

# The Value of Suffering: A Christian Perspective

*Sue Bohlin looks at suffering from a Christian perspective. Applying a biblical worldview to this difficult subject results in a distinctly different approach to suffering than our natural inclination of blame and self pity.*

*This article is also available in [Spanish](#).*



*There is no such thing as pointless pain in the life of the child of God. How this has encouraged and strengthened me in the valleys of suffering and pain! In this essay I'll be discussing the value of suffering, an unhappy non-negotiable of life in a fallen world.*

## Suffering Prepares Us to Be the Bride of Christ

Among the many reasons God allows us to suffer, this is my personal favorite: it prepares us to be the radiant bride of Christ. The Lord Jesus has a big job to do, changing His ragamuffin church into a glorious bride worthy of the Lamb. Ephesians 5:26-27 tells us He is making us holy by washing us with the Word—presenting us to Himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish. Suffering develops holiness in unholy people. But *getting there* is painful in the Lord's "laundry room." When you use bleach to get rid of stains, it's a harsh process. Getting rid of wrinkles is even more painful: ironing means a combination of heat plus pressure. Ouch! No wonder suffering hurts!



But developing holiness in us is a worthwhile, extremely important goal for the Holy One who is our divine Bridegroom. We learn in Hebrews 12:10 that we are enabled to share in His

holiness through the discipline of enduring hardship. More  
ouch! Fortunately, the same book assures us that discipline is  
a sign of God's love (Heb. 12:6). Oswald Chambers reminds us  
that "God has one destined end for mankind—holiness. His one  
aim is the production of saints."[\[1\]](#)

It's also important for all wives, but most especially the  
future wife of the Son of God, to have a submissive heart.  
Suffering makes us more determined to obey God; it teaches us  
to be submissive. The psalmist learned this lesson as he wrote  
in Psalm 119:67: "Before I was afflicted I went astray, but  
now I obey your word. It was good for me to be afflicted so  
that I might learn your decrees."

The Lord Jesus has His work cut out for Him in purifying us  
for Himself (Titus 2:14). Let's face it, left to ourselves we  
are a dirty, messy, fleshly people, and we desperately need to  
be made pure. As hurtful as it is, suffering can purify us if  
we submit to the One who has a loving plan for the pain.

Jesus wants not just a *pure* bride, but a mature one as  
well—and suffering produces growth and maturity in us. James  
1:2-4 reminds us that trials produce perseverance, which makes  
us mature and complete. And Romans 5:3-4 tells us that we can  
actually rejoice in our sufferings, because, again, they  
produce perseverance, which produces character, which produces  
hope. The Lord is creating for Himself a bride with sterling  
character, but it's not much fun getting there. I like  
something else Oswald Chambers wrote: "Sorrow burns up a great  
amount of shallowness."[\[2\]](#)

We usually don't have much trouble understanding that our  
Divine Bridegroom loves us; but we can easily forget how much  
He longs for us to love Him back. Suffering scoops us out,  
making our hearts bigger so that we can hold more love for  
Him. It's all part of a well-planned courtship. He does know  
what He's doing . . . we just need to trust Him.

# Suffering Allows Us to Minister Comfort to Others Who Suffer

One of the most rewarding reasons that suffering has value is experienced by those who can say with conviction, “I know how you feel. I’ve been in your shoes.” Suffering prepares us to minister comfort to others who suffer.

Feeling isolated is one of the hardest parts of suffering. It can feel like you’re all alone in your pain, and that makes it so much worse. The comfort of those who have known that same pain is inexpressible. It feels like a warm blanket being draped around your soul. But in order for someone to say those powerful words—“I know just how you feel because I’ve been there”—that person had to walk through the same difficult valley first.

Ray and I lost our first baby when she was born too prematurely to survive. It was the most horrible suffering we’ve ever known. But losing Becky has enabled me to weep with those who weep with the comforting tears of one who has experienced that deep and awful loss. It’s a wound that—by God’s grace—has never fully healed so that I can truly empathize with others out of the very real pain I still feel. Talking about my loss puts me in touch with the unhealed part of the grief and loss that will always hurt until I see my daughter again in heaven. One of the most incredibly comforting things we can ever experience is someone else’s tears for us. So when I say to a mother or father who has also lost a child, “I hurt with you, because I’ve lost a precious one too,” my tears bring warmth and comfort in a way that someone who has never known that pain cannot offer.

One of the most powerful words of comfort I received when we were grieving our baby’s loss was from a friend who said, “Your pain may not be about just you. It may well be about other people, preparing you to minister comfort and hope to

someone in your future who will need what you can give them because of what you're going through right now. And if you are faithful to cling to God now, I promise He will use you greatly to comfort others later." That perspective was like a sweet balm to my soul, because it showed me that my suffering was not pointless.

There's another aspect of bringing comfort to those in pain. Those who have suffered tend not to judge others experiencing similar suffering. Not being judged is a great comfort to those who hurt. When you're in pain, your world narrows down to mere survival, and it's easy for others to judge you for not "following the rules" that should only apply to those whose lives aren't being swallowed by the pain monster.

Suffering often develops compassion and mercy in us. Those who suffer tend to have tender hearts toward others who are in pain. We can comfort others with the comfort that we have received from God (2 Cor. 1:4) because we have experienced the reality of the Holy Spirit being there for us, walking alongside us in our pain. Then we can turn around and walk alongside others in their pain, showing the compassion that our own suffering has produced in us.

## **Suffering Develops Humble Dependence on God**

Marine Corps recruiter Randy Norfleet survived the Oklahoma City bombing despite losing 40 percent of his blood and needing 250 stitches to close his wounds. He never lost consciousness in the ambulance because he was too busy praying prayers of thanksgiving for his survival. When doctors said he would probably lose the sight in his right eye, Mr. Norfleet said, "Losing an eye is a small thing. Whatever brings you closer to God is a blessing. Through all this I've been brought closer to God. I've become more dependent on Him and less on myself." [\[3\]](#)

Suffering is excellent at teaching us humble dependence on God, the only appropriate response to our Creator. Ever since the fall of Adam, we keep forgetting that God created us to depend on Him and not on ourselves. We keep wanting to go our own way, pretending that we are God. Suffering is powerfully able to get us back on track.

Sometimes we hurt so much we can't pray. We are forced to depend on the intercession of the Holy Spirit and the saints, needing them to go before the throne of God on our behalf. Instead of seeing that inability to pray as a personal failure, we can rejoice that our perception of being totally needy corresponds to the truth that we really are that needy. 2 Corinthians 1:9 tells us that hardships and sufferings happen "so that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead."

Suffering brings a "one day at a time-ness" to our survival. We get to the point of saying, "Lord, I can only make it through today if You help me . . . if You take me through today . . . or the next hour . . . or the next few minutes." One of my dearest friends shared with me the prayer from a heart burning with emotional pain: "Papa, I know I can make it through the next fifteen minutes if You hold me and walk me through it." Suffering has taught my friend the lesson of total, humble dependence on God.

As painful as it is, suffering strips away the distractions of life. It forces us to face the fact that we are powerless to change other people and most situations. The fear that accompanies suffering drives us to the Father like a little kid burying his face in his daddy's leg. Recognizing our own powerlessness is actually the key to experience real power because we have to acknowledge our dependence on God before His power can flow from His heart into our lives.

The disciples experienced two different storms out on the lake. The Lord's purpose in both storms was to train them to

stop relying on their physical eyes and use their spiritual eyes. He wanted them to grow in trust and dependence on the Father. He allows us to experience storms in our lives for the same purpose: to learn to depend on God.

