they asked Ezra the scribe to bring the book of the law of Moses which the Lord had given to Israel. Then Ezra the priest brought the law before the assembly of **men, women, and all who could listen with *understanding*.** And he read from it before the Water Gate from early morning until

midday, in the presence of **men and women, those who could *understand*;** and all the people were **attentive** to the book of the law. . .And they read from the book, from the law of God, translating to give the **sense** so that they **understood** the reading (v.8). By implication, the younger children—those without understanding—were **not** present.

3. Another interesting "accountability" issue is found in the Torah which involves the numbering of the fighting men of Israel in the book of Numbers. We are told in Numbers 1 that Moses was instructed to "take a census of all the congregation of the sons of Israel, and their families. . .according to the number of names, every male, head by head **from twenty years and upward,** whoever is able to go out to war in Israel." (1:2,3). This passage informs us that there were *no teenagers* in Israel's army. This census was taken at the end of the entire year the Israelites spent at Mt. Sinai where they received the Law, and during which time they built the Tabernacle and organized themselves into a well-defined community. They were now to embark upon the conquest of Canaan. However, they were called upon to postpone that conquest because of their unbelief and disobedience at Kadesh Barnea. God sent them into the wilderness for forty years after their "Reconnaissance" of Canaan by the twelve spies ended in failure.

After this forty-year exile we read in Deuteronomy 2:14-16, "Now the time that it took for us to come from Kadesh-barnea to (here has been) thirty-eight years; until all the generation of the men of war perished from within the camp, as the Lord had sworn to them. Moreover the hand of the Lord was against them, to destroy them from within the camp, until they all perished."

What is significant here is that those men who perished were those selected for the army forty years earlier whose ages ranged from twenty to age sixty. The Bible says that by thirty-eight years later, all of these men, the men of

"unbelief," had now died off, leaving only the new generation which *would* be allowed to enter Canaan. This new "fighting force" would include that original group of males (from age 1 to 19 (which would now be ages 40 to 59) as well as all the males which had been born during the roughly forty years of Wilderness wanderings. So here again, there is an "age of accountability" factor taken into account by the Lord and His servant, Moses. There was no judgment upon this younger group of males. They were allowed to enter Canaan and participate in the conquest of the Land.

There is another passage that touches on this later "age of accountability" from the life of Jehoiachin, II Kings 24:8: "Jehoiachin was **eighteen** years old when he became king. . .and he did **evil** in the sight of the Lord, according to all that his father had done." So here we find an eighteen- year-old king who is viewed by the Lord as being accountable for the evil he had already done.

I put this section in, but I don't personally believe that exempting the "under-twenty-year-olds" at the time of the Exodus is a likely precedent for an age of accountability. Furthermore, we find in the legal regulations of the Torah that a disobedient and unmanageable teenager was responsible for his actions, and could be stoned to death by the community! This could occur for cursing his parents, violence, drunkenness, adultery, and so forth. So, in my thinking, the ten to twelve year age would seem more likely for an age of understanding or accountability.

4. Another passage which bears upon our question comes from the life of David, and specifically the outcome of his sin with Bathsheba and the premeditated murder of her husband, Uriah the Hittite (II Samuel 11 & 12). You will recall that David lusted after Bathsheba's great beauty and committed adultery with her, after which she became pregnant (11:1-5). David gave instructions to have Uriah placed "in the fiercest battle and withdraw from him so that he may be struck down and

die.” (11:15). After Uriah’s death, David brought Bathsheba to his house as his wife, and she bore him a son. (11:27) Nathan the prophet confronts David with his sin and says, “because by this deed you have given occasion to the enemies of the Lord to blaspheme, the child also that is born to you shall surely die.: Then the Lord struck the child that Uriah’s widow bore to David, so that he was very sick.” (12:14,15).

The child lingered for seven days and then died. During this time, David prayed and fasted and laid on the ground. When the child died the servants were afraid to tell David, but he saw them whispering and they finally told him, “He is dead.” (12:19).

When David heard this, he got up, washed himself, changed his clothes, asked for food and ate. His servants were perplexed by this: while the child lived, David mourned. When the child died, David got up and ate food. They wondered why. David said, “While the child was still alive, I fasted and wept; for I said, Who knows, the Lord may be gracious to me, that the child may live. But now he has died; why should I fast.? Can I bring him back again? ***I shall go to him*****, but he will not return to me.”**(12:22,23)

David has a view of death and immortality which expresses itself in this incident involving the death of a child. David believes in the after life. In Psalm 23 he concludes by saying: “Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.” So for David there was a place for the dead, including children—the house, or the dwelling place, of the Lord. David also speaks of this in Psalm 16:9,10 where he says, “For thou wilt not abandon (leave) my soul in Sheol (the grave); Neither wilt Thou allow Thy Holy One to see (experience) decay (corruption).” David believes in the resurrection of the body—for himself, and for the Messiah (the Holy One) (see also Acts 13:35). Job says something very similar: “And as for me, I know that my Redeemer lives, and at

the last He will take His stand on the earth. Even after my skin is flayed (corrupted) Yet without my flesh I shall see God; Whom I myself shall behold, and whom my eyes shall see and not another."

The point of David's perspective is that he believes that the child is still alive and in God's presence, David anticipates that when *he* dies, he will join his little son in the house of the Lord: "I shall go to him."

5. Finally, we have the teachings of Jesus Himself. In Matthew 19:13-15, our Lord says as the children we being hindered from coming near to Him, *"Let the children alone, and do not hinder them from coming to me; for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these, and after laying His hands on them, He departed. . ."*

Christ has a special love for little children. Why He associates children with the Kingdom of Heaven is because it is the place of the innocent, the blameless. It would appear that Jesus sees children in this light. The whole trend of Scripture seems to teach that the innocents who are too young to sin and too young to accept Christ intelligently (*with understanding!)*, are safe in the arms of a just and holy God.

We need never fear about God being unjust. He cannot be. His mercy and justice are from everlasting to everlasting. I therefore conclude, that there will be no children in hell. There will also be no retarded, or otherwise mentally-incapacitated individuals there, those who cannot fully comprehend and understand what Christ has accomplished on their behalf at Calvary.

In summary, I think we can conclude the following:

First, that there is some period of grace afforded the young before they have developed an understanding to fully comprehend the gospel message and its implications for their lives.

Second, there seems to be good scriptural support that all infants, like David's little son, go immediately, in their innocence, into the arms of the Lord.

Third, that the likely range of such an age of "accountability " may occur around the time of puberty.

Fourth, that we are not saying children younger than this "accountability age" commit no sin (as sinful tendencies and acts occur quite early in children), and because of their fallen nature, they do these things spontaneously, things which they have definitely NOT learned from their parents or their friends). What we are saying is that up to the point when they reach clear understanding, they do not come under the judgment of the Law.

