


Bible Literacy Quiz: A Test of Scripture Knowledge

Take this test of basic Bible knowledge to help assess your biblical literacy. This simple quiz examines some of the key doctrines and events of the Bible. It will give you a good feel for your breadth and depth of Scriptural knowledge.

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

It's alarming to us at Probe Ministries to see the drop in biblical literacy among Americans. Growing numbers of people don't know what the Bible says, even the most basic foundational truths and people and facts.

Evangelical pollster George Barna says,

Over the past 20 years we have seen the nation's theological views slowly become less aligned with the Bible. Americans still revere the Bible and like to think of themselves as Bible-believing people, but the evidence suggests otherwise. Christians have increasingly been adopting spiritual views that come from Islam, Wicca, secular humanism, the eastern religions and other sources.[\[1\]](#)

That's because we're not reading and studying the Bible. If we don't know what God says is truth, it makes us vulnerable to believing a lie.

Take the quiz yourself: click [here](#) for a format with the questions and answers separated.

1. Who wrote the first four books of the New Testament?



Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.

2. Who wrote the first five books of the Old Testament?

Most conservative scholars hold that the Pentateuch was written by Moses.

3. What two Old Testament books are named for women?

Esther and Ruth.

4. What are the Ten Commandments?

1. I am the Lord your God; you shall have no other gods before Me.
2. You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below.
3. You shall not misuse the name of the Lord your God.
4. Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy.
5. Honor your father and your mother.
6. You shall not murder.
7. You shall not commit adultery.
8. You shall not steal.
9. You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor.
10. You shall not covet your neighbor's house. You shall not covet your neighbor's wife—or anything that belongs to your neighbor. (Exodus 20:2-17)

5. What is the Greatest Commandment?

“Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.” (Matthew 22:37,38)

6. What is the second Greatest Commandment?

“Love your neighbor as yourself.” (Matthew 22:39)

7. What is the Golden Rule?

“Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.”

(Matthew 7:12)

8. What is the Great Commission?

“Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I will be with you always, to the very end of the age.” (Matthew 28:19,20)

9. What was the test of a prophet, to know that he was truly from God?

He had to be 100% accurate in his prophecies. The penalty for a false prophet was death by stoning. (Deuteronomy 18:20-22)

10. To whom did God give the 10 Commandments?

Moses. (Exodus 20)

11. Which two people did not die?

Genesis 5:24 says that Enoch, who was Noah's great-grandfather, “walked with God; then he was no more, because God took him away.” The other was the Old Testament prophet Elijah, who was taken up to heaven in a whirlwind with a chariot and horses of fire. (2 Kings 2:11)

12. What is the root of all kinds of evil?

The love of money. (1 Timothy 6:10)

13. What is the beginning of wisdom?

The fear of the Lord. (Psalm 111:10)

14. Who delivered the Sermon on the Mount?

The Lord Jesus. (Matthew 5-7)

15. How did sickness and death enter the world?

Romans 5:12 says that sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin. The fall of man is recorded in Genesis 3, where God's perfect creation was spoiled by Adam's sin.

16. Who was the Roman governor who sentenced Christ to death?

Pontius Pilate. (Matthew 27:26)

17. Who are the major prophets?

Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel.

18. What people group is the Old Testament about?

The Hebrews, who became the nation of Israel. They were descendants of Abraham through Isaac.

19. What happened while the Lord Jesus was in the desert for 40 days?

He was tempted by the devil. (Matthew 4:1) Hebrews 4:15 tells us that He was tempted in every way, just as we are—yet was without sin.

20. How many people were on Noah's ark?

Eight: Noah and his wife, his three sons Shem, Ham, and Japheth, and their wives. (Genesis 7:13, 1 Peter 2:5)

21. Who was the first murderer?

Cain, who killed his brother Abel. (Genesis 4:8)

22. Which person was afflicted with terrible trials but trusted God through it all?

Job. (See book of Job)

23. Who was Israel's most well-known and well-loved king?

David. (1 Chronicles 29:28)

24. Who was “the weeping prophet?”

Jeremiah.

25. Who was thrown into the lion’s den?

Daniel. (Daniel 6)

26. Who were the two people in the famous fight with a stone and a sling?

David and Goliath. (1 Samuel 17)

27. What is the book of Acts about?

The early years of the church, as the gospel begins to spread throughout the world.

28. What are epistles?

Letters.

29. On what occasion was the Holy Spirit given to the church?

Pentecost. (Acts 2:1-4)

30. Whom did God command to sacrifice his only son?

Abraham. (Genesis 22:2)

31. What was the Old Testament feast that celebrated God’s saving the firstborn of Israel the night they left Egypt?

Passover. (Exodus 12:27)

32. Who was the Hebrew who became prime minister of Egypt?

Joseph. (Genesis 41:41)

33. Who was the Hebrew woman who became Queen of Persia?

Esther. (Esther 2:17)

34. Who was the pagan woman who became David's great-grandmother?

Ruth. (Ruth 4:17)

35. Which angel appeared to Mary?

Gabriel. (Luke 1:26)

36. How did the Lord Jesus die?

He gave up His life while being crucified. (John 19:18)

37. What happened to Him three days after He died?

He was raised from the dead. (John 20)

38. What happened to the Lord Jesus 40 days after His resurrection?

He ascended bodily into heaven. (Acts 1:9-11)

39. What should we do when we sin, in order to restore our fellowship with God?

1 John 1:9 tells us, "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness."

40. How did the universe and world get here?

Genesis 1:1 tells us, "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth." We are told further in Colossians 1:16 and 17 that the Lord Jesus Christ was the one who did the creating.

41. Where did Satan and the demons come from?

Satan was originally the best and the brightest angel, but he sinned in his pride, wanting to be God. Some of the angels followed him, and these "fallen angels" were cast out of heaven. (Isaiah 14, Ezekiel 28)

42. Who directed the writing of the Bible?

The Holy Spirit. (2 Timothy 3:16, 2 Peter 1:21)

43. Where was the Lord Jesus before He was conceived in Mary?

In heaven. (Philippians 2:6-11, 1 Corinthians 15:49)

44. Who taught in parables?

The Lord Jesus. (Matthew 13:3)

45. What are parables?

A short, simple story with a spiritual point.

46. Which two animals talked with human speech?

The serpent in the Garden of Eden (Genesis 3:3) and Balaam's donkey (Numbers 22:28).

47. With which woman did David commit adultery?

Bathsheba. (2 Samuel 11)

48. Which one of their sons succeeded David as king?

Solomon. (2 Samuel 12:24)

49. Who was the female judge of Israel?

Deborah. (Judges 4:4)

50. Who was the wisest man in the world?

Solomon. (1 Kings 3:12)

51. Who was the first man?

Adam. (Genesis 2:20)

52. Who was the most humble man on earth?

Moses. (Numbers 12:3)

53. Who was the strongest man on earth?

Samson. (Judges 13-16)

54. Where were the two nations of God's people taken into captivity?

Israel was taken into Assyria (2 Kings 17:23), and Judah into Babylon (2 Chronicles 36:20).

55. Which cupbearer to a foreign king rebuilt the wall of Jerusalem?

Nehemiah. (Nehemiah 2:5)

56. Who were the two Old Testament prophets who worked miracles?

Elijah and Elisha. (1 Kings 17 – 2 Kings 6)

57. Which Old Testament prophet spent three days in the belly of a great fish?

Jonah. (Jonah 1:17)

58. What is the last book of the Old Testament?

Malachi.

59. For which Israelite commander did the sun stand still?

Joshua. (Joshua 10)

60. Who was the first king of Israel?

Saul. (1 Samuel 13:1)

61. Who built the temple in Israel?

Solomon. (1 Kings 6)

62. Which of the twelve tribes of Israel served as priests?

Levites. (Deuteronomy 10:8)

63. Which city fell after the Israelites marched around it daily for seven days?

Jericho. (Joshua 6:20)

64. What did God give the Israelites to eat in the wilderness?

Manna and quail. (Exodus 16)

65. Which two people walked on water?

Jesus and Peter. (Matthew 14:29)

66. Who was the first martyr?

Stephen. (Acts 7)

67. Who betrayed Jesus to the priests, and for how much?

Judas betrayed Him for 30 pieces of silver, the price of a slave. (Matthew 26:14-15)

68. What is the Lord's Prayer?

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen. (Matthew 6:9-13)

69. Who was the first person to see the risen Lord?

Mary Magdalene. (John 20:16)

70. Which prophet and cousin of the Lord was beheaded?

John the Baptist. (John 14:10)

71. To what country did the young Jesus and His parents escape when Herod was threatening His life?

Egypt. (Matthew 2:13-15)

72. What was Christ's first miracle?

He turned water into wine at the wedding at Cana. (John 2:11)

73. Which one of the Lord's personal friends did He raise from the dead?

Lazarus. (John 11)

74. Who was the greatest missionary of the New Testament?

Paul. (see book of Acts)

75. Who was Paul's first partner?

Barnabas. (Acts 13:2)

76. Whom did an angel release from prison?

Peter. (Acts 12)

77. Which event caused God to splinter human language into many tongues?

The building of the Tower of Babel. (Genesis 11)

78. Which chapter of an Old Testament prophet's book gives a detailed prophecy of the Messiah's death by crucifixion?

Isaiah 53.