I love this paraphrase of Romans 8:28: "The Lord may not have planned that this should overtake me, but He has most certainly permitted it. Therefore, though it were an attack of an enemy, by the time it reaches me, it has the Lord's permission, and therefore all is well. He will make it work together with all life's experiences for good."

## **Suffering Displays God's Strength Through Our Weakness**

*God never wastes suffering, not a scrap of it. He redeems all of it for His glory and our blessing.* The classic Scripture for the concept that suffering displays God's strength through our weakness is found in 2 Corinthians 12:8-10, where we learn that God's grace is sufficient for us, for His power is perfected in weakness. Paul said he delighted in weaknesses, hardships, and difficulties "for when I am weak, then I am strong."

Our culture disdains weakness, but our frailty is a sign of God's workmanship in us. It gets us closer to what we were created to be—completely dependent on God. Several years ago I realized that instead of despising the fact that polio had left me with a body that was weakened and compromised, susceptible to pain and fatigue, I could choose to rejoice in it. My weakness made me more like a fragile, easily broken window than a solid brick wall. But just as sunlight pours through a window but is blocked by a wall, I discovered that other people could see God's strength and beauty in me because of the window-like nature of my weakness! Consider how the Lord Jesus was the exact representation of the glory of the Father—I mean, He was all window and no walls! He was

completely dependent on the Father, choosing to become weak so that God's strength could shine through Him. And He was the strongest person the world has ever seen. Not His own strength; He displayed the Father's strength because of that very weakness.

The reason His strength can shine through us is because we know God better through suffering. One wise man I heard said, "I got theology in seminary, but I learned reality through trials. I got facts in Sunday School, but I learned faith through trusting God in difficult circumstances. I got truth from studying, but I got to know the Savior through suffering."

Sometimes our suffering isn't a consequence of our actions or even someone else's. God is teaching other beings about Himself and His loved ones—us—as He did with Job. The point of Job's trials was to enable heavenly beings to see God glorified in Job. Sometimes He trusts us with great pain in order to make a point, whether the intended audience is believers, unbelievers, or the spirit realm. Quadriplegic Joni Eareckson Tada, no stranger to great suffering, writes, "Whether a godly attitude shines from a brain-injured college student or from a lonely man relegated to a back bedroom, the response of patience and perseverance counts. God points to the peaceful attitude of suffering people to teach others about Himself. He not only teaches those we rub shoulders with every day, but He instructs the countless millions of angels and demons. The hosts in heaven stand amazed when they observe God sustain hurting people with His peace."[\[4\]](#)

I once heard Charles Stanley say that nothing attracts the unbeliever like a saint suffering successfully. Joni Tada said, "You were made for one purpose, and that is to make God real to those around you."[\[5\]](#) The reality of God's power, His love, and His character are made very, very real to a watching world when we trust Him in our pain.

# Suffering Gets Us Ready for Heaven

Pain is inevitable because we live in a fallen world. 1 Thessalonians 3:3 reminds us that we are “destined for trials.” We don’t have a choice whether we will suffer—our choice is to go through it by ourselves or with God.

Suffering teaches us the difference between the important and the transient. It prepares us for heaven by teaching us how unfulfilling life on earth is and helping us develop an eternal perspective. Suffering makes us homesick for heaven.

Deep suffering of the soul is also a taste of hell. After many sleepless nights wracked by various kinds of pain, my friend Jan now knows what she was saved from. Many Christians only know they’re saved without grasping what it is Christ has delivered them from. Jan’s suffering has given her an appreciation of the reality of heaven, and she’s been changed forever.

I have an appreciation of heaven gained from a different experience. As my body weakens from the lifelong impact of polio, to be honest, I have a deep frustration with it that makes me grateful for the perfect, beautiful, completely working resurrection body waiting for me on the other side. My husband once told me that heaven is more real to me than anyone he knows. Suffering has done that for me. Paul explained what happens in 2 Corinthians 4:16-18:

*“Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, for what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.”*

One of the effects of suffering is to loosen our grasp on this life, because we shouldn’t be thinking that life in a fallen



world is as wonderful as we sometimes think it is. Pastor Dick Bacon once said, "If this life were easy, we'd just love it too much. If God didn't make it painful, we'd never let go of it." Suffering reminds us that we live in an abnormal world. Suffering is abnormal—our souls protest, "This isn't right!" We need to be reminded that we are living in the post-fall "Phase 2." The perfect Phase 1 of God's beautiful, suffering-free creation was ruined when Adam and Eve fell. So often, people wonder what kind of cruel God would deliberately make a world so full of pain and suffering. They've lost track of history. The world God originally made isn't the one we experience. Suffering can make us long for the new heaven and the new earth where God will set all things right again.

Sometimes suffering literally prepares us for heaven. Cheryl's in-laws, both beset by lingering illnesses, couldn't understand why they couldn't just die and get it over with. But after three long years of holding on, during a visit from Cheryl's pastor, the wife trusted Christ on her deathbed and the husband received assurance of his salvation. A week later the wife died, followed in six months by her husband. They had continued to suffer because of God's mercy and patience, who did not let them go before they were ready for heaven.

Suffering dispels the cloaking mists of inconsequential distractions of this life and puts things in their proper perspective. My friend Pete buried his wife a few years ago after a battle with Lou Gehrig's disease. One morning I learned that his car had died on the way to church, and I said something about what a bummer it was. Pete just shrugged and said, "This is nothing." That's what suffering will do for us. Trials are light and momentary afflictions . . . but God redeems them all.

## Notes

1. Oswald Chambers, *Our Utmost for His Highest*, September 1.
2. Chambers, June 25.
3. *National and International Religion Report*, Vol. 9:10, May

1, 1995, 1

4. Joni Eareckson Tada, *When Is It Right to Die?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1992), 122.

5. Tada, 118.

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# Putting Beliefs Into Practice Revisited: Twenty-somethings and Faithful Living

*Rick Wade updates his [earlier discussion](#) of 3 major ingredients necessary for Christians' faithful living: convictions, character, and community.*

## A Turning Point

In recent months Probe has focused more and more attention on the state of the younger generations in the evangelical church regarding their fidelity to basic Christian doctrines and Christian practices like prayer and church attendance. Our concern has deepened as we've become more aware of the fact that, not only is the grasp on Christian beliefs and practices loosening, but that some unbiblical beliefs and practices in our secular culture are seen as acceptable for Christians.



With this in mind it seems appropriate to revisit a [program](#) I wrote over ten years ago on the necessity of linking our beliefs with the way we live in order to practice

a healthy Christian life. It was based on Steven Garber's book *The Fabric of Faithfulness*.<sup>{1}</sup> Garber's book was written with college students in mind. However, the principles are the same for people in other stages of life as well.

*The Fabric of Faithfulness* was written to help students in the critical task of establishing moral meaning in their lives. By "moral meaning" he is referring to the moral significance of the general direction of our lives and of the things we do with our days. "How is it," he asks, "that someone decides which cares and commitments will give shape and substance to life, for life?"<sup>{2}</sup>

In this article I want to look at three significant factors which form the foundations for making our lives fit our beliefs: convictions, character, and community.<sup>{3}</sup>

For many young people, college provides the context for what the late Erik Erikson referred to as a *turning point*, "a crucial period in which a decisive turn *one way or another* is unavoidable."<sup>{4}</sup> However, as sociologists Christian Smith and Patricia Snell report, graduation from college is no longer the marker for the transition of youth to adult.<sup>{5}</sup> Steve Cable notes that "most young adults assume that they will go through an extended period of transition, trying different life experiences, living arrangements, careers, relationships, and viewpoints until they finally are able to stand on their own and settle down. . . . Some researchers refer to this recently created life phase as 'emerging adulthood,' covering the period from 18 to 29."<sup>{6}</sup>

### *Telos and Praxis*

The young adult years are often taken as a time to sow one's wild oats, to have lots of fun before the pressures (and dull routine!) of "real life" settle in. Too much playing, however, delays one's preparation for those pressures. In addition, bad choices can be made during that time that will negatively affect the course of one's life.