I'm sure that much more could be gleaned from the scriptures on this, but these passages came to my mind. At least it's a start at answering your question, D____. I hope this helps.

Jimmy Williams, Founder
Probe Ministries

Yes Sir, that does help. Thanks very much. What you wrote is what I've long believed, without really knowing how to defend it biblically.

Now for a follow-up question which seems to spring quite logically from what you wrote: If God exempts from holding accountable for their sins those who are not old enough to have "understanding," and those of any age who are incapable of having "understanding" (such as the mentally retarded), is it also possible, Scripturally speaking, that He exempts in some measure those who have never heard of Jesus at all—judging them perhaps by whatever standard He utilized for those before Christ (lived), both Jews and non-Jews, some of whom certainly gained eternal life, rather than automatically condemning them for not accepting the Savior of whom they never heard?

I would suggest you check the Probe web site and look for three articles which address this question: "What About the Person Who Never Heard of Jesus," "Is Jesus the Only Savior?" and "Is There a Second Chance to Believe After Death?"

I would say in addition, to your remarks about Old Testament believers, that there were two kinds of people before Christ just as there are two kinds of people now: **believers** and **unbelievers**.

It is helpful for me to think of this in terms of a painting. As early as Genesis 3:15, immediately after the "Disobedience/Fall" God began to reveal His plan of redemption. He speaks there of the "Seed" of a Woman" who would one day **crush** the head of Satan and destroy his power and influence on the earth.

As we move through the Old Testament, God continues, with broad strokes at first, to sketch out the details of Who this Person would be. By the time we get to Malachi, a fairly accurate portrait of Messiah and His Mission has been provided. The New Testament is the fulfillment of that unfolding from the Old.

Jesus said, "Your Father Abraham **saw my day** (time, era) and rejoiced in it" (John 8:16). Now, what did He see (comprehend, understand)? Not the **whole** picture revealed in the New Testament, but enough information for him to have a basis (God's promise of a Messiah) for his trust, his belief, at that time.

Noah is another example. There is nothing directly mentioned about the Messiah in the Noah narrative (except the fact that the Ark itself is a **type** of Christ—those inside the Ark were saved; those outside the Ark perished), the important principle is that God revealed some things to Noah and asked him to be obedient to them.

We cannot understand this Old Testament Salvation issue unless

we see clearly what God was doing. What was He doing from Genesis 3:15 to the end of the Old Testament? He was progressively revealing more and more details about His promised Messiah. Hebrews 1:1-2 says, “God spoke long ago to the fathers by the prophets and in may portions and in many ways, in these last days has spoken to us in His Son, whom He appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the world.”

It seems apparent that the Old Testament saints had *some* “light” and they were responsible to respond to it. The CROSS has always been the *basis* for our salvation. Those who came before it looked *forward* in time to when it *would* be fulfilled. Those of us who have lived *after* Jesus’s Day look back to that time when it *was* accomplished. This is the *basis* for our salvation. The *means* of our salvation is always *faith*, encompassing all who lived before and all who lived after the Cross who “believed God” and whatever revelatory information they had at that time. And the *results* of our faith are always expressed in being obedient to those things which God has revealed. I hope this information and the other articles I have recommended you to read will answer your above question.

Do Babies Go to Hell? #2

This is one of those items that, as you know, God has not revealed. Consider this: If we think they don’t, that is, that God takes them all to Heaven, then abortion and the killing of those before the so-called age of accountability would be a great way to have more babies go to Heaven. Consider, what percent of those that reach the so-called age of accountability get saved/born again. By aborting and killing the young children we could increase that to 100 percent. This would of course make abortion and murder good.

Thank you for this response to my remarks about the above

topic.

First of all, I respectfully disagree with your first statement. It seems to me that, while we do not have a total answer to this question from the Scriptures, I enumerated several lines of thought pertaining to the question, one of which was a clear, biblical example recorded of a child who had died and went to heaven. So I don't think you could say "God has not revealed anything about this issue to us. We do have *some* information and insight from the Scriptures.

So I will restate my conviction that I do believe there are *not*—nor will there ever be—any children in hell.

Secondly, I don't follow your logic in your next statement. Given my view, any infant death—whether from abortion, accident, disease, assault or other causes—does not matter: *All* babies go to heaven. And so aborting children would *not* be a great way to have more babies go to Heaven, as you suggest, since all of them go to Heaven.

Thirdly, you have tacked on to this another issue which must be kept separate from the above. You say, I think, that we would be doing *some* persons (those who are not going to become Christians after they have reached the age of accountability when they are held responsible to God for their choices and behavior) a big "favor" by aborting them. I hope I am reading you right.

There are several things very wrong about what you propose: (a) I would assume that you believe, as I do, that the "termination of a pregnancy" (i.e., a euphemism for killing and destroying an unborn infant) is murder. This is a violation of the Sixth Commandment (Ex. 20:13). This commandment alone is in opposition to what you suggest. (b) Further, in order to carry out such a task, you would literally have to be God Himself, since you don't know which ones are the "fledgling" non-believers upon whom you are to

perform your acts of "mercy." (c) But why stop there? Why not go ahead and do the same with the mentally-impaired? The comatose? The *"non compos mentis"* elderly? Would they not also qualify? Something is wrong with this picture.

Fourthly, you say that carrying out such an enterprise would "make abortion and murder good." This is actually very far from what I view as a Scriptural perspective. Paul asks, "Shall we sin (continue in sin) so that (we can see) grace abound? (Romans 6:1)" In other words, should we take advantage of God's forgiveness of sins through Christ and go on sinning so we can see His marvelous Grace go to work to cover it? Paul says, "God forbid." He elaborates on this later on: "Let love be without hypocrisy. Abhor what is evil; cleave to what is good (12:9)." Earlier Paul defends his actions against those who were criticizing him and his colleagues, "slanderously reporting that we say, '*let us* ***do evil*** *that* ***good*** *may come.' Their condemnation is just* (Romans 3:8)." In Psalm 109:3-5 David's words could easily be applied to the unborn: "They have spoken against me. . they have also surrounded me with words of hatred, And fought against me *without cause*. In return for my love (innocence) they act as my accusers;…Thus they have repaid me *evil for good*. …and *hatred* for my *love.*" In II Corinthians 13:7,8 Paul says, "Now we pray to God *that you do no wrong*…but that you may *do what is right* . …For we can do *nothing* against the *truth*, but only *for* the truth." In Proverbs 17:13 it says, "He who returns evil for good, Evil will not depart from his house." And "He who *justifies* the wicked, and he who condemns the righteous, Both of them alike are an *abomination* to the Lord (vs. 15,16)." And Moses says, "I call heaven and earth to witness against you today, that I have set before you *life* and *death*, the blessing and the curse. So *choose life* in order that you may live, you and your seed, by loving the Lord your God, by *obeying* His voice, and by holding fast to Him; for this is your life and the length of your days (Deut. 30:19,20)." And finally, James says, "Let no one say when he is tempted, 'I am being tempted by God';

for God cannot be tempted by evil, and He Himself does *not tempt anyone* [to do evil] (James 1:13)."