79. Who wrestled all night with the Lord and was left with a permanent limp?

Jacob. (Genesis 32:22-32)

80. Which two pastors did Paul write letters to?

Timothy and Titus.

81. Who was hailed as a god when he was bitten by a snake but nothing bad happened?

Paul. (Acts 28:5-6)

82. Which two New Testament writers were brothers of the Lord Jesus?

James and Jude. (Matthew 13:55)

83. Which two New Testament books were written by a doctor?

Luke and Acts. (2 Timothy 4:11)

84. Who had a coat of many colors?

Joseph. (Genesis 37:3)

85. In what sin did Aaron lead the Israelites while his brother Moses was up on the mountain talking to God?

They made an idol in the form of a golden calf. (Exodus 32)

86. How many books are there in the entire Bible?

66: 39 in the Old Testament, and 27 in the New Testament.

87. What's the difference between John the Baptist and the John who wrote several New Testament books?

John the Baptist was a prophet who proclaimed the kingdom of God was near in preparation for his cousin Jesus' ministry. The John who wrote the gospel of John, the epistles—1, 2 and 3 John—and Revelation, was one of the twelve apostles and one of those closest to the Lord, along with Peter and James. He called himself "the disciple whom Jesus loved."

88. Who saw the Lord appear to him in a burning bush?

Moses. (Exodus 3)

89. How many sons did Jacob have?

Twelve. They were the ancestors of the twelve tribes of Israel. (Genesis 35:22)

90. Who gave up his birthright for a bowl of stew?

Esau. (Genesis 25:33)

91. Which Psalm starts out, "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want?"

Psalm 23.

92. Who disowned the Lord Jesus three times before a cock crowed?

Peter. (Matthew 26:69-75)

93. What did the Lord do just after the Last Supper to demonstrate His love and humility?

He washed the disciples' feet. (John 13:5)

94. Where is the New Testament "Hall of Faith?"

Hebrews 11.

95. Who appeared with the Lord Jesus in glory on the Mount of Transfiguration?

Elijah and Moses. (Mark 9:4)

96. Who is the second Adam?

The Lord Jesus Christ. (1 Corinthians 15:45-49)

97. Which Old Testament prophet married a prostitute because God told him to?

Hosea. (Hosea 1:2)

98. What are the two sacred ordinances that the Lord commanded

us to observe?

Baptism (Matthew 28:19,20) and Communion, or the Lord's Table (1 Corinthians 11:23-26).

99. What are supernatural enablings that allow a believer to serve the Body of Christ with ease and effectiveness?

Spiritual gifts. (Romans 12:6-8, 1 Corinthians 12, Ephesians 4:8-13, 1 Peter 4:10-11)

100. Whose tomb was Christ buried in?

Joseph of Arimathea. (Matthew 27:57-60)

101. Who wrote the book of Hebrews?

Nobody knows.

102. Which is the "epistle of joy?"

Philippians.

103. What is the book of Revelation about?

The end of the world.

104. Who is the bride of Christ?

The church—that is, all who have trusted Him for salvation. (Ephesians 5:25-27, Revelation 19:7-8)

Note

1. bit.ly/fr8BuA

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covet your neighbor's wife—or anything that belongs to your neighbor. (Exodus 20:2-17) [Back](#)

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8. "Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I will be with you always, to the very end of the age." (Matthew 28:19,20) [Back](#)

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73. Lazarus. (John 11) [Back](#)
74. Paul. (see book of Acts) [Back](#)
75. Barnabas. (Acts 13:2) [Back](#)
76. Peter. (Acts 12) [Back](#)
77. The building of the Tower of Babel. (Genesis 11) [Back](#)
78. Isaiah 53. [Back](#)
79. Jacob. (Genesis 32:22-32) [Back](#)
80. Timothy and Titus. [Back](#)
81. Paul. (Acts 28:5-6) [Back](#)
82. James and Jude. (Matthew 13:55) [Back](#)
83. Luke and Acts. (2 Timothy 4:11) [Back](#)
84. Joseph. (Genesis 37:3) [Back](#)
85. They made an idol in the form of a golden calf. (Exodus 32) [Back](#)
86. 66: 39 in the Old Testament, and 27 in the New Testament. [Back](#)
87. John the Baptist was a prophet who proclaimed the kingdom of God was near in preparation for his cousin Jesus' ministry. The John who wrote the gospel of John, the epistles—1, 2 and 3 John—and Revelation, was one of the twelve apostles and one of

those closest to the Lord, along with Peter and James. He called himself “the disciple whom Jesus loved.” [Back](#)

88. Moses. (Exodus 3) [Back](#)

89. Twelve. They were the ancestors of the twelve tribes of Israel. (Genesis 35:22) [Back](#)

90. Esau. (Genesis 25:33) [Back](#)

91. Psalm 23. [Back](#)

92. Peter. (Matthew 26:69-75) [Back](#)

93. He washed the disciples’ feet. (John 13:5) [Back](#)

94. Hebrews 11. [Back](#)

95. Elijah and Moses. (Mark 9:4) [Back](#)

96. The Lord Jesus Christ. (1 Corinthians 15:45-49) [Back](#)

97 Hosea. (Hosea 1:2) [Back](#)

98. Baptism (Matthew 28:19,20) and Communion, or the Lord’s Table (1 Corinthians 11:23-26). [Back](#)

99. Spiritual gifts. (Romans 12:6-8, 1 Corinthians 12, Ephesians 4:8-13, 1 Peter 4:10-11) [Back](#)

100. Joseph of Arimathea. (Matthew 27:57-60) [Back](#)

101. Nobody knows. [Back](#)

109. Philippians. [Back](#)

103. The end of the world. [Back](#)

104. The church—that is, all who have trusted Him for salvation. (Ephesians 5:25-27, Revelation 19:7-8) [Back](#)

Tradition and Scripture

While many evangelical Christians treat tradition with suspicion if not hostility, Dr. Michael Gleghorn makes a case for the value of tradition in understanding and supporting our faith.

Understanding Tradition

In this article we'll be thinking about tradition and its relationship to Scripture. Now I realize that some of you may already be asking, "Tradition! Can anything good come from there?" The answer of course is "yes"—for if it were not, then I wouldn't bother writing about it. Indeed, it's actually an important topic to address, for in our day many evangelicals seem to harbor an attitude of suspicion—if not outright hostility—toward the very notion of tradition.[\[1\]](#) In support of this attitude, some might point to what Jesus said to the religious leaders of his day: "You have a fine way of setting aside the commands of God in order to observe your own traditions" (Mark 7:9 NIV). And if this is what Jesus said, then aren't we better off to simply dismiss tradition and focus solely on the teaching of Scripture?



Before we jump to that conclusion, we must first determine what we mean when we use the word "tradition." After all, in other passages Scripture speaks very favorably of tradition. Paul told the Corinthians, "Now I praise you

because you . . . hold firmly to the traditions, just as I delivered them to you" (1 Cor. 11:2 NASB). Traditions, it seems, can sometimes be good—and sometimes bad. And this is true even of the *Christian* tradition. But in order to talk intelligently about our subject, we must first understand precisely what we're talking about. What, then, is the meaning of "tradition"?

When theologians speak about the Christian tradition, they are typically referring to the ways in which the faith has been understood by previous generations of Christians. For example, what understanding did our Christian forbears have of worship and theology, and how did they express their understanding through creeds, confessions, sermons, and books? Stanley Grenz and John Franke describe the Christian tradition "as the history of the interpretation and application of canonical scripture by the Christian community, the church, as it listens to the voice of the Spirit speaking through the text."[{2}](#) And Richard Lints describes it as "the faith transmitted by the community of interpreters that has preceded us."[{3}](#)

Defined in this way, we must candidly admit that the Christian faith has been understood somewhat differently from one time and place to another. How are we to think about such differences? Should they always be viewed negatively, as a corruption of the original faith deposit? Or might they sometimes be seen as a positive and healthy development of this deposit?

Tradition: A Metaphor

In a fascinating discussion of these issues, Colin Gunton asks us to think of tradition as an organism.[{4}](#) He notes that just as a child or plant may grow larger and stronger over time, so too the content of Christian doctrine can become more elaborate and enriched with the passage of time. He then

observes, “If revelation is something given in the beginning—as undoubtedly one dimension of it is, the faith once for all delivered to the saints—then it may be argued that through tradition what began as a seed or a seedling is enabled to expand without falsifying its beginnings.”^{5} This comment helps us see the interconnectedness of tradition and revelation—an issue which we will return to later.