Theologian Jacques Ellul gives this charge to young people:

“Remember your Creator during your youth: when all possibilities lie open before you and you can offer all your strength intact for his service. The time to remember is not after you become senile and paralyzed! . . . You must take sides earlier—when you can actually make choices, when you have many paths opening at your feet, before the weight of necessity overwhelms you.”{7}

Living in a time when so many things seem so uncertain, how do we even *begin* to think about setting a course for the future? Steven Garber uses a couple of Greek words to identify two foundational aspects of life which determine its shape to a great extent: *telos* and *praxis*. *Telos* is the word for the end toward which something is moving or developing. It is the goal, the culmination, the final form which gives meaning to all that goes before it. The goal of Christians is to be made complete in Christ as Paul said in Colossians 1:28: “Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature [or complete or perfect] in Christ.” This over-arching *telos* or goal should govern the entirety of our lives.

Garber’s second word, *praxis*, means action or deed.{8} Jesus uses the word in Matthew 16:27 when he speaks of us being repaid according to our deeds or *praxis*.

While everyone engages in some kind of *praxis* or deeds, in the postmodern world there is little thought given to *telos* because many people believe no one can *know* what is ultimately real, what is eternal, and thus where we are going. We are told, on the one hand, that our lives are completely open and free and the outcome is totally up to us, but, on the other, that our lives are determined and it doesn’t matter what we do. How are we to make sense of our lives if either of those is true?

Where we begin is the basic beliefs that comprise the *telos* of the Christian; i.e., our convictions.

## Convictions: Where It Begins

When we think of our “end” in Christ we’re thinking of something much bigger and more substantive than just where we will spend eternity. We’re thinking of the goal toward which history is marching. In His eternal wisdom God chose to sum up all things in Christ (Eph. 1:10). New Testament scholar J. B. Lightfoot wrote that this refers to “the entire harmony of the universe, which shall no longer contain alien and discordant elements, but of which all the parts shall find their centre and bond of union in Christ.”<sup>[9]</sup> It is the *telos* or “end” of Christians to be made perfect parts of the new creation.

Who is this Jesus and what did he teach? He said that He is the only way to God, and that our connection with Him is by faith, but a faith that results in godly living. He talked about sin and its destruction, and about true faith and obedience. What Jesus said and did provide the content and ground of our convictions, and these convictions provide the ground and direction for the way we live. These aren’t just religious ideas we’ve chosen to adopt. They are true to the way things are.

Garber tells the story of Dan Heimbach who served on President George H. W. Bush’s Domestic Policy Council. Heimbach sensed a need while in high school to be truly authentic with respect to his beliefs. He wanted to know if Christianity was really true. When serving in Vietnam he began asking himself whether he could really live with his convictions. He says,

“Everyone had overwhelmingly different value systems. While there I once asked myself why I had to be so different. With a sense of tremendous internal challenge I could say that the one thing keeping me from being like the others was that deep

down I was convinced of the truth of my faith; this moment highlighted what truth meant to me, and I couldn't turn my back on what I knew to be true."[\[10\]](#)

Christian teachings that we believe give meaning to our existence; they provide an intellectual anchor in a world of multiple and conflicting beliefs, and give direction for our lives. For a person to live consistently as a Christian, he or she must know at least basic Christian doctrines, and be convinced that they are "true truth" as Francis Schaeffer put it: what is really true.

## **Character: Living It Out**

So our beliefs must be grounded in Christ. But we can't stop there. Not only do we need to receive as true what Jesus taught, we also need to live it out as He did. After telling the Corinthians to do all things to the glory of God, Paul added that they should "be imitators of me as I am of Christ" (1 Cor. 11:1).

Morality is inextricably wedded to the way the world is. A universe formed by matter and chance cannot provide moral meaning. The idea of a "cosmos without purpose," says Garber, "is at the heart of the challenge facing students in the modern world."[\[11\]](#) This is a challenge for all of us, student and non-student. Such a world provides no rules or structure for life. Christianity, on the other hand, provides a basis for responsible living for there is a God back of it all who is a moral being, who created the universe and the people in it to function certain ways. To not live in keeping with the way things are is to invite disaster.

If we accept that Christianity *does* provide for the proper development of character in the individual based on the truth of its teachings, we must then ask *how* that development comes about. Garber believes an important component in that process is a mentor or guide.

Grace Tazelaar graduated from Wheaton College, went into nursing, and later taught in the country of Uganda as it was being rebuilt following the reign of Idi Amin. At some point she asked a former teacher to be her spiritual mentor. Says Garber, "This woman, who had spent years in South Africa, gave herself to Grace as she was beginning to explore her own place of responsible service." Grace saw her mentor's beliefs worked out in real life.[\[12\]](#)

The White Rose was a group of students in Germany who opposed Nazism. Brother and sister Hans and Sophie Scholl were strongly influenced in their work by Carl Muth, a theologian and editor of an anti-Nazi periodical. One writer noted that "The Christian Gospel became the criterion of their thought and actions." Their convictions carried them to the point of literally losing their heads for their opposition.

Being a mentor involves more than teaching others how to have quiet times. They need to see how Christianity is fleshed out in real life, and they need encouragement to extend themselves to a world in need in Jesus' name, using their own gifts and personalities.

## **Community: A Place to Grow**

Garber adds one more important element to the mix of elements important in being a Christian. We've looked at the matter of convictions, the beliefs we hold which give direction and shape to our lives. Then we talked about the development of character, the way those beliefs are worked out in our lives. Community is the third part of this project of "weaving together belief and behavior" (the sub-title of Garber's book), the place where we see that character worked out in practice.

Christian doctrines can seem so abstract and distant. How does one truly hold to them in a world which thinks so differently? Bob Kramer, who was involved in student protests at Harvard in

the '60s, said he and his wife learned the importance of surrounding themselves with people who also wanted to connect *telos* with *praxis*. He said, "As I have gotten involved in politics and business, I am more and more convinced that the people you choose to have around you have more to do with how you act upon what you believe than what you read or the ideas that influence you. The influence of ideas has to be there, but the application is something it's very hard to work out by yourself." [\[13\]](#)

The Christian community (or the church), if it's functioning properly, can provide a solid plausibility structure for those who are finding their way. To read about love and forgiveness and kindness and self-sacrifice is one thing; to see it lived out within a body of people is quite another. It provides significant evidence that the convictions are valid. "We discover who we are," says Garber, "and who we are meant to be—face to face and side by side with others in work, love and learning." [\[14\]](#)

During their university years and early twenties, if they care about the course of their lives, young people will have to make major decisions about what they believe and what those beliefs mean. Garber writes, "Choices about meaning, reality and truth, about God, human nature and history are being made which, more often than not, last for the rest of life. Learning to make sense of life, for life, is what the years between adolescence and adulthood are all about." [\[15\]](#)

Convictions, character, and community are three major ingredients for producing a life of meaningful service in the kingdom of God, for putting together our *telos* and our *praxis*.

## Notes

1. Steven Garber, *The Fabric of Faithfulness: Weaving Together Belief and Behavior During the University Years* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1996). An expanded edition was



published in 2007 under the shortened title *The Fabric of Faithfulness: Weaving Together Belief and Behavior*.