The principle is pretty clear: **"It is never *right* to do *wrong* in order to do *right*." "It is never *good* to do *evil* in order to do *good*."**

I hope this answers your question, _____ .

God's blessings,

Jimmy Williams, Founder
Probe Ministries

Do Babies Go To Hell #3

First, I want to say that our family has been blessed by the ministry of Probe. I've caught up on my mail, and just read the answer to the questions "Do Babies Go to Hell?" There is a passage in Romans that always comes to mind in this regard. It is Romans 7:9.

> I was once alive apart from the Law; but when the commandment came, sin became alive and I died;

This is "the" verse that really spoke to me about the existence of an "age of accountability," whatever that age may be. Being a Jew, and a Pharisee at that, I'm sure Paul had a knowledge of the law on some level at an early age. But it wasn't until it "came" to him (he understood it?) that he was accountable, i.e. he "died" (came under condemnation which he knew was worthy of death).

Just though I'd pass this on. I might not have bothered to respond, not wanting to take time to look up the verse, but I just read Romans 7 this morning so it was "quite" fresh in my mind. And I can never read this without thinking of this

point.

May the Lord continue to bless your ministry.

PraiSing Him,

Dear _____,

Thank you for your e-mail and comments on Romans 7:9. It really relates to this subject. I am glad you are benefiting from the Probe web site. Thank you for expressing your appreciation, which is a real encouragement to all the Probe Staff.

Jimmy Williams
Probe Ministries

Do Babies Go To Hell #4

I frequent your web site and have enjoyed it thoroughly. It has helped to shape me and has been a source of God's truth for me. For that I am grateful!! I don't think that once I have ever felt that you have been different than what God's truth says. Below I raise some questions about the recent article about babies' salvation. Please comment to help me understand how you feel. Thanks.

First of all, the Bible says that ". . .all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." All we like sheep have gone astray, we have turned everyone to our own way. . ." ". . . there is none that doeth good, no not one." These folks that believe that children won't be held accountable for their sins, I believe, don't understand the fallen nature of man and the righteous character of an all-Holy God.

Even David had a handle on this doctrine when he wrote in

Psalm 51: “Behold, I was shaped in iniquity and in sin did my mother conceive me.”

It’s important to note that the “all” and “everyone” listed above means all people, even babies, born and yet unborn. We are by nature sinful, which means we are spiritually dead and enemies of God. Spiritually-dead people (of any age) cannot make themselves spiritually alive any more than physically-dead people can make themselves physically alive.

Spiritually-dead babies are enemies of God and separated from Him and completely unable to change that situation. The nature of God is that He is totally just and righteous. The Bible says, “. . . I am of purer eyes than to behold iniquity.” “The soul that sinneth, it shall die.” “I will by no means clear the guilty.” He had sworn a “thousand” times in Scripture to punish sin wherever He finds it. His justice demands that He do it. He cannot make any exceptions.

So. . .this is why Jesus came to earth to die on the cross. If babies were not going to be held accountable for their sins (and would automatically go to heaven when they die) as this fellow teaches, then Jesus wasn’t needed for them. This path would lead us to believe that Jesus came to die only for those who have reached that mystical “age of accountability” and understand their sinful condition and can make a decision regarding the gospel. It is true that as we mature and do become aware of our thoughts and behavior and choices that we will be held accountable for them. Those who assert that the age of accountability is when children become responsible before God, yet none of them seem to know when that age is. Wouldn’t it seem important to know that?

One more thing. By stating that we must reach this (unknown) age before we can understand and believe and thus be responsible for our salvation puts some of the credit for our being saved upon US, doesn’t it?

The business of enlightening souls and saving same belongs to the Holy spirit. Martin Luther stated, “I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in God or come to Him. . .” We are saved by God alone. “By grace are you saved through faith, and that not of yourselves. It is the gift of God, not of works, lest any man should boast.”

We are accountable for our sins from conception and can only be saved when the Holy Spirit gives us this faith and changes us from spiritually dead to spiritually alive. This is why we embrace Baptism. In I Peter 3:21, Peter states: “Therefore we conclude, that Baptism doth also save us, not the removal of the filth of the flesh, but the answer of a good conscience toward God, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ.”

In Baptism, we are responding to a command of Christ’s and the Holy Spirit promises to save us through the water and the Word by this act. What do you think of this?

Thank you for your recent e-mail. I appreciate the fact that you have found benefit from the Probe Website. I am the fellow you refer to who is responsible for writing the e-mail, “Do Babies Go to Hell?”

In your first two paragraphs you mention the fact that from conception babies bear the stamp of sin. I have no problem with this as long as we understand what that means. And what it means is that babies are members of a fallen race (See my discussion on this in E-Mail #1). Sin is passed on genetically from the male. This was why the Virgin Birth was necessary and specifically why Jesus was “without sin.” He is therefore the only exception to the general rule.

And I also agree with you that apart from the working of God, all humans are spiritually dead until they hear the Gospel, respond to it and are born again into the family of God.

You say that “spiritually-dead babies (born and unborn) are enemies of God, separated from Him, and are completely unable

to change that situation." And I agree with you on the basis of what I have just said above. But I want to ask you a question. Do you then believe that every embryo, every unborn fetus, and all toddlers, let's say, from the beginning of time until now, are actually in hell? What if we add four and five-year olds? Them too? I don't think so. But this is what you are asserting to be true.

I point you back to a review of my original discussion in E-Mail #1 about an alternative to your conclusion and one which has some (not exhaustive) support in the Scriptures. Specifically, I would ask you to focus on David's experience with his newborn son (from Bathsheba) who became sick and died seven days after his birth (II Samuel 11 and 12). After the child has died, David says, "I shall go to him, but he will not return to me (12:22,23)." Now here is a baby that had, as we all do, a sin nature, but *didn't* go to Hell. In Psalm 23 we have a clear indication of where David felt he would be after death: "I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever." And he anticipated that he would again see his little son.