For now, it’s important to notice what this metaphor does for us. It enables us to see tradition, like the growth of a child or a plant, as something *natural* and *healthy*—indeed, something to be *hoped for*, *encouraged*, and *expected*. This is an important reminder for those of us who might be tempted to view tradition solely in negative terms.

At the same time, however, Gunton is aware that things can always go wrong. He writes, “The organism might become diseased, and require surgery; or it might simply grow too many branches, or branches in the wrong places, and require pruning.”^{6} In this case, instead of the tradition developing in a natural and healthy way from the original revelation, it develops in an unnatural and unhealthy way. We might identify this latter situation with the unpleasant possibility of heresy—something which needs to be corrected or even surgically removed so that the organism doesn’t die or mutate into a completely different, unrelated life-form. If that were to happen, then while we might still have tradition of a sort, it could no longer be properly thought of as *Christian* tradition.^{7} It will be helpful for us to keep this metaphor in mind as we continue to reflect on the role of tradition and its relationship to Scripture, particularly because we must now deal with a problem that this discussion inevitably raises.

Scripture and Tradition: A Problem

Stanley Grenz and John Franke view tradition as a “source or

resource” of the Christian church, which can aid in the church’s task of both theological construction and lived performance.[{8}](#) Some of the specific elements of the Christian tradition which they see as especially valuable in informing how we accomplish these tasks are the histories of worship, liturgy, and theology, as well as the “classic” theological formulations of the church, such as creeds and confessions. Of course, they are careful to point out that while these resources are extremely valuable, they “must always and continually be tested by the norm of canonical scripture.”[{9}](#)

In a similar way, Richard Lints describes the “goal of theology” as bringing “the biblical revelation into a position of judgment on all of life,” including tradition.[{10}](#) But this raises a bit of a problem, for in order to bring tradition under the authority of Scripture, Scripture must first be interpreted. And many scholars maintain that the Christian tradition primarily consists of the scriptural interpretation and application of faith communities from the past. Indeed, this is basically how Lints himself defines the term. “In the discussion that follows,” he says, “*tradition* will signify the faith transmitted by the community of interpreters that has preceded us.”[{11}](#)

Moreover, Lints rightly believes that we neglect this tradition at our peril. For in banishing past interpretations of Scripture from our present consideration in doing theology, we can easily become ensnared “in a web of subjectivism” regarding our own interpretation of the Bible.[{12}](#) And this would be an incalculable loss to the church in her ongoing task of preaching and teaching the Bible. The fact of the matter is that these past interpretations are a necessary aid, both in revealing our own biases and blind spots, and in helping us avoid “what C. S. Lewis aptly called ‘chronological snobbery’—the conceit that we are necessarily wiser than our forbears.”[{13}](#)

But this leads to the following problem: If Scripture is to be

brought into a position of judgment over all of life (including the Christian tradition), it must first be properly interpreted. But it would be irresponsible to engage in this interpretative task without the aid of the very tradition of past interpretation over which Scripture is to sit in judgment. How can this difficulty be resolved? Does Scripture occupy a place of authority over tradition, or does tradition rather occupy a place of authority over Scripture?

Scripture and Tradition: A Solution

Before we attempt to respond to this question, we should first take time to remember just how it was that Scripture came into being in the first place. As Grenz and Franke remind us,

[T]he community precedes the production of the scriptural texts and is responsible for their content and for the identification of particular texts for inclusion in an authoritative canon to which it has chosen to make itself accountable. Apart from the Christian community, the texts would not have taken their particular and distinctive shape. Apart from the authority of the Christian community, there would be no canon of authorized texts. In short, apart from the Christian community the Christian Bible would not exist.[\[14\]](#)

It might now be interesting to ask what the Christian community and the Christian Bible have in common. According to Grenz and Franke, it is the work of the Holy Spirit—a work that grants to each one its respective authority. They write,

In this conception, the authority of both scripture and tradition is ultimately an authority derived from the work of the Spirit. Each is part of an organic unity, so that even though scripture and tradition are distinguishable, they are fundamentally inseparable. . . . The authority of each—tradition as well as scripture—is contingent on the

work of the Spirit, and both scripture and tradition are fundamental components within an interrelated web of beliefs that constitutes the Christian faith. To misconstrue the shape of this relationship by setting scripture over against tradition or by elevating tradition above scripture is to fail to comprehend properly the work of the Spirit.[{15}](#)

Does this mean, then, that there is no sense in which all of life (including tradition) should be brought under the judgment of Scripture? This does not seem to be what Grenz and Franke are saying. Although they do contend that the triune God “is disclosed in polyphonic fashion through scripture, the church, and even the world,” they then qualify this by noting, “albeit always normatively through scripture.”[{16}](#) In their view, Scripture is still theology’s “norming norm,” but since Scripture must always be interpreted, it cannot be easily separated from tradition. Scripture still holds the place of prominence in doing theology, but in a carefully nuanced and qualified way that gives appropriate weight to God’s other mediums of revelation, such as tradition, creation, and the church.

Tradition in Scripture and Theology

In one of his 1993 Warfield Lectures, the late Colin Gunton observed that two of the narrative sections in Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians contain possibly the most easily recognizable accounts of “the working of tradition in the New Testament.”[{17}](#) In both 1 Corinthians 11, where Paul discusses the Lord’s Supper, and 1 Corinthians 15, where he refers to Jesus’ death and resurrection as the heart of the gospel, Paul specifically declares that he is delivering to the Corinthians certain traditions about Jesus which he himself had previously received. In other words, the biblical writings themselves are seen to be “part of a tradition of interpretation of that which is in certain respects prior to them.”[{18}](#)

The unique revelation of God in the person of Jesus Christ is *prior* to the traditions about Him which Paul had received. And the traditions which Paul had received, including the meaning given them by the early church and Paul himself, are also *prior* to his deliverance of them to the Corinthians (as well as those of us who have subsequently read this letter). Tradition, it seems, cannot always be so easily separated from the Bible itself.

Of course, very few Christians would disagree that traditions like those passed on by the Apostle Paul to the Corinthians are “authoritative for the faith and life of the church.”[{19}](#) The problem rather arises with how the original revelation “is interpreted and handed on by those who follow the . . . apostles: the way in which revelation is mediated by tradition.”[{20}](#) How should we understand this relationship?

For one thing, we should probably grant a certain degree of freedom, in response to the Spirit’s guidance, to the way in which the tradition is articulated in different cultural and historical contexts. This allows the tradition to grow in a healthy way which, at the same time, is still amenable to correction when necessary. Granted, we are speaking of the development of tradition in something like an ideal setting, and the world in which we now live is certainly not ideal. But if tradition is one of the means which God has chosen for mediating revelation from one generation to another, then for better or worse, it will (and should) continue to play an important role in the life of the church. As Gunton wisely concludes, “although we may and must be critical of tradition, as the action of fallible and sinful human beings, we may not lay aside the means which God has himself chosen.”[{21}](#)

Notes

1. Stanley J. Grenz and John R. Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism: Shaping Theology in a Postmodern Context* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 109.

2. Ibid., 118.
3. Richard Lints, *The Fabric of Theology: A Prolegomenon to Evangelical Theology* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1993), 84.
4. Colin E. Gunton, *A Brief Theology of Revelation* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1995), 85-87.
5. Ibid., 85.
6. Ibid., 86.
7. Ibid., 87.
8. Grenz and Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism*, 120-29.
9. Ibid., 124.
10. Lints, *The Fabric of Theology*, 82.
11. Ibid., 84.
12. Ibid., 93.
13. Ibid., 96.
14. Grenz and Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism*, 115.
15. Ibid., 117.
16. Ibid., 117-18.
17. Gunton, *A Brief Theology of Revelation*, 93.
18. Ibid., 95.
19. Ibid.
20. Ibid.
21. Ibid., 102-03.

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Paul and the Mystery Religions – Christianity Defended

Was early Christian teaching influenced by the mystery

religions of the day? Don Closson presents a solid look at this question; concluding that Christian doctrine as taught by Paul and others was grounded in truth and was not influenced by these other religious concepts.

Introduction

A common criticism of Christianity found on college campuses today is that its core ideas or teachings were dependent upon Greek philosophy and religious ideas. It is not unusual for a student to hear from a professor that Christianity is nothing more than a strange combination of the Hebrew cult of Yahweh, notions adopted from the popular Greek mystery religions of the day, and a sprinkling of ideas from Greek philosophic thought. This criticism of traditional Christianity is not new. In fact, its heyday was in the late 1800s to the 1940s and coincides with what is now called the History of Religions movement. This group of theologians and historians accused Paul of adding Greek ideas to his Hebrew upbringing, and in the process, creating a new religion: one that neither Jesus nor His first disciples would recognize.