2. Ibid., 27.

3. Ibid., 37.

4. Erik Erikson, *Insight and Responsibility: Lectures on the Ethical Implications of Psychoanalytic Insight* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1964), 138, quoted in Garber, 17.

5. Christian Smith and Patricia Snell, *Souls in Transition: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of Emerging Adults* (Oxford University Press, 2009).

6. Steve Cable, "Emerging Adults and the Future of Faith in America," Probe Ministries, 2010, [www.probe.org/emerging-adults-and-the-future-of-faith-in-america/](http://www.probe.org/emerging-adults-and-the-future-of-faith-in-america/).

7. Jacques Ellul, *Reason for Being: A Meditation on Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 282-83, quoted in Garber, 39.

8. Colin Brown, ed., *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976), s.v. "Work," by H.-C. Hahn (3:1157-58). [Note: The hyphen is there in the source text.]

9. J. B. Lightfoot, *Notes on the Epistle of St. Paul*, 322, quoted in Brown, NIDNTT, s.v. "Head," by C. Brown (2:163).

10. Garber, *Fabric*, 122.

11. Ibid., 59.

12. Ibid., 130.

13. Ibid., 149.

14. Ibid., 147.

15. Ibid., 175.

# Happy Birthday to Jesus-in-Me!

Happy Birthday to Jesus-in-Me!

Today is my spiritual birthday. 40 years ago I woke up in the morning a sophomore in college, disengaged with God, ignoring Him like I had for years, but when I went to bed that night my entire world and eternity had changed forever. In the middle of the day, a classmate handed me a flyer, inviting me to a performance of an illusionist/magician, André Kōle. I was intensely interested, being a fan of illusion, but when the flyer revealed the event was sponsored by Campus Crusade for Christ, I said to myself, "Forget it." I was *not* interested in hanging with Jesus freaks! But as the day wore on, it felt like there was a string tied around my heart, drawing me to that evening's performance.

So I went.

And André Kōle used magic to illustrate spiritual principles that made sense to me, especially when he talked about every human being having a God-shaped hole in our hearts that we try to stuff with anything *but* God: good grades, reputation, relationships, appearance, money, attention, achievements. He explained how God had sent Jesus to earth to show us what He was like, and then Jesus died on the cross to deal with our sin once and for all. Three days later God raised Him from the dead and He's still alive today, unlike the founder of any other world religion. If I trusted in Jesus, He would come to live inside me forever and He, being God, would fill that God-

shaped hole and I could experience the “abundant life” He came to bring us (John 10:10). I remember thinking, “YES!!” and threw open the door of my heart to Him, placing myself in Jesus’ hands and trusting Him with my life and my future.

I had no idea what that meant. I just knew it was right.

Life became a perpetual surprise box as God started making changes in me from the inside out. To my delight, I discovered that all the things I really liked about myself then, and even moreso as forty years have unfolded, were the things that God put in me. He gave me a depth of joy that I didn’t know was possible. He planted spiritual gifts in me that were the manifestation of His Holy Spirit shining through the window of my life: gifts of shepherd/teacher, of encouragement, of word of wisdom, all of which came straight from His heart into mine. He continued to shape the personality and temperament He had given me with maturity and seasoning. He made my heart a big pipe through which He poured His love into other people.

I remember one time a couple of months into my new life, discovering a different kind of fellowship with other Christ-followers and a love for God’s word as I started being taught the Bible and learning to teach others what I was learning, wondering if this cool new life would last or if it was just some sort of fad.

I didn’t know that God was *transforming* me, giving me a taste for His life and His kingdom that would spoil me for any counterfeit the world had to offer. He opened my eyes to be aware of the spiritual realm, not just the physical realm I lived in, and enlarged my understanding to include the Big Picture of life on earth and in eternity. I learned that my life wasn’t about me at all, it was about Jesus, and because He loved me, He had drawn me into His life, His circle of delight and fellowship with His Father and His Spirit—that I was now included into the “holy hug” of Father, Son and Spirit who had adopted me, and I was now a daughter of



the King—which makes me a forever princess! Forty years later, I still revel in that gift, and I love to pull out a tiara and pop it on my head when I’m sharing my story of grace with people.

When I was a little girl I just wanted to be happy when I grew up. Who doesn’t, right? But what I discovered is that God had His definition of happy—blessed—plus so much more. He gave me Himself, and all the good things of life are found in Him.

Happy birthday to Jesus-in-me! My heart is overflowing with unspeakable gratitude!

This blog post originally appeared at  
[http://blogs.bible.org/engage/sue\\_bohlin/happy\\_birthday\\_to\\_jesus-in-me](http://blogs.bible.org/engage/sue_bohlin/happy_birthday_to_jesus-in-me) on Feb. 12, 2013

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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*,<sup>[1](#)</sup> 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."

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?

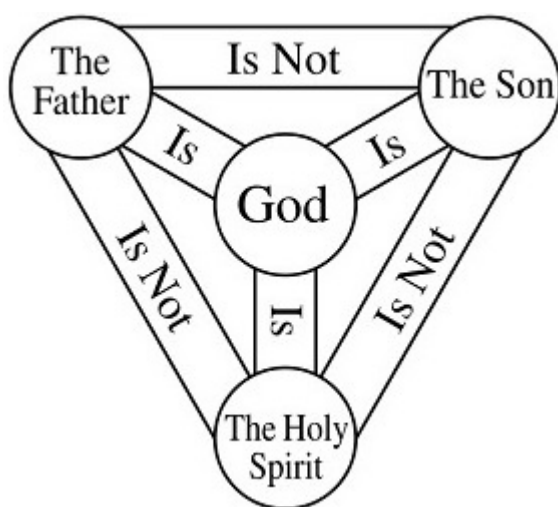
In this article I'll examine why the Trinity is important. And hopefully we'll lay some groundwork so that we may happily realize that to be truly Christian is to be consciously Trinitarian.

## **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." 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."

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 worshipping 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?”<sup>{14}</sup> 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”<sup>{15}</sup>—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).<sup>{16}</sup>

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](http://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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## Putting Beliefs Into Practice

*Rick Wade uncovers and analyzes three major ingredients to help students produce a life of meaningful service in the kingdom of God: convictions, character, community.*

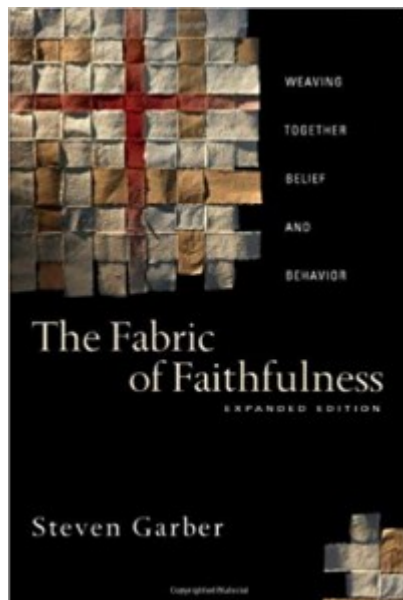
### Why Do You Get Up in the Morning?

“Why do you get up in the morning?”

That’s a question Steven Garber likes to ask college students. It might sound like a rather silly question at first. We get

up in the morning because there are things to be done that won't get done if we lie in bed all day. But Garber wants to know something more important. What are the things that lie ahead of us that make it worth getting out of bed? What do we intend to accomplish? Are our ambitions for the day worthy ones? More importantly, How do they fit with our view of life, or our worldview?