In your next paragraph you make the assumption that those who have not reached the age of accountability have no need of a Savior. I don't follow your logic. On the basis of your own premise that all in Adam are tainted with sin and are in need of a redeemer, I don't understand why you would say His death would not apply to these young ones as well. You do admit that **"it is true that as we mature and do become aware of our thoughts and behavior and choices that we will be held accountable for them."** That is exactly the point. The primary reason that Christian parents hesitate to explain the Gospel to very young children is because those parents want them to be old enough to fully UNDERSTAND what Jesus did for them.

This leads me on to answer your question about "pinning down" what/when that age might be. I don't think we can arbitrarily pick an exact age for everyone. There are too many variables. But we do know this: there are FOUR components necessary for

one to come to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ. We find them in Paul's interchange with Lydia in Acts 16:14: "And a certain woman named Lydia. . .was (1) **listening**, and the (2) **Lord opened her heart to respond** to the (3) **things spoken** by (4) **Paul**."

In Acts 9:27-39 we have the account of Philip's encounter with the Ethiopian Eunuch, who was reading Isaiah 53 out loud as he sat in his chariot. Philip ran up and asked him, "Do you **understand** what you are reading? The eunuch answered, "How could I, unless **someone guides** me?" You know the rest of the story. My point here is that even **adults** don't become Christians until they, with the enlightenment of the Holy Spirit, come to **understand** the gospel and see it with the eyes of faith. Would it be any **less** important for children to have the same understanding?

We also find in the Scriptures times when God **overlooked** sin under certain circumstances as the redemptive work unfolded through time: "the redemption which is in Christ Jesus; whom God displayed publicly as a propitiation in His blood through faith. This was to demonstrate His righteousness , because of the **passing over** of the **sins** previously committed in the **forbearance** of God (Romans 3:24-25." (See also Acts 17:30; Romans 5:13,14). You will also find other, similar elements in the first e-mail.

In your next paragraph you indicate you feel special credit is due those who come to a place of accountability to God, and that their use of reason or comprehension somehow negates the work of the Spirit. I point you back to Lydia. NO ONE COMES TO CHRIST WITHOUT UNDERSTANDING THE GOSPEL. This involves *reason*. And part of that reasoning is to comprehend Romans 6:23—it is, as you mention, by *grace* and not of works, "lest *anyone* might boast."

You conclude with some comments about baptism, and quote I Peter 3:21. I am not sure why you included this in the

discussion, but let me comment: First of all, I am wondering if you are including believer baptism as *part* of the Gospel: that is, you believe one does not become a Christian when he *believes* the Gospel, but rather that you only accomplish when you are baptized. I am assuming that you are not here referring to infant baptism, which, incidentally, is used by some segments of Christendom to do something to *cover* these young ones until they come of an age when they *can* understand the Gospel. I do not personally believe that baptizing an infant with water, without an understanding of the Gospel, accomplishes *anything*. It isn't even mentioned in Scripture.

Further, Paul tells us clearly in Romans 1:16 that he is "not ashamed of the **gospel**, for **it** is the **power** of God **unto salvation for every one who *believes*.**" And so it is clear that the ***Gospel*** is the power of God unto Salvation, and *nothing else*. But we find in 1 Corinthians 1:17 that Paul **clearly** distinguishes between the Gospel and Baptism: "For Christ did not send me to **baptize**, but to preach the **gospel**." Evidently, Paul does not include baptism as part of the gospel, but rather saw it as the appropriate response of obedience following one's conversion. Even the verse you quote from Peter must be carefully read: Peter qualifies his statement about baptism by making sure he is not misunderstood. He appears to me to be saying that water will not wash away sin, but rather, in **obedience** to the command of Christ, the believer, in good conscience toward God, gives his answer, or his response, to the truth of the Gospel by submitting to baptism. Baptism is a public testimony of one's inner commitment to the Person and Work of Christ: "The word is near you, in your **mouth**, and in your **heart.—**That is, the word of faith which we are preaching, that if you **confess** with your **mouth** Jesus as Lord, and **believe** in your **heart** that God raised Him from the dead, you shall be **saved**; for with the **heart** man **believes**, resulting in righteousness, and with the **mouth** he **confesses**, resulting in **salvation.**

You asked me to comment on these issues and I have tried to do this as honestly as I can from my understanding of God's Word. You may not be comfortable with all of my responses, but I have given you my "best shot."

May the Lord bless you and your family,

Jimmy Williams, Founder
Probe Ministries

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"Is There a Second Chance to Believe After Death?"

Hi there Jim. We've spoken before and I found it quite helpful. Can I ask you a question on divine judgment? What about those who would come before God and who really weren't HONESTLY sure about it all and didn't become a Christian in life? When they stood in front of Him and God knew how they felt through life…would that be fair to send them to hell? Obviously they would have a sudden change of heart, right? Thanks, Jim.

If I understand you correctly, you are wondering if a person who is skeptical of the claims of Christ throughout life, didn't CLEARLY understand the gospel but you imply if they had, they would have placed their faith in Christ. And then you wonder if once dead and seeing that His claims were genuine, God would be unfair in sending that person to hell. If I am not clear on your meaning here, please let me know.

First of all, the Bible says that "it is appointed unto man ONCE to die and afterwards comes judgment (Hebrews 9:27)."

This seems to rule out any idea of a second chance, and the concept of reincarnation as well.

Furthermore, we are told in John 16:8-11 that the Holy Spirit is constantly convicting the world (including your hypothetical person) of "sin, righteousness, and judgment." What this means is that *no one* is left without an opportunity to respond to this prompting of the Spirit, repent, and place their faith in Christ.

And Romans 1:18-20 Paul tells us that God's **wrath** has been revealed from heaven against all unrighteousness (as we see above in the John passage), and "because that which is **known** about God is **evident within** them. . .For since the creation of the world, His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been **clearly seen**, being understood through what has been made, so they are **without excuse**."

Luke 17 also gives us some things which bear on your question. Read the parable of the rich man and Lazarus (17:19-31). The crux of the story is that both of these men died. The rich man found himself in hell, and was able to see Lazarus (the poor beggar) in heaven (Abraham's Bosom). The rich man is in torment, and now, "knowing" the truth of things, asks if he could be sent back to earth to talk to his five brothers and warn them so they don't join him in hell. (This is analogous to the man in your hypothetical). Look carefully at the Lord's answer. He tells the man it wouldn't do any good. The Lord says they *have* a witness: Moses and the Prophets. The rich man says, yes, but they would *listen* if someone came back from the dead and *told* them!

Jesus responds by saying if they didn't believe/respond to the light they already had (through Moses and the Prophets), they wouldn't be persuaded even if someone came back from the dead to tell them! In short, the necessary information and guidance to enter the family of God is available to all during their lifetime. And faith must have an object worthy of its trust.

Hebrews 11:6 tells us that “Without **faith** it is **impossible** to please God, for he who comes to God must **believe** that He is, and is a rewarder of those who **diligently seek** Him.”