Was the origin of Christianity dependent on existing Greek philosophical and religious ideas? That question hinges upon how one is using the word “dependent.” Philosopher Ron Nash argues that dependency can be weak or strong and that the difference is a vital one. A strong dependency would mean that the idea of Jesus as a dying and rising savior-god would never have occurred to early believers if they had not become aware of them first in pagan thought. It would be admitting that Paul and the other new Christians came to believe that Christ was a resurrected God-man who made an atoning sacrifice for the sins of the world because of pagan ideas. Proving a strong dependency of Christianity on Greek thought would be very damaging to those who hold a high view of Scripture.

A weak dependency means that the followers of Jesus used

common religious terminology of the day in order to be understood by the Hebrew and Greek culture surrounding them. This poses no problem for a high view of Scripture. As Nash states, " . . . the mere presence of parallels in thought and language does not prove any dependence in the strong sense."^[1] Nash and others argue that only a weak dependency can be shown to have existed between Greek religious thought and the Gospel of Christ.

In this article we will consider arguments against the strong dependency claims of the History of Religions movement and modern critics. Specifically, we will compare the theology of the apostle Paul with ideas found in the popular Greek mystery religions present during the early church period.

Although these ideas rarely surface in everyday discussions, Christians entering the academic world of our college campuses would benefit from time spent understanding this issue. In the hands of a professor hostile to Christianity, partial truths and exaggerated similarities between Christianity and the mystery religions can overwhelm an unaware teen. Being conscious of these arguments against Christian thought prepares us to give an answer to everyone who questions the hope that we have in Christ.

Arguments Against a Strong Dependency on Mystery Religions Viewpoint

Previously we noted that the History of Religions movement claimed that Christian thought had a direct and strong dependency on the mystery religions. Although some scholars agreed with this view, many did not. A good example is the famous German historian Adolf von Harnack, who wrote:

We must reject the comparative mythology which finds a causal connection between everything and everything else. . . . By such methods one can turn Christ into a sun god in the

twinkling of an eye, or one can bring up the legends attending the birth of every conceivable god, or one can catch all sorts of mythological doves to keep company with the baptismal dove . . . the wand of 'comparative religion' triumphantly eliminate(s) every spontaneous trait in any religion.[\[2\]](#)

What were the basic traits of the mystery religions? The annual vegetation cycle was often at the center of these cults. Deep significance was given to the concepts of growth, death, decay and rebirth. The cult of Eleusis and its central deity, Demeter, goddess of the soil and farming, is one example. The mystery religions also had secret ceremonies and rites of initiation that separated its members from the outside world. Every mystery religion claimed to impart secret knowledge of the deity. This knowledge would be communicated in clandestine ceremonies often connected to an initiation rite. The focus of this knowledge was not on a set of revealed truths to be shared with the world, but on hidden higher knowledge to be kept within the circle of believers.

At the core of each religion was a myth in which the deity returned to life after death, or else triumphed over his enemies. As one scholar explains, the myth "appealed primarily to the emotions and aimed at producing psychic and mystic effects by which the neophyte might experience the exaltation of a new life."[\[3\]](#) On the other hand, the mysteries were not concerned as much with correct doctrine or belief, but with the emotional state of the followers. The goal of the believers was a mystical experience that led them to believe that they had achieved union with their god.

The various religious movements found throughout the Roman Empire were not united in doctrine or practice, and they changed dramatically over time. Any impact that they may have had on Christianity must be evaluated by the time frame in which the religions encountered one another. When comparing

religious systems, Philosopher Ronald Nash warns that caution is advised against using careless language. He states, "One frequently encounters scholars who first use Christian terminology to describe pagan beliefs and practices and then marvel at the awesome parallels they think they have discovered." {4}

What if someone told you that the root of Paul's New Testament theology was in obscure Greek mystery religions, rather than his Jewish training and his encounter with Jesus Christ? That's exactly what the History of Religions movement argued at the end of the 19th century. Many scholars still teach that Paul's portrayal of Jesus as a dying and rising savior would never have occurred without the presence of the mystery religions. Next, we will continue to consider arguments against what might be called "the strong dependency view."

Weaknesses in the Strong Dependency View

The first argument against this view is the logical fallacy of *false cause*. This fallacy occurs when someone argues that just because two things exist side by side, that one must be the cause of the other. As one theologian has written, the History of Religions School had the tendency "to convert parallels into influences and influences into sources." {5} Causal connection is much harder to prove than proximity. The mere fact that other religions may have had a god who died and then came back to life in some manner does not mean that this was the source of Christian ideas, even if it can be shown that the apostles knew of this other set of beliefs.

Some scholars, hostile to Christianity, tend to exaggerate, or invent, similarities between Christianity and the mystery religions. British scholar Edwyn Bevan writes:

Of course if one writes an imaginary description of the Orphic mysteries . . . filling in the large gaps in the

picture left by our data from the Christian Eucharist, one produces something very impressive. On this plan, you first put in the Christian elements, and then are staggered to find them there.[{6}](#)

An example might be the practice of the taurobolium in the cult of Cybele or Great Mother. This initiation rite, in which the blood of a sacrificed bull is allowed to pour over a neophyte, is claimed by some to be the source of baptism in Christianity. Arguments have been made that the language “blood of the lamb” (Rev. 7:14), and “blood of Jesus” (1 Peter 1:2) was borrowed from the language of the taurobolium and criobolium in which a ram was slaughtered. In fact, a better argument can be made that the cult borrowed its language from the Christian tradition.

The cult of Cybele did not use the taurobolium until the second century A.D.; the best available evidence for dating the practice places its origin about one hundred years after Paul wrote his epistles.[{7}](#) German scholar Gunter Wagner points out that there was no notion of death and resurrection in the cultic practice.

After noting the change in meaning that the taurobolium experienced over time, scholar Robert Duthoy writes:

It is obvious that this alteration in the taurobolium must have been due to Christianity, when we consider that by A.D. 300 it had become the great competitor of the heathen religions and was known to everyone.[{8}](#)

More Weaknesses in the Strong Dependency View

A simple but powerful argument against the likelihood that Paul would have turned to pagan thought for his theology was

his strict Jewish training. In Philippians 3:5 Paul boasts of being a Hebrew of Hebrews. He had studied under Gamaliel, the most celebrated teacher of the most orthodox of the Jewish parties, the Pharisees. And in Colossians he warns against the very syncretism he is being accused of proposing. According to Bruce Metzger:

[W]ith regard to Paul himself, scholars are coming once again to acknowledge that the Apostle's prevailing set of mind was rabbinically oriented, and that his newly found Christian faith ran in molds previously formed at the feet of Gamaliel. {9}

We find no accusations in the New Testament of Paul incorporating pagan thought into his theology, nor does he defend himself against such claims.

The very nature of the mystery cults, with the conflicting pantheon of deities and mythical beings, makes it highly unlikely that the strict monotheism and the body of doctrines found in the New Testament would be their source. Although the mystery religions did move towards advancing a solar god above all the others, this change began after 100 A.D., too late to impact the theology of the New Testament.

It should also be noted that early Christianity was an exclusivistic religion while the mystery cults were not. One could be initiated into the cult of Isis or Mithras without giving up his or her former beliefs. However, to be baptized into the church one had to forsake all other gods and saviors. This was a new development in the ancient world. Machen writes, "Amid the prevailing syncretism of the Greco-Roman world, the religion of Paul, with the religion of Israel, stands absolutely alone." {10}

Paul's religion was grounded in real events. The mystery religions were not. They were based upon dramas written to capture men's hearts and passions. Reformed scholar Herman

Ridderbos writes:

Whereas Paul speaks of the death and resurrection of Christ and places it in the middle of history, as an event which took place before many witnesses . . . the myths of the cults in contrast cannot be dated; they appear in all sorts of variations, and do not give any clear conceptions. In short they display the timeless vagueness characteristic of real myths. Thus the myths of the cults . . . are nothing but depictions of annual events of nature in which nothing is to be found of the moral voluntary, redemptive substitutionary meaning, which for Paul is the content of Christ's death and resurrection.[{11}](#)

Next we will conclude with further arguments against Paul's use of the mystery religions.

Conclusion

Muslim author Yousuf Saleem Chishti writes that the doctrines of the deity of Christ and the atonement are pagan teachings that come from the apostle Paul, not from Christ Himself.[{12}](#) He states that, "The Christian doctrine of atonement was greatly coloured by the influence of the mystery religions, especially Mithraism, which had its own son of God and virgin Mother, and crucifixion and resurrection after expiating for the sins of mankind and finally his ascension to the seventh heaven."[{13}](#) Were these doctrines something Paul made up or borrowed? What did Jesus teach regarding the atonement?