Wait a minute. This is getting rather heavy. Should the activities of our day—routine and non-routine—be tied somehow to a worldview? This implies that our basic beliefs are significant for the way we live, and, conversely, that what we do with our days reflects what we really believe.



Steven Garber believes both are true. Garber is on the faculty of the American Studies Program in Washington, D.C. In 1996 he published a book titled *The Fabric of Faithfulness: Weaving Together Belief and Behavior During the University Years*.

[{1}](#) The purpose of this book is to help students in the critical task of establishing moral meaning in their lives. By *moral meaning* he is referring to the moral significance of the general direction of our lives and of the things we do with our days. What do our lives mean on a moral level? "How is it," he asks, "that someone decides which cares and commitments will give shape and substance to life, for life? This question and its answer are the heart of this book." [{2}](#)

In this article we will look at the three significant factors to which Garber draws attention, factors that form the foundations for making our lives fit our beliefs: convictions, character, and community. [{3}](#)

For many young people, college provides the context for what the late Erik Erikson referred to as a *turning point*, "a

crucial period in which a decisive turn *one way or another* is unavoidable.” {4} College students no longer have Mom and Dad looking over their shoulders; their youth pastors are back home; their friends and other significant adults are not around to keep those boundaries in place that once defined their lives. They are on their own, for the most part. *In loco parentis* was the place the university once held in students’ lives: “In the place of the parents.” No more. One writer says tongue in cheek that the new philosophy is *non sum mater tua*: “I’m not your mama.” {5}

Even worse for Christian students, when they are on campus they don’t find themselves on their own in a perfectly innocuous environment that seeks to continue in the students’ lives what their parents began. Professor J. Budziszewski, a faculty member at the University of Texas at Austin, says that “The modern university is profoundly alienated from God and hostile to Christian faith.” {6} Thus it is that in the college environment Christian students are really put to the test. Given the loss of the support group at home, on the one hand, and the input of new ideas and activities that are antithetical to their faith, on the other, how will they not only stand firm in their faith, but actively move forward in developing a life that is consistent with what they believe?

Before considering what Garber says about convictions, character, and community, let’s think about beliefs and practice in general.

## ***Telos and Praxis***

Many students think of the college years as their chance to finally break loose of the constraints of home and have a good time—a *really* good time—before settling down into the hum-drum routine of adult life. They see education simply as a means for getting good jobs. Thus, academics are too often governed by the marketplace. Students who try to discuss ideas and issues outside the classroom are often put down by their



peers. The attitude seems to be to do just enough to get the grades, and let the party begin! {7}

Is this why we send our children to college? Just to get good grades to get good jobs? For the Christian student this question is ever so vital.

Hear how Jacques Ellul expands the message of Ecclesiastes chapter 12:

Remember your Creator during your youth: when all possibilities lie open before you and you can offer all your strength intact for his service. The time to remember is not after you become senile and paralyzed! Then it is not too late for your salvation, but too late for you to serve as the presence of God in the midst of the world and the creation. You must take sides earlier—when you can actually make choices, when you have many paths opening at your feet, before the weight of necessity overwhelms you. {8}

Students don't understand the pressures that will come with career and marriage and family and all the other ingredients of adult life. The time to think, choose, and begin acting is when the possibilities still lie open before them.

Steven Garber uses two Greek words to identify the two aspects of life which must be united: *telos* and *praxis*. *Telos* is the Greek word for the end toward which something is moving or developing. It isn't just the end in the sense of the final moment in time; it is the goal, the culmination, the final form that gives meaning to all that goes before it. The goal that defines all human life is the time when Christ will return and reign forever and believers will be conformed to His image completely. This *telos* or goal should govern our actions. In fact, the adjectival form of the word, *teleios*, is the word Paul and James use when they call us to be perfect or complete (Col. 1:28; James 1:4).

Garber's second word, *praxis*, means action or deed. {9} In

Matthew 16:27, for example, Jesus speaks of us being repaid according to our deeds or *praxis*.

The question we all need to ask ourselves is whether we are ordering our *praxis* in keeping with our *telos*. Does the end toward which we are heading as children of God define the activities of our lives?

While everyone engages in some kind of *praxis* or deeds, in the postmodern world there *is* no *telos*, no end toward which everything is moving. Westerners no longer even look for the perfection of man, as in modernism. College students are told in so many different ways that their lives are either completely open—the “freedom” of existentialism, or completely determined—in which case freedom is an illusion. So either there is nothing bigger than us to which we might aspire, or we’re just being carried along by forces we can’t control. In either case, how are students to make any sense of their lives in general or their studies in particular? Emotivism and pragmatism rule. We choose based upon our own feelings or desires—which can change frequently or in accordance with what works or both. And what “works” is what gives them the best chance in the marketplace. Is there anything bigger that should give students a focus for their studies and their lives?

## **Convictions—The Foundation of Basic Beliefs**

Foundational to how we live is the body of basic beliefs we hold. I noted earlier Garber’s use the words *telos* and *praxis* to refer to the end toward which we are moving and the practice or deeds of our lives. The matter of *telos* or end points to the content of our faith, or our worldview, which forms our basic convictions. Let’s look more closely at the importance of convictions.

When we think of our end in Christ we’re thinking of something

much bigger and more substantive than just where we will spend eternity. We're thinking of the goal toward which history is marching. In His eternal wisdom God chose to sum up all things in Christ (Eph. 1:10). Here's how J. B. Lightfoot puts it. It speaks of "the entire harmony of the universe, which shall no longer contain alien and discordant elements, but of which all the parts shall find their centre and bond of union in Christ." {10} It is the *telos* or end of Christians to be made perfect parts of the new creation.

This isn't mere philosophical or theological speculation, however, for we have the reality of the historical presence of God in Christ on earth which gave evidence of the truth of these beliefs of a sort we can grasp. This is so important in our day of religious pluralism, an approach to religion that abstracts ideas from various religions in the search for ultimate truth. Christianity isn't an abstract set of beliefs; it is true religion grounded in objective, historical events. Historical events and revealed meanings provide the objective ground for our convictions. And these convictions provide the ground and direction for the way we live.

It is critical, then, for students to understand Christian doctrine thoroughly and its meaning and application to the various facets of life.

This whole matter of doctrine grounded in historical fact is troublesome in itself today because there has been a rift created between fact and value. Facts are those things that can be measured scientifically. All else, especially religion and morality, is considered value; it is subjective and varies according to personal preference, culture, etc. Students are told that their most basic beliefs are "noncognitive emotional responses or private subjective preferences." {11} They are told that it doesn't matter whether what they believe is objectively true; all that matters is whether it is meaningful to them. But as Garber notes, "What is real?' informs What is true?' which informs What is right?'" {12} Our beliefs and

actions find their ultimate meaning—apart from how we might feel about them—in the fact that they are based on reality.

Garber tells the story of Dan Heimbach who, among other things, served on President Bush's Domestic Policy Council. Heimbach was raised in a Christian home, but sensed a need while in high school to be truly authentic with respect to his beliefs. He wanted to know if Christianity was really true. When serving in Vietnam he began asking himself whether he could really live with his convictions. He says:

Everyone had overwhelmingly different value systems. While there I once asked myself why I had to be so different. With a sense of tremendous internal challenge I could say that the one thing keeping me from being like the others was that deep down I was convinced of the truth of my faith; this moment highlighted what truth meant to me, and I couldn't turn my back on what I knew to be true. [\[13\]](#)

Likewise, when some of Jesus' disciples left Him, He asked those who remained if they would leave also. Peter answered, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have words of eternal life" (Jn. 6:68). It was what Peter believed that kept him close to Jesus when circumstances called for retreat.