Now what would be fair about giving those who “sat” on the fence, ignored the evidence, and failed to **exercise faith** in Christ, and then, when dead, like the rich man, now **knowing** the truth, (no need to exercise faith) asking for another chance?

There are **no unbelievers** in heaven *or* hell. They are now **all** believers. They know the truth. Unfortunately, those who chose not to respond to all of the “signposts” God has given the world (which could be believed if any person desired), they must face the consequences of their “non-actions.” It would not be fair of God to include the man you are suggesting along with those who pleased God by exercising their faith in Christ while faith was still the issue!

I hope this answers your question, _____.

Jimmy Williams, Founder
Probe Ministries

Jesus: Political Martyr or Atoning God?

Introduction

Every Easter season journalists feel obliged to write something relating to Jesus and the passion narratives. This year our paper covered the current struggle many are having over the meaning of Christ’s death on the cross. The paper

quotes a seminary professor in Atlanta who has observed that more and more of his students are rejecting the traditional view of why Christ died and what His death accomplished. The professor says, “They don’t consider Jesus a ransom for sin. They shudder at hymns glorifying the ‘power of the blood.’ They cringe at calling the day Jesus died Good Friday.”{1} Yet even more serious is their rejection of a God who required a human sacrifice in order to forgive people. This version of God simply does not mesh with their views of how a God who “is love” would behave.

Although disturbing, we shouldn’t be surprised. Our culture has been moving away from a biblical view of truth and toward the acknowledgment of just one moral duty or virtue, that is—tolerance. This new absolute requires that we be tolerant of every possible faith assumption and moral system except, it seems, the traditional Christian view of God and salvation. It’s not that we have new information about the life of Jesus or the reason for His death. As a society we no longer want to hear about a God who is holy and requires satisfaction when His moral order is violated. This view applies the notion “I’m OK, you’re OK to God.” Maybe if we tolerate Him, even with His outdated notions of holiness, He will tolerate us in our fallenness.

Was Jesus just a political martyr, or was his death an atonement for sin? What is remarkable is that some individuals who claim to be Christian, who desire seminary training, reject what the Bible teaches about the nature of God and the salvation He has provided in Christ. When cut-off from the Bible, our perception of God can become a mere reflection of our culture’s likes and dislikes. Even when the Bible is consulted, it is often interpreted through the lens of absolute tolerance. However, if the necessity of Christ’s death for our sins is denied, the Gospel is no longer Good News and Christianity’s message of grace is abandoned, leaving us with an ethical system with no basis for forgiveness or

reconciliation with God.

Unfortunately, the Bible contains a lot of bad news. It says that because of the Fall we are in bondage to sin and the kingdom of Satan, and that without Christ everyone is separated from God and under His wrath. As a result, we all deserve death and eternal punishment. Why then do we call the biblical message Gospel or good news? How does the death of Christ relate to mankind's precarious condition? How has the church attempted to explain what the death of Christ accomplished? Lets take a deeper look at what theologians call the atonement.

What Did Jesus' Death Accomplish?

As we mentioned earlier, the notion of God requiring a blood sacrifice for sin is becoming less and less palatable to modern tastes. It is not surprising then that many question the idea that the death of Christ was an atoning sacrifice for humanity's sins.

What did the death of Jesus accomplish? As we investigate this issue, we should keep in mind that the answer depends on what one believes to be true concerning the kind of person God the Father is, who Jesus Christ is, and the current condition of mankind. For instance, if God the Father is not all that upset by sin, or if Jesus was just a good man and no more, the death of Christ might be seen as an encouragement or example to mankind, not as a payment for sin. This, in fact, is the first view of the atonement we will consider.

In the sixteenth century Laelius Socinus taught that the obedience and death of Jesus were part of a perfect life that was pleasing to God and should be seen primarily as an example for the rest of humanity. Socinians rejected the idea of Jesus being a payment for sin. To support this view they point to 1 Peter 2:21 which says "For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example,

that you should follow in His steps." As mentioned earlier, one's view of the atonement depends on his or her view of God and humanity. The Socinians taught that mankind is capable of living in a manner pleasing to God, both morally and spiritually. They accepted the teachings of Pelagius, a 4th century theologian who argued that mankind is able to take the initial steps toward salvation independent of God's help. This Socinian tenet became the foundation of Unitarian thought which rejects the notion of the Trinity as well.

There are a number of passages in the Bible that make the Socinian perspective untenable. Even the passage in 1 Peter 2 works against their view. Jesus was an example for us, but verse 24 adds that, "He Himself bore our sins in His body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed." The entire sacrificial system of the Old Testament taught the Jews the need for atonement, a way for God's people to return to a harmonious relationship with God. The annual "Day of Atonement" sacrifice was instituted to cleanse Israel from all of her sins, thus removing God's wrath from the nation. The book of Hebrews teaches that Jesus was the perfect high priest as well as the perfect sacrifice, making the final atonement for the sins of the people (Hebrews 2:17). Yes, Jesus was an example of a sinless human life, but He was so much more than that.

Views of the Atonement

Many modern day theologians argue that Jesus did no more than die a martyr's death on behalf of the poor and marginalized people of the world. His death was more a political act than a spiritual one. As one scholar writes, "The salvation he brings is a transformation of the social order. . ."{2} According to this view, Jesus is to be seen as a political figure who challenged the power structures of His day and offered

salvation through class warfare and the redistribution of wealth. Needless to say, this has not been the position held by the church for the last two thousand years.

In light of the Socinian theory, that the death of Jesus was merely an example and that salvation comes by living like Jesus lived, a response quickly followed by a man named Hugo Grotius (1583-1645). Where Socinus taught that we were only required to do our best and respond to God's love for salvation, Grotius pictured God differently. Grotius focused on the holiness and righteousness of God, and the fact that this holy God has established a universe governed by moral laws. Sin is defined as a violation of these laws. Sin is not necessarily an attack on the person of God but on the office of ruler that God holds. As ruler, God has the right, but not necessarily the obligation, to punish sin. God can forgive sin and remove humanity's guilt if He so chooses. Grotius held that God did indeed choose to be gracious and yet acted in a manner that teaches the severity of sin. As one theologian has written:

> *It was in the best interest of humankind for Christ to die. Forgiveness of their sins, if too freely given, would have resulted in undermining the law's authority and effectiveness. It was necessary to have an atonement which would provide grounds for forgiveness and simultaneously retain the structure of moral government.{3}*

Often called the "governmental theory" of the atonement, it argues that the death of Christ was a real offering to God, enabling Him to deal mercifully with mankind. The chief impact of the act was on man, not on God. God didn't need to have His wrath satisfied by blood atonement, but humanity did need to be taught the severity of sin and only an act of great magnitude could accomplish this lesson.