First, both Jesus and Paul taught that Christianity was the fulfillment of Judaism. In Matthew 5:17 Jesus said that He came to fulfill the law and the teaching of the Prophets, not to abolish them. In Colossians (2:16-17), Paul writes that the religious codes of the Old Testament were merely a foreshadowing of the things that were to come, and that the new reality is found in Christ. Both Christ and Paul taught

the necessity of the blood atonement for sin. Jesus stated that, "For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45). At the Last Supper He added, "This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins" (Matthew 26:28). Paul affirmed Christ's teachings when he wrote, "In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace" (Ephesians 1:7). Tying the doctrine back to the Old Testament, Paul wrote, "Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed" (1 Corinthians 5:7).

The idea that Jesus was the Son of God, born of a virgin, dying on the cross, and being resurrected are hardly Paul's ideas alone. They are found in the earliest Christian writings and held consistently wherever the faith spread. The parallels between Christianity and Mithraism claimed by Chishti are hard to evaluate or confirm. He gives us no references as evidence for the similarities.[\[14\]](#) Other scholars who have looked at the issue find that most of the similarities disappear on close inspection. Where they do occur, it can be argued that Mithraism borrowed ideas from Christianity rather than vice versa. Bruce Metzger writes, "It must not be uncritically assumed that the Mysteries always influenced Christianity, for it is not only possible but probable that in certain cases, the influence moved in the opposite direction."[\[15\]](#)

Those who find Christianity hard to accept have offered many reasons for not doing so. The claim that the doctrines of Christianity had a strong dependency on the mystery religions stands on shaky ground and should be investigated thoroughly before one rejects the good news of the New Testament writers.

Notes

1. Ronald Nash, *The Gospel And The Greeks*, (Probe Books: Dallas, TX, 1992), 18.

2. Ibid, 118.
3. Ibid, 124.
4. Ibid, 126.
5. Ibid, 193.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid, 154.
8. Ibid, 155.
9. Ibid, 196.
10. Ibid, 197.
11. Ibid. 198.
12. Normal Geisler, *Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics*, (Baker Books, 1999), 490.
13. Ibid.
14. Ibid. 492.
15. Nash, 198.

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Prometheus, God and Film: 10 Science Fiction Movies with a

Theological Theme

Dr. Terlizzese looks to see if we can find a Christian worldview perspective or, at least, questions which need theological answers in a number of popular science fiction movies. He finds some good themes and bad themes and offers advice on how to view movies of all types.

Sci-fi films have never been more popular than they are today. Witness this summer's offerings: *Prometheus* (see below), *Chronicle*, *The Hunger Games* even the comic book-inspired *Avengers* and the romantic comedy *Seeking a Friend for the End of the World* feature elements of science fiction. And like most arts and literature, they contain elements of theology. This genre borrows a basic aspect of the Christian worldview concerning the value and meaning of individuals in a world of technological conformity.

Sci-fi combines a somewhat biblical understanding of mankind with an almost religious belief in technological progress. This fuels the popular fear that technology will rob people of their souls or individuality. The modern technological worldview is rooted in *materialism*: it affirms that people are basically machines who can be objectified, categorized and manipulated as any other object in nature. One film scholar notes this connection:

Scientism opened the doors for a mechanical view of mankind. . . . We are no longer special, no longer sacred – neither the form (body) nor the mind. “Let us conclude boldly then that man is a machine, and that there is only one substance, differently modified, in the whole world. What will all the weak reeds of divinity, metaphysic, and nonsense of the schools avail against this firm and solid oak?”[Le Mettrie]. [Sci-fi] arises out of the tension between this kind of “rude” scientism and the Christian cosmology. Scientism “robs” humans of their very humanity and makes them out to be

biological machines, much like the alien children in Village of the Damned. [{1}](#)

Reaching a Popular Audience

The sci-fi genre asks, What is human nature?[{2}](#) In light of technological advance, how we define humanity becomes more crucial as technology changes not just the natural world, but humanity itself. It has become imperative not only for philosophers, but for everyone to ask, how is technological advance transforming human nature? The failure to perceive change caused by new technology creates a serious problem for an age so enormously influenced by it. Sci-fi movies serve as a philosophical treatise for average people who are not professionally trained, raising questions and issues that would otherwise be lost on the common person because of their intolerable abstraction.

The movies speak the common language of our times. When teachers want to make an idea concrete or illustrate a point, they grope for an example from a popular movie. Most people love movies and to be able to relate abstract concepts through such a relevant medium will certainly create a profound effect.

We normally think of sci-fi as promoting innovative technology that holds out optimistic promise for the future of mankind. This is generally true of print media produced by popular writers like Jules Verne, H. G. Wells or Isaac Asimov. However sci-fi film has taken another tack by appealing to commonly held suspicions of technological progress. An optimistic view of progress views new technology as a liberating force destined to lift the burdens of work, cure disease, improve communication and free humanity from natural limits. A pessimistic view takes the opposite direction; instead of liberation it fears that new technology will create a new form of enslavement and dehumanization that will rob people of

their individuality or their very souls.

Given the popularity of movies and the latent theological premise of many sci-fi films, the following list presents an incomplete, but important sample of theology in sci-fi movies. It is intended to help Christians read the movies from more than a literalist perspective by paying attention to the metaphors and symbols that constitute their meaning. These movies may contain objectionable material, but more importantly, resonate with redemptive themes worth analyzing.

Movies are cultural day dreams, serving as modern folklore and morality tales. They signify a shared message of hope or fear not always transparent without analysis. So let's get started!

Prometheus, 2012

Humanoid aliens seed earth with their DNA that creates humanity. They leave clues behind on how to find them in a distant galaxy. When earthlings discover their origins they uncover a plan for human extinction, revealing that the gods are hostile towards their own children. The movie raises classic theological and philosophical questions such as, Where did we come from? Why are we here? And, where are we going? Though never distinguishing between wishful thinking or religious truth claims, it presents faith as a choice for meaning, even in the face of the most hostile conditions. The cross remains a prominent and enduring symbol of hope and human redemption. Humans are worth saving and are not genetic mistakes that deserve extinction.

The Terminator, 1984

Robots represent both hope and fear of technological aspirations. They symbolize the incredible potential of technological capability and human replacement. Robots are mechanical people that embody the fears of extreme rationalization. Cartesian philosophy identified reason as the definition of human nature, which takes its final form in the

computer. Robots are nothing more than embodied computers. Sometimes the movies picture them as our slaves and protectors. Robots enable people to live work-free lives as with Robby the Robot from *Forbidden Planet* (1956) who undoubtedly depicts the most iconic and loveable of all movie robots. However, most robots represent something evil and ominous as in *The Terminator*.

The premise states that computer intelligence Sky Net became self-aware and immediately perceived humanity as a threat and initiated a nuclear strike. Some people survived to fight back and achieved ultimate victory led by the messianic figure John Conner sent to rescue humanity from techno-enslavement and termination. Human victory over the machines necessitated that Sky Net send a robot agent back in time to eliminate the mother of the rebel leader. Commentators read the plot as loosely based on the story of the Birth of Christ. *The Terminator* encapsulates the abiding fear that mankind will one day destroy itself through the use of its own technology. That which was meant to enhance human life will one day annihilate it. The need for salvation remains paramount as the last installment *Terminator Salvation* (2009) indicates.

The Matrix, 1999

In the not too distant future Artificial Intelligence (AI) becomes self-aware and identifies humanity as a threat and initiates a war, a common theme in science fiction. Humanity burns the atmosphere to create perpetual darkness in order to block the sun and deny the machines a power source. The machines respond by turning people into batteries and growing them in a huge incubator, kept alive in a vegetative state through feeding them the blood of the previous generation and by sending false impressions to the brain that simulate a normal existence. Billions of people are given fabricated lives in a huge computer-simulated world called the Matrix. Zion, the only surviving human city, awaits deep underground for their savior Neo, rescued from the Matrix and believed to

possess the power to fight the machines within the Matrix and free mankind.

In addition to the obvious messianic overtones the series presents a complicated patchwork of different religious ideas from Christianity and Buddhism to Greek mythology as a counterpoint to the Cartesian philosophy that reason alone ultimately defines human nature. The computer best embodies the logical conclusion of rational thought and the loss of human freedom that results from the universal acceptance of rationalism. *The Matrix* demonstrates an acute historical irony in rejecting rationalism and looking to premodern religious ideas to define human nature and provide meaning to life, even though these ideas are considered anachronistic in a secular and technological age.

The Book of Eli, 2010

The Book of Eli presents an explicitly Christian message of obedience to the voice of God in describing the spiritual journey and act of faith by the blind nomad Eli. Set in a post-apocalyptic world of the near future, a drifter finds his purpose in life through committing to memory the *King James Bible*, then spending thirty years traveling across the wasteland to an unknown destination. Along the way Eli encounters a ruthless mayor seeking the power of the book for his own political ends. In addition to the spiritual journey the movie depicts the dark side of faith when used to control and manipulate others.