What we believe gives meaning to our existence; it provides an intellectual anchor in a world of multiple and conflicting beliefs, and it gives broad direction for our lives. For a student to live consistently as a Christian, he or she must know what Christianity is, and be convinced that it is "true truth" as Francis Schaeffer put it: the really true.

## **Character—Living One's Beliefs**

So convictions grounded in reality are significant for the way we live. But convictions alone aren't enough in the Christian life. They need to be matched by character that is worthy of the One who redeemed us, the One whom we represent on earth.

It can be hard for students, though, to feel encouraged to develop Christ-like character given the attitudes of people all around them.

Steven Garber sees the TV show *Beavis and . . .* (well, that other guy) as symptomatic of the attitude of many young people today. He quotes a Harvard student who described the show this way: "Two teenaged losers . . . mindlessly watch videos, and they snicker. . . . [They] help us understand what the next century will be like. The founding principle will be nihilism. Rampant disregard for other living things . . . will be in. Taking responsibility for one's actions will be out. . . . It's proof that there is a whole new generation out there that completely understands all of this society's foibles. And can only snicker." [{14}](#)

How shall we inspire our students to develop character in keeping with their convictions so they don't end up "getting all A's but flunking life," in Walker Percy's words? [{15}](#) How can we turn them away from the destructiveness of a nihilistic worldview in which nothing has meaning?

Having abandoned the Christian *telos* our society is characterized by "an ethic of emotivism, one which asserts that all moral judgments are nothing but expressions of preference.'" [{16}](#) This goes back to the split between fact and value I spoke of earlier. Values are person-centered; they have no force beyond the individual's power to live them out and impose them on others. They aren't grounded in anything more ultimate than an individual or at best a particular society.

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

Secular humanism . . . stubbornly insisted that morality

need not be based on the supernatural. But it gradually became clear that ethics without the sanction of some higher authority simply were not compelling. The ultimate irony, or perhaps tragedy, is that secularism has not led to humanism. We have gradually dissolved—deconstructed<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub>the human being into a bundle of reflexes, impulses, neuroses, nerve endings. The great religious heresy used to be making man the measure of all things; but we have come close to making man the measure of nothing. {17}

Morality is inextricably wedded to the way the world is. A universe formed by matter and chance cannot provide moral meaning. The idea of a “cosmos without purpose,” says Garber, “is at the heart of the challenge facing students in the modern world.” {18} It provides no rules or structure for life. Christianity, on the other hand, provides a basis for responsible living for there is a God back of it all who is a moral being, who created the universe and the people in it to function certain ways, and who will call us to give an account in the end.

Bob Kramer was a campus leader for student protest at Harvard in the '60s. He wanted to bring about social change, but when he discovered in his classes that his basic beliefs about right and wrong, truth and justice were wrong, he dropped out. “There was no real foundation for what I believed,” he says, “beyond that I believed it.” {19}

If we accept that Christianity does indeed provide direction and firm foundations for the development of character in the individual, still we must ask how that development comes about. Can we expect students to just read the Bible and go out and live Christianly? For Steven Garber, this leads us to consider the importance of a mentor, a person under whom the student can learn how to live as a person of high moral character.

Garber tells the story of Grace Tazelaar who graduated from

Wheaton College and then went into nursing. She then taught in the country of Uganda as it was being rebuilt following the reign of Idi Amin. At some point she asked a former teacher to be her spiritual mentor. Says Garber, "This woman, who had spent years in South Africa, gave herself to Grace as she was beginning to explore her own place of responsible service. At the core of her teacher's life, Grace recalls, I saw much love amidst trauma.'" "Those lessons," says Garber, "cannot be taught from a textbook; they have to be learned from a life."

[{20}](#)

The White Rose was a group of students in Germany who opposed Nazism. Brother and sister Hans and Sophie Scholl were strongly influenced in their work by Carl Muth, a theologian and editor of an anti-Nazi periodical. One writer noted that, "The Christian Gospel became the criterion of their thought and actions." [{21}](#) Their convictions carried them to the point of literally losing their heads for their opposition.

The development of moral character was once an integral part of education. Christians must once again seek the development of the whole person in education. That means, on the one hand, finding adults who are willing to become mentors for students, and, on the other, drawing students out and interesting them in forming significant relationships with adults, whether they be relatives, professors, pastors, or perhaps professionals in their fields of interest. This involves more than teaching students how to have quiet times. The kind of pietistic Christianity which pulls into itself to simply develop one's own spiritual experience won't do if we're to have an impact on our world. Students need to be shown how to apply the "do not's" in Scripture, but also how to find the "do's" and . . . well, do them. They need to see how Christianity is fleshed out in real life, and they need encouragement to extend themselves in Jesus' name to a world in need using their own gifts and personalities.

## Community—Finding and Giving Support

If convictions provide our foundations and our instructions, mentors can be our guides as we see in them how those convictions take shape in someone's life. Community, the third element, then provides a context within which to practice . . . our practice!

Garber notes that “community is the context for the growth of convictions and character. What we believe about life and the world becomes plausible as we see it lived out all around us. This is not an abstraction, though. Its reality is seen in time and space, in the histories and circumstances of real people living real lives.” Working together with other believers “allows for young people to make stumbling and fumbling choices toward a *telos* whose character is not altogether known at the time; it also allows for grace, which is always a surprise.” {22}

Christian doctrines can seem so abstract and distant. How does one truly hold to them in a world which thinks so differently? When Donald Guthrie, who has worked with the Coalition for Christian Outreach, was asked what makes it hard to connect beliefs with life's experience, he replied, “The cynical nature of our culture, as it permeates the lives of people around me—and me. And only community can stand against that.” {23} “We discover who we are,” he continued, “and who we are meant to be—face to face and side by side with others in work, love and learning.” {24} Bob Kramer, whom we spoke of earlier, said he and his wife believed it was important to surround themselves with people who also wanted to connect *telos* with *praxis*. He says, “As I have gotten involved in politics and business, I am more and more convinced that the people you choose to have around you have more to do with how you act upon what you live than what you read or the ideas that influence you. The influence of ideas has to be there, but the application is something it's very hard to work out by



yourself." {25} "My best friend's teachers were my best friends. We were all trying to figure this out together." {26}

The Christian community, if it's functioning properly, can provide a solid plausibility structure for those who are finding their way. To read about love and forgiveness and kindness and self-sacrifice is one thing; to see it lived out within a body of people is quite another. It provides significant evidence that the convictions are valid.

During the university years, if they care about the course of their lives, students will have to make major decisions about what they believe and what those beliefs mean. "Choices about meaning, reality and truth, about God, human nature and history are being made which, more often than not, last for the rest of life. Learning to make sense of life, for life, is what the years between adolescence and adulthood are all about." {27} Says the Preacher, "Remember also your Creator in the days of your youth."

Convictions, character, community. Three major ingredients for producing a life of meaningful service in the kingdom of God. Students who would put together *telos* and *praxis*, the goal of life and the practice of life, must know what they believe and determine to live in accordance with those beliefs. They should consider finding a mentor and learning from that person how one weaves faith and life. And they should embed themselves in a group of Christians equally committed to living the Christian life fully. "Somewhere, deep in the mysteries of how we learn to see and hear, and what we learn to care for and about, there is a place where presupposition meets practice, where belief becomes behavior," says Steven Garber. {28}

Let me encourage you to get a copy of Steven Garber's book, *The Fabric of Faithfulness*, both to read yourself and to give to your students. It's published by InterVarsity Press. You might also want to consider how to apply what it says in your

church. Let's make it our common aim to help our young people be and live the way God intended.