Although this is an interesting approach, it lacks scriptural

confirmation. As one critic notes, “We search in vain in Grotius for specific biblical texts setting forth his major point.” Being a lawyer, Grotius was attracted to the Old Testament idea expressed in Isaiah 42:21 which says that God will magnify His law and make it glorious. Fortunately, the New Testament reveals that God had a plan to both maintain His law and provide a gracious plan of substitutional atonement in Christ.

Views of the Atonement

Modern theologians like Dr. Marcus Borg, who teaches at Oregon State University, doubt that Jesus understood His death to be an atonement for sin. He teaches that Jesus was only aware of the political and religious implications of His actions.{4} How does this compare with teaching on this subject down through the centuries?

So far we have considered the historical views of Socinus and Grotius regarding the atonement. Both taught that the death of Christ primarily affected humanity. Socinus argued that Christ gave us a model to follow: a blueprint for living a good life. Grotius taught that Christ’s death served to give humanity an accurate picture of the devastating impact of sin.

One of the earliest views of the atonement was quite different from both of these perspectives. Often called the ransom theory, this teaching was developed by the Church Fathers Origen and Gregory of Nyssa. It was probably the way Augustine thought about the atonement as well, and it was popular until the time of Anselm in the eleventh century (1033-1109).

Origen held that the Bible teaches believers “were bought at a price” (1 Cor. 6:20), and that Jesus told His followers that He was a ransom for many and that His death has delivered us from the dominion of darkness (Mk. 10:45, Col. 1:13). From this he surmised that Christ’s death actually was a payment to Satan, buying, if you will, those held hostage by the fallen

angel. Origen argued the death of Christ mostly impacted Satan, paying him off in order to gain the release of his captives. While it is true that we were bought at a price and have been delivered from darkness, the Bible never mentions that sinners owe anything to Satan.

Gregory of Nyssa held that God actually tricked Satan to gain our release. Satan thought he was getting a perfect man to replace the many already in his grasp. Instead God tricked him by wrapping Christ's humanity around His deity. However, the notion that Jesus was offered primarily as a sacrifice to Satan didn't fit well with Scripture.

Instead, the Bible often speaks of the need to appease the wrath of God. Romans 3:25 tells us that God presented Jesus as a sacrifice of atonement or a propitiation. The Greek word used here carries that meaning of "a sacrifice that turns away the wrath of God—and thereby makes God propitious (or favorable) towards us."{5} Hebrews 2:17 states: "For this reason he (Jesus) had to be made like his brothers in every way, in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God, and that he might make atonement for the sins of the people." 1 John 2:1-2 adds that Jesus "Speaks to the Father in our defense" and "is the atoning sacrifice for our sins." The impact of the atonement is not on Satan, but on God the Father.

The Satisfaction Theory

Did he die as a political martyr, having no notion that His death might accomplish something eternally significant? Or did Jesus and His followers assume that his death fulfilled a divine purpose? It is common for modern thinkers to discount the supernatural elements in their explanations of his death. For instance, historian Paula Fredriksen, professor at Boston University, argues that both his arrest and the events that followed probably shocked Jesus.{6} She implies that the death of Jesus and the birth of Christianity are to be thought of

and analyzed only at the political or sociological level: that nothing miraculous occurred. This is obviously not the traditional view of the church.

Most evangelical Christians hold to an Anselmic view of the atonement. Anselm (1033-1109) was the archbishop of Canterbury in the twelfth century. He constructed a logical argument that God must, and did, become a man in the person of Jesus Christ because of the necessity of the atonement. According to Anselm, when mankind sinned it took something from God. By rebelling against God's holiness and failing to recognize the authority that God has to rule, humanity failed to render God His due. Not only have we taken from God what is His, we have injured His reputation and owe compensation.

God must act in a manner consistent with His role of creator and ruler of the cosmos. He cannot arbitrarily choose to ignore a challenge to His authority. We cannot merely pay back or make reparations for our personal sin. Compensation is necessary for the damage done to all creation since the Fall, and this compensation is greater than what our deaths alone would repay: thus the necessity of both the incarnation and the atonement.

The Anselmic view carries with it some important implications.

First, it holds that humanity is unable to satisfy the harm done by sin. God had to act on our behalf or salvation would be impossible.

Second, God's actions show that He is both holy and just, and at the same time a remarkably loving God.

Third, this view highlights the centrality of grace in Christian theology. Each person must accept the infinitely valuable and gracious gift of God's provision for sin because our own efforts to please God will always fall short.

The Anselmic perspective gives believers a great deal of

security. We know that it is not our works that earn salvation, but Christ's sacrificial death that paid the price for sin even before we committed our first transgression.

Finally, Christ's death on the cross highlights the horrible price for sin. With this knowledge we should be eternally grateful for what God has done on our behalf.{7}

Notes

1. Susan Hogan-Albach, "Christians struggle with the meaning of the cross," *Dallas Morning News*, Saturday, April 7, 2001, 2G.

2. Ibid., 3G.

3. Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1985), 790.

4. Hogan-Albach, 3G.

5. Wayne Grudem, *Bible Doctrine*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1999), 254.

6. Hogan-Albach, 3G.

7. Erickson, 822-823.

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What Difference Does the Trinity Make?

Greg Crosthwait examines the Christian teaching of the Trinity—one God in three Persons—with a view toward how it impacts one's daily life.'

How much do you love the Trinity? Strange question, isn't it? Well, it certainly struck me as strange the first time I read it. But James R. White, in his article *Loving the Trinity*,{1} both asks the question and then addresses why it's so important.

On the issue of the Trinity in the contemporary church, he writes, "For many Christians, the Trinity is an abstract principle, a confusing and difficult doctrine that they believe, although they are not really sure why in their honest moments. They know it is important, and they hear people saying it is 'definitional' of the Christian faith. Yet the fact of the matter is . . . little is taught about the relationship of the divine Persons and the Triune nature of God. It is the great forgotten doctrine."{2}

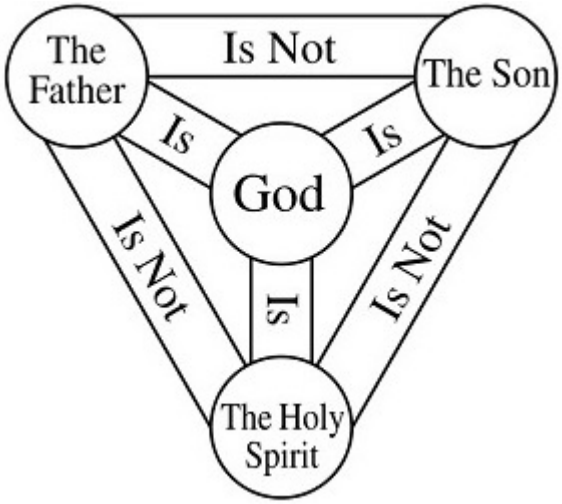
When I hear that, it prompts me to ask two questions. First of all, to what extent as Christians are we consciously Trinitarian? Well, that softens the question. Perhaps I should ask more accurately, To what extent as Christians are we relentlessly, doggedly, and fervently Trinitarian? Secondly, why should we be?