The Invasion, 2007

The Invasion is an excellent remake of the original science fiction masterpiece *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956, 1979) in which spores from outer space take over human bodies by emptying them of free will and any unique qualities as individuals, making everyone soulless and identical. The message is clear: that a world without free will may be more peaceful and happy, but would be horribly inhuman. What price

are we willing to pay for peace, security and harmony? If these qualities are not derived from love then we do not have a world worth living in. In the absence of freedom, a nightmarish world of automatons pretending to be humans assumes control. They are bodies without souls. In the chilling words of the original movie, "Love, desire, ambition, faith—without them life's so simple." {3} This may be life in unison, but it is more like the life of a grove of trees all getting along rather nicely. This movie franchise argues for the idea that love and choice are essential aspects of our humanity without which life loses its purpose.

Planet of the Apes, 1968

This 1960's protest film decries the potential genocide of nuclear war. Astronauts find themselves stranded on a strange planet where apes rule humans. The movie has several themes including the debate between evolution and creation, science and religion, church and state relations as well as racism and offers an accurate commentary on humanity as a creature that wages war on all those around it including himself. It is rare to find any movie that weaves so many themes into its message, while not revealing its main point until its climactic surprise ending.

The Day the Earth Stood Still, 1951

We do not need to see films based on the Gospels in order to find Christ at the movies. The presence of a Christ-like figure is usually signified when a heroic character with extraordinary powers dies and comes back to life, such as in the case of Klatuu, the representative of a galactic alliance who visits earth during the Cold War and warns that we must turn our efforts to peace or face annihilation because earth poses a threat to the rest of the galaxy. Humanity's technical abilities now exceed its self-control, which will end in disaster if it does not turn to peaceful ends.

Star Wars, 1977

Science fiction generally focuses on the power of reason and technology. *Star Wars* follows a different tack, making faith and religion central. The movie sets the action in the familiar device of good vs. evil, but adds the dimension of faith being more powerful than technical ability in the promotion of both good and evil. The *Star Wars* franchise contrasts with that other perennially popular space melodrama *Star Trek*, which often belittles notions of God, faith and religion. Based on the secular humanism of its creator Gene Roddenberry, technology or human potential trumps faith and religion. In contrast, *Star Wars* derives from the ecumenical ideas of George Lucas, where faith represented by “the force”—for better or worse—is more powerful than raw technological ability.

Close Encounters of the Third Kind, 1977

Everyman Roy Neary experiences a close encounter with a UFO that sends him on a journey to discover its meaning. In the process he acts erratically, causing his wife Ronnie to leave him with their three children. The further he delves into the mystery, the more he discovers the truth behind his encounter: that extraterrestrials have visited earth and are seeking him out along with a select group of others. The movie vaguely resembles John Bunyan’s famous allegory of the Christian life, *Pilgrim’s Progress*. Aliens often represent transcendence in the movies, either as angelic messengers or demonic powers. *Close Encounters* may be interpreted as a spiritual journey that seeks out a higher purpose in life beyond mundane existence.

2001: A Space Odyssey, 1968

2001 lives up to its reputation as the greatest science fiction movie ever made. The movie begins with a tribe of hominids on the brink of starvation. An extraterrestrial force endows them with the gift of technology in the form of animal

bones used to hunt for food and murder their opponents. The action then moves to outer space when the murder weapon is flung into the air and transforms into a space ship, suggesting continuity between the earliest technology and the most advanced.

Mankind finds itself on the brink of encountering extraterrestrial (ET) life near Jupiter. A small crew travels to the location of a beacon with the assistance of an onboard supercomputer, the HAL 9000, who (he is strangely human) becomes threatened by the crew who want to turn off his higher cognitive ability. HAL murders the crew except for one member who escapes and finishes the mission. After his encounter with the ET, Commander Bowman converts into an angelic figure, or star child who returns to earth. Director Stanley Kubrick comments on the meaning of this scene when he says of Bowman, "He is reborn, an enhanced being, a star child, an angel, a superman, if you like, and returns to earth prepared for the next leap forward in man's evolutionary destiny."[\[4\]](#)

The star child is the first of a new race representing a spiritual rather than technological change. "Kubrick's vision reveals technology as a competitive force that must be defeated in order for humans to evolve."[\[5\]](#) The message of *2001* is that, though technology assists humanity in survival, it also threatens human existence.

A Final Word

Humanity now needs a spiritual transformation, not more technology, in order to survive. Although we find this theological message in an unusual source, it still represents an important warning we have yet to heed.

Notes

1. Per Schelde, *Androids, Humanoids and Other Science Fiction Monsters* (New York: New York University Press, 1993),125.

2. Deborah Knight and George McKnight, "What is it to be human? *Blade Runner* and *Dark City*" in *The Philosophy of Science Fiction Film*, ed., Steven M. Sanders (Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 2008), 26.

3. M. Keith Booker, *Alternative Americas: Science Fiction Film and American Culture* (Westport CT: Praeger, 2006), 63.

4. Stanley Kubrick quoted in Thomas A. Nelson, *Kubrick: Inside a Film Artist's Maze* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2000), 133.

5. Daniel Dinello, *Technophobia! Science Fiction Visions of Posthuman Technology* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2005), 99.

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When the Church Is More Cultural than Christian

July 7, 2011

So, I'm reading this excellent biography of Bonhoeffer right now, and I've been mulling this question. Well, I guess it's twofold, really.

Background: You probably know this already, but just in case. In Nazi Germany the German church pretty much abandoned any form of orthodox Christianity in order to fit in with the culture. Bonhoeffer, Niemoller and others formed the Confessing Church as a stand for true Christianity in the face of the cultural abdication of the wider church. Most were either imprisoned or killed for their efforts.

1 – Do you think that the American church is undergoing a similar shift to fit in with cultural norms on a broad scale that could threaten orthodox Christianity (clearly, hopefully, not to the extent of the Reich church, but still, I see some possible parallels)? What do you think are the areas in which the American church is most at risk? Why?

2 – Do you think we have leadership that is taking a stand for orthodoxy in a counter-cultural and true way on the national scene? If so, who?

Yes. The American church acquiesces to the culture in various ways which are detrimental to the Gospel. It's tricky because it is vital to the Gospel that the Gospel (whose hands and feet are the church) be relevant. Churches which are highly separatist and never adapt to or accommodate culture do violence to the Gospel as well, so it's tricky. And we'll none of us ever get it 100% right. Ever. I keep trying to tell God humility is overrated; he never listens.

I think there are two veins in which American churches are perhaps more American than Christian. One is liberal; one is conservative. (Brilliant, I know.) The tendency is to point the finger at the other and overreact for fear of falling into the other's traps. We're so focused on not falling into *this* trap, that we don't even notice that what we think is a bunker is merely another trap of another sort.

Now to your actual question: What are these traps?

Liberal:

Of course there are the far left examples like: Employing poor hermeneutics which 1) Undercut Scripture as a text which is not historical or literal at all, and 2) justify sin, usually sexual sin such as premarital sex and homosexual sex and the sexually-related sin of abortion. And then there is the slightly more subtle trap of feeling the need to bend over backwards to kiss the keister of Science. Finally, there is the acquiescence of the (pseudo)tolerance mantra of

hypermodernism: partly out of fear of being legalistic, partly because it is more comfortable, we succumb to Relativism.

Conservative:

Employing poor hermeneutics which truncate Scripture as a text which is entirely literal (it seems to me that this is a very Western thing to do, but I could be wrong; it could simply be a human thing to do... we feel more comfortable in black and white). Such a lack of hermeneutic leads to overly hard-nosed positions about creation and "the woman issue" among other things. It also leads to, instead of justifying sin, creating an extra hedge of rules so that we can be darn sure we avoid the undignified, socially unacceptable sins, perhaps especially, sexual sin.

And then of course there's the idea of a Christian America; or that politics can fix every(one else)thing.

Traps for all:

[Moralistic Therapeutic Deism](#) is probably a problem for both sides. So is materialism of course, privatism and spiritual professionalization—You'd better keep your hands off of my individual rights and my private life... and: spiritual things go in one compartment, which is private and has no business interfering in the public sphere: ie. faith and science and/or faith and business. Professionalization is also quite Western. I love this quote from GK Chesterton's *Heretics*:

But if we look at the progress of our scientific civilization we see a gradual increase everywhere of the specialist over the popular function. Once men sang together round a table in chorus; now one man sings alone, for the absurd reason that he can sing better. If scientific civilization goes on (which is most improbable) only one man will laugh, because he can laugh better than the rest.

Professionalization probably also includes running our churches too much like businesses.