## Notes

1. Steven Garber, *The Fabric of Faithfulness: Weaving Together Belief and Behavior During the University Years* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996).
2. Ibid., 27.
3. Ibid., 37.
4. Erik Erikson, *Insight and Responsibility: Lectures on the Ethical Implications of Psychoanalytic Insight* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1964), 138, quoted in Garber, 17.
5. David Hoekema, *Campus Rules and Moral Community: In Place of In Loco Parentis* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Pub., 1994), 140, cited in William H. Willimon and Thomas H. Naylor, *The Abandoned Generation: Rethinking Higher Education* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 51.
6. J. Budziszewski, *How to Stay Christian in College: An Interactive Guide to Keeping the Faith* (Colorado Springs: Navpress, 1999), 25.
7. For an alarming look at the attitude of students and especially the importance of alcohol on campus, see Willimon and Naylor, chaps. 1 and 2.
8. Jacques Ellul, *Reason for Being: A Meditation on Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 282-83, quoted in Garber, 39.
9. Colin Brown, s.v. "Work," by H.C. Hahn.
10. Colin Brown, s.v. "Head," by C. Brown.
11. Richard Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism: Science, Hermeneutics and Praxis* (Philadelphia: University of Philadelphia Press, 1983), 18, quoted in Garber, 53.
12. Garber, 56.
13. Ibid., 122.
14. Joe Matthews, "Beavis, Butthead & Budding Nihilists: Will Western Civilization Survive?" *Washington Post*, October 3, 1993, p. C1, quoted in Garber, 40-41.

15. Walker Percy, *The Second Coming* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1980), 32, 93, quoted in Garber, 43.
16. Alister McIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 11-12, quoted in Garber, 50-51.
17. Henry Grunwald, "The Year 2000," *Time*, March 30, 1992, 75, quoted in Garber, 54.
18. Garber, 59.
19. Ibid., 61.
20. Ibid., 130.
21. Inge Jens, ed. *At the Heart of the White Rose: Letters and Diaries of Hans and Sophie Scholl* (New York: Harper and Row, 1987), xi, quoted in Garber, 167.
22. Garber, 146.
23. Ibid., 147.
24. Ibid., 147.
25. Ibid., 149.
26. Ibid., 152.
27. Ibid., 175.
28. Ibid., 174.

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# Listening

## Listening: A Lost Art?

*"Listen to me!"*

*"Don't you ever listen?"*

*"Listen up!"*

*"Are you listening?"*

*"Listen carefully to what I have to say."*

*"Listen and learn."*

Do such phrases sound familiar to you? Maybe you have heard them from your parents, a teacher, a preacher, or maybe you use them with your children or other family members. They are commands or questions that emphasize the importance of listening. We all want to be heard; we believe what we have to say is significant. It is disheartening and humiliating when we are ignored.

Many years ago I witnessed a scene that has been written indelibly in my memory. It was not an event of earth-shaking importance. It was a simple exchange of time and attention between two people. One of those people was a very prominent, world-renowned pastor of one of the largest churches in the world. The other person was a church member who simply was seeking to spend a few minutes in conversation with the pastor. I don't know what the member wanted to discuss; it didn't seem to matter to the pastor. The thing that made their conversation so memorable was that many people just like the one with whom he was talking surrounded the pastor. They all wanted a few minutes of his time and attention. But instead of being distracted by many different voices, the pastor gave his full attention to one person at a time. He focused his eyes on each individual and appeared to have a genuine interest in each of them. This scene has proven to be a model for me. I have thought of it many times as I have attempted to give my attention to anyone who seeks to be heard.

On the other hand, we have seen and experienced the opposite of this scene. Too often we are oblivious to the importance of listening. Either the one to whom we are speaking is not listening, or we are not concentrating enough on what someone else has to say to us. Have we lost the art of listening? If so, it is important that we consider how meaningful it can be to be good listeners. Within a Christian worldview, this is an essential art.

The words *listen* or *hear* and their cognates are used in the New American Standard Bible over 1,500 times. Obviously this

implies that the terms are important for one who takes the Bible seriously. If we are to build a worldview that honors God, we should learn to listen.

To whom or what should we listen? Surely many answers to this question could be suggested. The art of listening is worthy of thorough discussion. But, in this discussion, I will concentrate on four facets of listening. First, we should listen to God. Second, we should listen in order to understand. Third, we should listen to the world around us. And fourth, we should listen to the non-Christian. Each of these will be offered with the hope that the development of good listening skills will lead to good communication of God's truth. If we are listening carefully, we will in turn have a hearing among those who need the message we can share.

## **Listening to God**

What would your parents, or children, or family, or friends, or coworkers say if they were asked if you listen to them? In most cases, we would like to think that such people deserve to be heard. But if you are a Christian, God should be added to such a list. Surely a Christian wants to listen to God above all others.

A Christian worldview includes the belief that God is a supernatural but personal being who communicates with us. His transcendent character does not mean that He is bound to be isolated from those He loves. That love includes the fact that He has infinite wisdom to share with His loved ones. And the wise person is one who is worthy of that description because he has learned to listen to God's wisdom.

In addition, the Christian worldview includes the glorious truth that God listens to us. As a book title states, *He is The God Who Hears*.[\[1\]](#) The creator and sustainer of the universe actually chooses to hear us. The Bible is clear about this. "Idols are deaf (Deut 4:28; Rev 9:20), but God is

personified as having ears (1 Sam 8:21) and hearing his people (2 Sam 22:7).”{2}

Such thoughts are part of a common thread among most Christians. But those of us who have been taught the central tenets of biblical content may tend to be too comfortable with such concepts. We may have ignored the startling nature of communication with God. It can be helpful for us to realize that these beliefs are distinguishing marks of both biblical Judaism and Christianity. “Unlike ancient religions that sought revelation through the eye and through visions, biblical people primarily sought revelation through the ear and hearing. Hearing symbolizes the proper response to God in the Bible.”{3} From the central proclamation of Judaism, “Hear, O Israel! The LORD is our God, the LORD is one!” (Deut. 6:4), to the familiar declaration of the Lord Jesus, “He who has ears to hear, let him hear” (Matt. 11:15), the Bible affirms the importance of listening to the God of the Bible.

At this point we should stop and consider at least one segment of what is entailed in listening to God. That is, we are to listen to God through His Word, the Bible. “Just as human beings address God by means of language through prayer, God addresses human beings by means of language in the pages of Scripture.”{4} Before we succumb to the temptation of letting such truths pass by us, consider the dynamic implication of God addressing us in the pages of Scripture. The apostle Paul refers to this in 1 Corinthians 2:12-13:

*Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might know the things freely given to us by God, which things we also speak, not in words taught by human wisdom, but in those taught by the Spirit, combining spiritual thoughts with spiritual words.*

Obviously Paul believed that what He wrote was from God through the Holy Spirit. Paul was listening to God in such a

way that “we might know the things freely given to us by God.” Thus, when the Christian reads or hears the Bible, he is listening to God.

## **Listening In Order to Understand**

Have you ever had a frustrating conversation? That’s a ridiculous question, right? You can probably bring many such conversations to mind! You just were not able to “get through” to the person, or the opposite was true. Maybe one of the two of you was listening, but you just did not understand one another.

As Christians, such frustration may be the result of not cultivating the art of listening. This begins with listening to God. If we have learned to hear God through His Word, we have come to realize important elements of listening in order to understand. If we can listen to God, we are able to listen to our fellow men.