In this article I'll examine why the Trinity is important. And hopefully we'll lay some groundwork so that we may happily realize that to be truly Christian is to be consciously Trinitarian.

Why the Trinity is Important: An Overview

Perhaps some find it easier to think that the Trinity is the "secret handshake" of Christian theologians. Or maybe some may consider the Trinity of value only so we can sing the hymn *Holy, Holy, Holy*. At the root of these notions is the idea that the Trinity serves no place in the real life of one who holds a Christian worldview. But that's a mistake. A. W. Tozer begins his book *The Knowledge of the Holy* saying, "What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us."{3} This statement follows his comment in the preface that reads, "It is impossible to keep our moral practices sound and our inward attitudes right while our idea of God is erroneous or inadequate. If we would bring back spiritual power to our lives, we must begin to think of God more nearly as He is."{4}

Before moving on in our discussion, though, it may be helpful to give a brief explanation of what I mean when I refer to the Trinity. Of course, we could borrow a short phrase from *Holy, Holy, Holy*, "God in three persons, Blessed Trinity." Another handy definition is this, "Although not itself a biblical term, 'the Trinity' has been found a convenient designation for the one God self-revealed in Scripture as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. It signifies that within the one essence of the Godhead we have to distinguish three 'persons' who are neither three gods on the one side, nor three parts or modes of God on the other, but coequally and coeternally God."{5}



Even though it's short, this definition is both a mouthful and a mind full. But let's settle on four basic concepts before we move on to the implications. At the heart of the definition of the Blessed Trinity we have: one God, three Persons, who are coequal and coeternal. With this sketch in place, then, we are ready to move out and survey the importance of the Trinity with respect to the Christian worldview and its practical aspects for the Christian life. At the end of our discussion I truly hope that we can affirm together our love for the Trinity.

The Trinity and the Christian Worldview

Having established a short, working definition of the Trinity—one God, three Persons, who are coequal and coeternal—let's look at the implications of the Trinity on your worldview.

When it comes to discussing worldviews the starting point is the question, Why is there something rather than nothing?{6} As you may already know, there are three basic answers to this question. The pantheist would generally answer that all is one, all is god, and this "god with a small g" has always existed. Second, the naturalist would say that something, namely matter, has always existed. Third, the theist holds that a personal, Creator-God is eternal and out of nothing He created all that there is.

When we look around at what exists, we see an amazing collection of seemingly disparate elements such as gasses, liquids, and solids, planets and stars, horses, flowers, rocks, and trees. And seeing all of these things we notice that they all exist in some sort of equilibrium or unity. How is it that such diversity exists in such apparent unity? And

are we as human beings any more important than gasses or ants?

Because the pantheist believes that everything melds into a gigantic oneness, he ultimately has no place for individual things or people. As Scott Horrell argues, “When a worldview begins with an all-inclusive, apersonal deity, there is no final place for the human being or for ethics on either an individual or a social level.”{7}

The pantheist’s commitment to an all-inclusive oneness leaves no room for the real world in which people live, where I am not you and neither of us is one with a tree or a mountain. The naturalist has no problem accepting the reality of the physical world and the diversity present in it. However, there is no solid ground for understanding why it is all held together. In short, there is no infinite reference point so we are left with the circular argument: everything holds together because everything holds together; if it didn’t, we wouldn’t be here to see it. What a coincidence! In fact, coincidence, or chance, is the only basis for anything. As a result human beings are left with an absurd existence. “Without a unifying absolute, everything exists by chance and chance alone. . . . The human being is reduced to either a cog in a cosmic machine or an astronaut adrift in space. . . . If there is no infinite, absolute reference in the universe, then all of the particulars . . . have absolutely no meaning.”{8}

Trinitarian theism is the only option that contains within itself an explanation of both the one and the many while saying that people are important. In the Trinity, God has revealed Himself as the eternal, infinite reference point for His creation. Moreover, the Trinity provides the only adequate basis for understanding the problem of unity and diversity since God has revealed Himself to be one God who exists in a plural unity. Ultimately then, as Horrell concludes, “Every thing and every person has real significance because each is created by and finally exists in relationship to the Triune God.”{9}

The Trinity and Salvation

In reference to the Christian worldview I used the term *Trinitarian theism*. I used that term because the doctrine of the Trinity separates Christianity from any other type of theism. And, most importantly, it's the only view that adequately describes God's work in salvation.

There are other religions beside Trinitarian theism that believe in one God. Judaism, Islam, and so-called Unitarian Christianity (an oxymoron to be sure) all hold to a mono-personal God. This understanding of "God in one person" suffers in two important respects.

First of all, if we understand God to be self-existent, eternal, and personal, characterized by such an action as love, then a mono-personal God cannot be adequate, for love demands an object. Consider Deuteronomy 6:4-5: "Hear, O Israel! The LORD is our God, the LORD is one! And you shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might." The first part of this passage is one of the great texts affirming the essential unity of God. And love is the proper human response to Him. This love is not some squishy feeling, but rather an expression of devotion from someone to someone. Love has a source and love has an object. Since human beings are created in the image of God, then He must be capable of love in His very self. So, when we hear, "God is love," (1 John 4:16) we must realize that in Himself God must be at least two. Scott Horrell writes, "In short, it seems from every vantage that for God to be infinitely personal and to be love, he must exist as at least two persons. A mono-personal God is not 'big enough' to be God."{10}

The other area in which a strictly mono-personal God is inadequate is in the relationship between God's mercy and His justice. In Romans 3:25-26 we read of Jesus Christ, "a sacrifice of atonement" (NIV) and God the Father who is "just

and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus." Simply stated, a mono-personal God cannot be both just and the justifier. Horrell argues, "[I]f God, as Moral Absolute of the universe, shows mercy and forgives the sinner, then he has violated his righteous justice. And if God exercises justice against the sinner, then he has denied his mercy. For a mono-personal God, compassion contradicts holiness, forgiveness is finally contrary to justice. God's judgment and mercy are arbitrary, if not capricious."{11}

So far we have seen the work of God the Father, the righteous judge, and God the Son, the only One who can satisfy the judgment of God the Father, and therefore the only worthy object of saving faith. The Trinity is complete as we understand that the Holy Spirit is the One who, in Jesus' words, "when He comes, will convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment" (John 16:8). The Holy Spirit is the active agent in the hearts of men and women, and He "works in the fallen world convicting and leading sinners to salvation. With God's absolute holiness satisfied at the cross, true forgiveness can be freely offered to all who believe."{12}

So we see that the gospel, the story of the God who saves His people, is Trinitarian at its very core. Otherwise God would not be truly just, in which case grace would be far less than amazing.