Finally, Q number 2: Yes. What's tricky about this is that one must sometimes be under the radar to be counter-cultural, partly because when you're counter-cultural, no one wants to listen to you! Eugene Peterson, Tim Keller, NT Wright, Nancy Pearcey, Os Guinness (an outside perspective is always helpful) and the [Trinity Forum](#), Jamie Smith, especially in the area of how we do church and spiritual formation... I'm sure there are others, including my [colleagues](#) who are currently working on assessing and addressing this issue of cultural captivity: first creating an Ah-ha moment about our cultural captivity, and secondly, creating a way out of captivity and into freedom.

Good question!

This blog post originally appeared at reneamac.com/2011/07/07/when-the-church-is-more-cultural-than-christian/

“If the Trinity Doctrine is Correct, Then Why Isn't It in the Bible?”

Okay, smart guy. . .if the Trinity doctrine is correct, then why do Catholic encyclopedias themselves admit that it was never taught in the bible? Why does Jesus say that God is greater than he is? Why did Jesus pray to God if God is Jesus? If Jesus died on the stake, how could he bring himself back to life in three days?

Thank you for your recent inquiry. Let me see if I can shed

some light on the things you have questions about. You ask:

If the Trinity doctrine is correct, then why do Catholic encyclopedias themselves admit that it was never taught in the Bible?

You have misinterpreted what they said. What is *not in the Bible* is the use of the term "trinity." It, like many other terms, is a theological designation descriptive of what is *taught* in the Bible. And this concept of a tri-partite Being comes from many places in Scripture, from both Old and New Testaments.

Perhaps the most important is found in Matthew 28:18-20. From the very beginning, the early church baptized in the name of the "Father, the Son, and Holy Ghost" because it was one of the last things Jesus told his disciples to do: "And Jesus said, 'All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.'"

This practice of baptizing converts in the three names of the Godhead was faithfully followed by the Apostles as they spread out to proclaim the Gospel in the first century, and the practice was still in effect at the time of the first major church council at Nicea (A.D. 325). In fact, this was the major topic under consideration. It was here that what we know as the "Doctrine of the Trinity" was hammered out by these church leaders who searched the scriptures and shaped what they believed to be the truth about the Godhead.. I point this out simply to emphasize that the practice of the Church reflected a universal acceptance of the concept of the Trinity for almost 300 years before the Church got around (because of persecution under the various Roman Emperors) to clarifying and resolving this issue at Nicea.

I think it is also important, in light of your question, for

you to know something about this historic Council. Constantine, the first Christian Emperor, called this council, paid the expenses to bring 318 bishops (out of 1,800) from all over the Roman Empire to the little town of Nicea (which is near Constantinople), and served as both host and moderator during the deliberations, which lasted about six weeks.

Most of the bishops present were from the Eastern Mediterranean (Alexandria, Jerusalem, Antioch, Damascus, Ephesus) and they spoke Greek. In fact, only seven bishops represented the Western church, those who spoke Latin. Each major city throughout the Roman Empire had a bishop, and the bishops from the prominent cities I just named, by sheer representation, dominated the Council. So if anyone was responsible for coming up with the Trinity it was the Eastern church, not the "Catholic" church.

The elderly Bishop of Rome (who at that time was not considered a pope, but one bishop among equals), chose not to come himself due to illness. He did, however, send two of his associates.

All branches of orthodox Christianity—Eastern Orthodox, Protestant, and Roman Catholic, have universally accepted the conclusions of the Council of Nicea concerning the Trinity, namely, that the scriptures clearly teach God is One in Essence, but three in personality: unified, but also distinct. Incidentally, the term "catholic," for the first three or four centuries, was used to describe the *entire* church, the *universal* body of Christians sprinkled throughout the Greco-Roman world. At that time "Catholic" had nothing to do with the city of Rome. (_____, if you want more specific examples from scripture which teach a trinitarian God, let me know).

Why does Jesus say that God is greater than he is? Why did Jesus pray to God if God is Jesus?

Consider John 1:1-4: "In the Beginning was the Word, and the

Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through Him; and apart from Him nothing came into being that has come into being. In Him was life, and the life was the light of Men."

This passage also addresses part of your first question as well. Note that there are two terms used in verse one: "the Word," and "God." What does it say about the Word?

"The Word **was**" – the Word existed in the beginning (Eternity Past)

"The Word was **with** God" – (Greek, *pros*, "face-to-face with")

"The Word **was** God." – (Full Deity. . .or God Himself).

Whoever the Word was, the Word possessed (1) eternal existence like God, (2) had face-to-face fellowship with God, and (3) is designated AS God.

Who was the Word? John 1:14 tells us: "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth." That's Jesus. The second person of the Trinity came and dwelt among us. He became the God-Man. Jesus was just as much man as if He had never been God, and just as much God as if He had never been man. . .two natures distinct, but linked together in one Person.

As a true human, Jesus had feelings, grew to manhood (cf. Luke 2:52), could become weary, thirsty, depressed, and die a human death. When Jesus said, "I thirst" on the cross, He was speaking from His humanity. When He said things like, "Your sins are forgiven you," or "Rise, take up your bed and walk," He was speaking from His deity.

In Christ's humanity, while here on earth, the Father WAS greater, because now Christ was relating to God the Father, not only out of the equality He possessed with His Father in eternal existence, eternal fellowship, and full deity, but now also relating to Him as a man. This also answers your question

about why Jesus prayed to the Father. The answer is simple: Jesus was praying from His humanity. He was a man with normal human emotions. He felt the need to pray as all men do.

_____, your questions have focused entirely on the divine nature of Christ, but His humanity is equally important for us. Consider this passage from Philippians 2:6-11: “Who, although He existed in the form of God, He did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped (competed for), but He emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond servant, made in the likeness of men. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore, God has highly exalted Him, and bestowed on Him the Name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those who are in heaven, and on earth, and under the earth, and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father...”

The total uniqueness of Christ as the God-Man is absolutely necessary for human salvation. He is the Mediator Who, through His death, provides for us a bridge, or access, to God if we will accept it. And His humanity is necessary to accomplish this, because *Deity doesn't die*: “Therefore, when He comes into the world, He says, ‘Sacrifice and offering (animals) Thou hast not desired, But a body (His humanity) Thou hast prepared for me. . .Behold, I have come to do thy will, O God.’” (Hebrews 10:5-7)

Further, the scripture makes it clear that the entire plan of redemption to bring about the salvation of human beings involved the entire Trinity. In fact, all the great acts of God throughout the scriptures involved the active participation of the Godhead:

- Creation of the Universe (Ps. 102:25; Col. 1:16; Job 26:31)
- Creation of Man (Gen. 1:1-3, 2:7; Colossian 1:16; Job

33:4)

- The Incarnation (Luke 1:30-37)
- Baptism of Christ (Mark 1:9-11)
- Christ's Death on the Cross (Psalm 22; Romans 8:32; John 3:16, 10:18; Galatians 2:20; Hebrews 9:14)
- Christ's Resurrection (Acts 2:24; John 10:18; I Peter 3:10)
- Inspiration of Scripture (II Timothy 3:16; 1:10,11; II Peter 1:21)

To each of the above events, the scriptures ascribe an active participation by each member of the Trinity.

If Jesus died on the stake, how could he bring himself back to life in three days?

If Jesus is God as well as man, He would have no trouble rising from the dead. The verses cited above (See Resurrection) indicate that Jesus, God the Father, and the Holy Spirit were all actively involved in the process of bringing Him back to life.

I might also add that historically, it is undisputed that during the early centuries there was rapid growth and a dramatic impact by Christianity across the Roman Empire. It is very difficult to explain this, if you just leave a dead Jew hanging on a cross. Nothing short of His actual resurrection can explain the boldness and unflinching commitment of the first disciples to proclaim it so, and, who were, with few exceptions, called upon to seal their affirmation to the truth of this event with their own, violent martyrdoms.

_____, I have taken some time to try to answer your questions. They are all good and important questions. And I hope you can see that there are good answers to these questions. But what is most important is if you really want them and believe them. Your note sounded angry, or hurt. Perhaps you have been "burnt" in the past by some who claim to

be Christians but who have deeply disappointed you. I hope not to do that.

And I hope this information is helpful to you, _____. I am a busy man, but if you sincerely want answers to your questions, I definitely have time for that. The ball is in your court.

Jimmy Williams, Founder
Probe Ministries

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Theology vs. Science or Theology plus Science?

Appendix A: Theology vs. Science or Theology plus Science?