First, we realize that understanding is often the result of focus. Whether we are studying the Bible, praying, hearing a sermon, listening to family or friends, viewing a movie, or a list of other things, our attention needs to be focused. Admittedly, this can be difficult to achieve. Distractions seem to flood our lives at the most inopportune times. But how often are such distractions a result of unnecessary additions to our lives? Have we put rugged mountains in our paths? Do we find ourselves struggling to climb those mountains before we can focus on what we truly are seeking on the other side? Perhaps we are in need of a refocusing on what is truly important, along with the discarding of what is not truly important. When this happens we will begin to walk a path that will provide more opportunities to listen in order to understand. I believe our relationships with God and those we love will deepen as a result.

The second element of understanding is patient contemplation.

Some may call this meditation, which is a thoroughly biblical practice when we are meditating on Scripture. But whether we are contemplating Scripture, or what our children may have just said, our objective is to understand. Again, this also can be difficult to achieve. Because of the ways in which pop culture has permeated our lives, we have grown accustomed to immediate gratification.[{5}](#) This isn't surprising in light of the fact that most of what fills our ears and eyes doesn't require much, if any, patient contemplation. In fact, the things we tend to hear and see would be considered failures if we didn't respond immediately. Such pressures are indicative of the struggles of Christians in the world. According to Scripture, this will be true until Jesus returns. As a result, the Christian community is in need of those who are willing to do the hard work of patient contemplation. There is too much at stake to do otherwise.

The third element of listening in order to understand concerns the application of what is heard. When we have listened carefully enough to focus and contemplate we then are ready to use what has been heard. This is a crucial element of a Christian worldview, because in the New Testament “. . . the only marks to distinguish true hearing from purely physical hearing are faith (Matt. 8:10; 9:2; 17:20 etc.) and action (Matt. 7:16, 24, 26; Rom. 2:13 etc.).”[{6}](#) As Jesus said, “. . . everyone who hears these words of Mine, and acts upon them, may be compared to a wise man, who built his house upon the rock” (Matt. 7:24). Let's aspire to be considered among the wise. God will be glorified because He will have something to say through us.

## **Listening to the World Around Us**

You are sitting in your doctor's office waiting to see him about a persistent cough you have had for more than two weeks. As you are thumbing through a magazine you are suddenly startled by an advertisement that proclaims, in very large



letters: "YOU ARE THE C.E.O. OF YOUR LIFE!" Then you begin to read the fine print at the bottom of the ad, which states: "Think about it. Your life is like a business. It makes sense that you're the one in charge." You are thinking about it, and you do not agree. Why? Because you have been "listening" to the world around you and you realize that your world view does not fit with what you consider to be a brazen claim. You are not the C.E.O. of your life; God is. Your mental and spiritual sensitivity meter is working properly.

This fictitious scenario illustrates one of the common ways our Christian worldview guides us as we "listen" to the world around us. Many ideas are being shared in that world and many of them are contrary to Christian thought. Stephen Eyre refers to those ideas as "dragons." He believes these are cultural values that ". . . are particularly strong and absolutely deadly for the church."[\[7\]](#) Eyre identifies six of them.

The first dragon is *Materialism*. Matter is all that matters; "I am what I own." Jesus said, ". . . do not be anxious for your life, as to what you shall eat, or what you shall drink; nor for your body, as to what you shall put on. Is not life more than food, and the body than clothing?" (Matt. 6:25)

The second dragon is *Activism*. Life is to be filled with action; "I am what I do," or "I am what I produce." God said, "Cease striving and know that I am God; I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth" (Ps. 46:10).

The third dragon is *Individualism*. We can depend on no one but ourselves; "I am self-sufficient." The apostle Peter wrote these memorable words to people, not just an individual: ". . . you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God's own possession . . ." (1 Pet. 2:9).

The fourth dragon is *Conformism*. Recognition by others is a necessity; "I am who others recognize me to be." Jesus warned

His disciples: "Beware of practicing your righteousness before men to be noticed by them; otherwise you have no reward with your Father who is in heaven" (Matt. 6:1).

The fifth dragon is *Relativism*. It doesn't matter what you believe, as long as you believe something; "I am whatever I choose to believe." Jesus declared that what we believe about Him is what ultimately matters when He said, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but through Me" (John 14:6).

The sixth dragon is *Secularism*. Religion is all right in its place; "I am sufficient without God." Jesus said we are not sufficient unless we have Him: "I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me, and I in him, he bears much fruit; for apart from Me you can do nothing" (John 15:5).

Are we listening to the dragons, or to the Word of God? May the Lord guide us as we listen to the world around us with His ears.

## **Listening to the Non-Christian**

My ministry experiences include the privilege of travelling to the beautiful country of Slovenia. While in this formerly communist state I was invited to speak to older high school students in their classes. (Yes, they spoke and understood English very well.) After one of these classes I engaged in conversation with several young people who were especially curious about the issues I had raised about the subject of worldviews. As I listened closely to what they were saying I realized they might have been using certain terms without much knowledge of what they mean. One of those terms was the word atheist. Some of them claimed they were atheists. So I gently asked if they understood the implications of the word by using an illustration that got their attention. Then I asked if they knew of the word agnostic. After they indicated they had not heard of the word I explained it to them. Immediately they

responded by asserting that the word agnostic described them more accurately than atheist. From that point in our conversation I was able to share the gospel, the answer to their agnosticism.

As you can imagine, that incident is a joyous memory in my life. But what if I had not listened carefully, not only to what the students were saying, but what they did not say? I believe that if I had not focused my attention in order to contemplate their comments and questions, I would not have had their attention as I did.

When we are listening carefully to the non-Christian we are winning an opportunity to be heard by him. There are times when evangelism can be a matter of listening, and then telling. Here are two suggestions that can help in developing the art of listening to the non-Christian.

First, listen for what the person presupposes is true. For example, the actor Brad Pitt is quoted as saying, "I have a hard time with morals. All I know is what feels right. What's more important to me is being honest about who you are."[\[8\]](#) If you were listening to him say these things you may have wanted to encourage him to consider the implications of his statements. How would he react if someone "felt like" stealing his car or robbing his house? You also could ask him if Charles Manson was being honest about himself when he committed murder. Brad Pitt's presuppositions about morality cannot be sustained. He needs something greater than his feelings and a vague sense of honesty.

Second, listen for what is not said. You may hear a lot of assertions, but what are the crucial elements you do not hear? Imagine you are listening to a non-Christian friend as he has a tirade about the hypocrisy of the Christians he knows (you excepted, of course). It suddenly occurs to you to ask what is behind his anger. He then becomes increasingly agitated as he tells you someone in a church rejected him and defamed his

family when he was younger. Now you can begin to build up what had been torn down in your friend's life, even though a lot of patience may be required.

People need to be heard. May God grant us the wisdom to listen. In the process may He grant us the privilege of carrying His wondrous message to those who will hear.

## Notes

1. W. Bingham Hunter, *The God Who Hears* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1986).
2. Leland Ryken, James C. Wilhoit, Tremper Longman III, gen. eds., "Ear, Hearing," in *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1998).
3. Ibid.
4. Gene Edward Veith, Jr., *Reading Between the Lines* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1990), 18.
5. See my essays on the subjects of [Television](#) and [Slogans](#).
6. Gerhard Kittel, akouw, in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Vol. I, ed. Gerhard Kittel, trans. and ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964), 220.
7. Stephen D. Eyre, *Defeating the Dragons of the World* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1987), 14. Much of the material in this section comes from this book.
8. Brad Pitt, quoted in *Ladies Home Journal* (March 1999), 46.