The Trinity and the "Everydayness" of Everyday

What greater reality can be contained within the Christian confession of the Trinity than that of a God who is able to exercise perfect justice and perfect mercy perfectly? Such a self-revelation from God regarding His activity in salvation should encourage confessing Christians to focus on and revel in the Trinity rather than ignoring or dismissing it as though

it were some eccentric, old uncle at a family reunion. And according to James R. White, this is what is happening in parts of the church.

> *Entire sections of the modern church are functionally "non-Trinitarian." I did not say "anti-Trinitarian," for that would involve a positive denial of the doctrine. Instead, while maintaining the confession that the Trinity is true, many today function as if the Trinity did not exist. It has no impact on their theology, their proclamation, prayer, or worship.{13}*

This observation leads us into the final section of our discussion. Since we covered the importance of the Trinity with regard to the Christian worldview and the gospel, let's not leave it on the shelf or in the text book. Let's dress the doctrine of the Trinity in some work clothes and allow this blessed truth to change our lives where we live them, in the everydayness of everyday.

Trinitarianism impacts three important areas: worship, prayer, and the local church.

Worship

Worship is a debated topic these days. But in the midst of the opinions and preferences about drums, organs, guitars, hymns, praise choruses, and seeker sensitivity, how often does someone declare that our worship is not Trinitarian enough?

Though it seems like a dry, academic issue this is an important question in two ways. First of all, if our worship is not Trinitarian enough, then we fail to worship the God of the Bible. And in biblical terms worshiping anything other than the Most High God is idolatry. As Isaiah records, "Remember the former things long past, For I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is no one like me" (Isa. 46:9).

Would a visitor to a typical worship service realize that a Christian church confesses and worships the Triune God? Most certainly someone would realize that we worship Jesus. That person might even hear Him called God's Son. But would this person hear prayers addressed to the Father, in the name of the Son, by the power of the Holy Spirit? Would this visitor hear songs to the different Persons of the Trinity, about the different Persons of the Trinity?

Good examples of this type of song are the classic hymn *Holy, Holy, Holy* and the chorus *There is a Redeemer*, with the refrain, "Thank you, O my Father, for giving us Your Son; And leaving Your Spirit 'til the work on earth is done." That last example is not foggy theology, but an expression of gratitude to the Living God for who He is and what He has done, is doing, and will do.

I am not arguing that all Christian worshipers must hold doctorates in theology, but simply that we exercise care in the content of our worship so that we truly worship the one true God in three Persons. We can focus on Jesus, and indeed we ought to for He is our Savior. But we must not exclude confession and adoration of the Father and the Holy Spirit, much less the blessed Trinity.

Prayer

In his book, *God: Who He Is, What He Does, How to Know Him Better*, J. Carl Laney includes a helpful section on prayer. He writes, "Although God is one divine essence, He is also three persons. Which of these should we address in our prayers?"{14} Though this question may seem like an unnecessary trifle, we must be informed by Scripture. We are taught by Jesus to address God the Father, "Pray, then, in this way: Our Father who is in heaven, hallowed be Your Name" (Matt. 6:9). In another statement on prayer Jesus says, "Truly, truly, I say to you, if you ask the Father for anything in My name, He will give it to you" (John 16:23). We see that, in Laney's words,

“Christian prayer involves requesting the Father on the basis of the Son’s merits, influence, and reputation”{15}—that is to say, ask of the Father in the name of the Son. We can also address our prayers to Jesus, who says, “If you ask Me anything in My name, I will do it” (John 14:14).{16}

The Spirit is also active when we pray. Paul writes, “In the same way the Spirit also helps our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we should, but the Spirit intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words” (Rom. 8:26). So then we pray to the Father, in the name of the Son, by the power of the Spirit who assists us in our weakness. What a wonderful provision from the Triune God who not only desires us to ask of Him, but also enables us to do it.

The Local Church

As we seek to apply the Trinity in the everydayness of everyday, let’s consider life in the local church. And here we encounter an important application of Trinitarian theology.

The Trinity serves as a model for the local church. For as there are three Persons united in the Godhead, all of whom are equally God, so also those who are children of God, united in Christ, and members of the church universal are all equally sons and daughters of God and coheirs of His promises. As Scott Horrell writes, “Believers are to be given real value and dignity by the local church, not left as anonymous spectators amidst professional performances.”{17} The foundation of the value and dignity of believers, regardless of gender or training, rests in the Trinity.

However, this does not negate the need for order in the church. For, though each member of the Trinity is equally God, we see that there is a functional order within the Trinity. The Father sends the Son, the Son glorifies the Father, the Father and the Son together send the Spirit, and the Spirit bears witness of the Son. So also we have a functional order

in the local church. There are those who are responsible to exercise authority, elders and deacons, and those who are responsible to submit to authority. But it's important that we realize that submission does not imply inferiority. The Trinity models this truth. "Whether in the church, family, or society, submission to another does not admit inferiority any more than the Son, by his obedience, is inferior to the Father."{18}

Though brief in some respects, I hope this discussion has been profitable for you. It's only a beginning point, and I encourage you to press on, for the deep well of the greatness of our Triune God can never run dry. May we then remove the concept of the Trinity from our dusty shelves and proudly display it as the jewel of God's revelation that it is.

Notes

1. James R. White, "Loving the Trinity," *Christian Research Journal*, Volume 21, Number 4.
2. Ibid., 22.
3. A. W. Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1961), 1.
4. Ibid., viii.
5. G. W. Bromily, "Trinity" in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1984), 1112.
6. For a fuller discussion on worldviews see Worldviews by Jerry Solomon at www.probe.org.
7. J. Scott Horrell, *In the Name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit: Constructing a Trinitarian Worldview* (1998), 1.
8. Ibid., 8.
9. Ibid., 8.
10. Ibid., 11.
11. Ibid., 11.
12. Ibid., 12.
13. White, 22.
14. J. Carl Laney, God: *Who He Is, What He Does, How to Know Him Better* (Nashville, TN: Word, 1999), 122.

15. Ibid.
16. Ibid.
17. J. Scott Horrell, *The Self-Giving Triune God, The Imago Dei and the Nature of the Local Church: An Ontology of Mission*, 13.
18. Ibid.

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