Note: This is one of two appendices for Steve Cable's article [Are We Significant in This Vast Universe?](#)

Are science and religion mortal enemies, or collaborating partners, or denizens of different realms with no common ground? Is the ultimate objective of science to unmask the fictitious myths behind all religions freeing mankind to pursue a rational utopia as espoused by Daniel Dennett^{1} and other atheist academics? Or should we subscribe to the prevailing Western view of a clear secular vs. sacred split, segregating out thoughts so that science and theology are not allowed to deal with any topics which intersect?^{2} Or will unbiased scientific inquiry lead us to a deeper appreciation and understanding of our Creator as espoused by early

formulators of the modern scientific method, such as Isaac Newton, as well as many respected researchers, such as leading nanotechnologist, Dr. James Tour, who stated, "I stand in awe of God because of what he has done through his creation. Only a rookie who knows nothing about science would say science takes away from faith. If you really study science, it will bring you closer to God." {3}

The current view promoted as dogma by many in academia is that acceptable, genuine science is based on a theological presupposition, namely, that any possibility of intervention by a transcendent Creator or other non-physical entity must be excluded from consideration in evaluating possible explanations for any phenomena observed in the physical world. It is ironic that Carl Sagan, one of the popular promoters of this dogma, would take fundamental issue with his own dogma when he wrote,

A central lesson of science is that to understand complex issues (or even simple ones), we must try to free our minds of dogma and to guarantee the freedom to publish, to contradict, and to experiment. Arguments from authority are unacceptable. {4}

In a similar fashion, a common viewpoint promoted in some theological circles is that theology trumps science in any areas in which they have an intersecting interest, i.e. a viewpoint that looks only at the Bible without allowing its interpretation of Scripture to be informed by the findings of science. From this viewpoint, science is at best a limited field of study looking at only a small part of reality, and at worst is spending large amounts of resources studying an illusion masquerading as reality. It is assumed that science cannot provide insights to help deepen our understanding of theology.

I propose that both of these viewpoints share a common shortcoming of prejudging the result before examining the

evidence. Both scientist and theologians should be free to follow the evidence where it leads, whether the evidence comes from observation of the physical aspects of our universe, or from philosophy and logic, or from divine revelation.

One area where this clash of viewpoints is reaching a fever pitch is in the field of Intelligent Design science. Researchers in this emerging field say, let us follow the evidence where it leads. If the makeup of the physical realm includes evidence of an intelligent designer, let's admit it and pass the information on to the theologians. If the physical makeup is more indicative of the handiwork of random variations and natural processes, let's cite it and pass that information along as well. As demonstrated in the 2008 documentary, *Expelled: No Intelligence Allowed*, these researchers are facing stiff opposition and even persecution from the defenders of the scientific establishment. Ironically, but not unexpectedly, the more we learn about the fine tuning required to support life, the history of our planet, and the complexity of living organisms, the more the evidence aligns with the presence of an intelligent designer rather than the results of random, undirected processes. As one scientist observed,

[0]n whatever volume scale researchers make their observations – the universe, galaxy cluster, galaxy, planetary system, planet, planetary surface, cell, atom, fundamental particle, or string – the evidence for extreme fine-tuning for life's sake, and in particular for humanity's benefit, persists. [{5}](#)

As Christians, we need not fear science. If the Bible is revelation from our actual Creator, it will not crumble in the presence of scientific studies into the nature of our universe. We do need to be concerned about agenda-driven science which is focused on manipulating scientific results and the popular public perception of those results to prove a predetermined theological point, whether it is atheism or a

particular interpretation of the Bible.

If God is the Creator of the universe and the Bible is revelation directly from God, then accurate observation of the universe will ultimately prove to be consistent with His revelation. By combining the general revelation of science with the special revelation of the Bible, we should be rewarded with a greater understanding of the nature of our Creator and His intentions for mankind.

Notes

1. Daniel Dennett, *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon* (New York: Viking Press, 2006).
2. Nancy Pearcey, *Total Truth: Liberating Christianity from Its Cultural Captivity* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2004).
3. Candace Adams, "Leading Nanoscientist Builds Big Faith," *Baptist Standard*, March 15, 2000.
4. Carl Sagan, *Billions and Billions: Thoughts on Life and Death at the Brink of the Millennium* (New York, Random House, 1997).
5. Hugh Ross, *Why The Universe Is The Way It Is* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2008), 124.

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Critique of "The Shack" – A Christian Theologian's Perspective

Dr. Zukeran commends the author on attempting to make the gospel accessible. However, from a Christian theologian's

perspective, he also warns us that the book presents confused pictures of the nature of God, the Son, and the way to salvation. The book can act as a great starting point for discussion, but do not rest your theology upon the pages of this fictional book.

The Shack by William Young has become a *New York Times* bestseller. Eugene Peterson, Professor Emeritus of Spiritual Theology at Regent College, Vancouver, B.C. writes, "The book has the potential to do for our generation what John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* did for his. It's that good." Many Christians say that the book has blessed them. However, others have said that this book presents false doctrines that are heretical and dangerous. The diversity of comments and questions about the book created a need to research and present a Biblical critique of this work.

William Young creatively writes a fiction story that seeks to answer the difficult question of why God allows evil. In this story the main character, Mackenzie Allen Philips, a father of five children, experiences the unthinkably painful tragedy of losing his youngest daughter to a violent murder at the hands of a serial killer. Through his painful ordeal he asks the questions, "How could God allow something like this to happen?" and "Where was God in all this?"

One day he receives an invitation to meet God at the shack where his daughter was molested and killed. There he meets God the Father who appears as a large African-American woman named Papa, God the Son who appears as a Middle Eastern Man in a leather tool belt, and God the Holy Spirit who appears as an Asian woman named Sarayu. In this place over the course of a few days Mack asks each member of the triune God difficult questions about life, eternity, the nature of God, evil, and other significant issues with which every person struggles in their lifetime. Through several dialogues with each member of this "Trinity," Mack receives answers, and through these answers we learn about the nature of God and the problem of

suffering and evil.

COMMENDABLE FEATURES

The Shack creatively addresses a relevant and difficult issue of God and the problem of evil. Young answers the problem of God and evil with the free will argument, which states that God created people with the free will to commit evil. Young also emphasizes that God has an ultimate plan for our lives which cannot be overcome, even by acts of evil. As humans, we are limited finite creatures who cannot see how all things can fit together or how even evil events might somehow fulfill God's ultimate plan. God is good, and God is love. Therefore, what He allows is filtered through His love and infinite wisdom. God permits individuals to exercise their free will even if they choose to go against His commands. In His love, He does not impose His will on us. When we choose to do evil, these actions hurt Him deeply. Often we cannot understand events that happen in our lives; however, we are asked to trust God even when we cannot see or comprehend why He allows things to happen. In fact Young points out that taking away our freedom would not be the best thing for God to do. I believe Young does a decent job of tackling the difficult issue of evil. He does attempt to answer a very difficult question in a creative way that many will find engaging.

Young also emphasizes the intimate relationship we are to have with God. There is a danger that a believer's faith can become cerebral and neglect the emotional, heart aspect of one's walk with God. A faith that is only centered on knowing doctrine only can be a cold kind of faith (Rev. 2:4-5).

CRITICISMS OF *THE SHACK*

I commend Young for attempting to wrestle with a difficult issue in a creative manner. Young is not a trained theologian or Bible scholar. He wrote this book for the purpose of sharing his experience and insight as he worked through

personal tragedy in his life. He does attempt to be orthodox in his theology but there are some apparent errors. I do not doubt his sincerity or his relationship with God. He is a brother in Christ and it is my goal to present an accurate critique of his work.

In seeking to address the issue of God and the problem of evil, the author presents flawed theological views that confuse the nature of God. One of my concerns is the emphasis on experience and how it is given emphasis equal to or stronger than the Bible. Young refers to the Bible superficially; however, his primary focus in this work is on experience. In fact, he unfortunately makes some critical remarks regarding the sole authority of the Word and the training needed to interpret it properly:

In seminary he had been taught that God had completely stopped any overt communication with moderns, preferring to have them only listen and follow sacred scripture, properly interpreted, of course. God's voice had been reduced to paper, and even that paper had to be moderated and deciphered by the proper authorities and intellects. It seemed that direct communication with God was something exclusively for the ancients and uncivilized, while educated Westerners access to God was mediated and controlled by the intelligentsia. Nobody wanted God in a box, just in a book. (p. 65)

Throughout the book, he criticizes Biblical teachings as "religious conditioning" or "seminary teaching" (p. 93). Young's intention may be to encourage the audience to break stereotypes in their thinking about God. This is commendable, for we must constantly examine our theology of God and evaluate whether we have adopted false stereotypes in our understanding of God. It may not have been the author's intent to devalue the word of God or theological training. However, comments like these give that impression.

Our theology must be consistent with God's Word. God will not reveal Himself or communicate in ways that are contrary to His Word. God is not limited to words on a page; He also communicates through His creation or general revelation (Rom. 1). However, God has given us special revelation and communicated specific truths about His character in His Word. If God reveals and communicates information that is contrary to His Word, then He could not be a God of truth. There are truths that are not mentioned in the Bible, but those facts should be consistent and not contrary to the Word of God. It was unfortunate that there were more critical remarks made on biblical training and not a stronger emphasis to study and exhort believers to be diligent students of the word (2 Tim. 2:15).

Confusion Regarding the Nature of God

Young presents several incorrect and confusing teachings regarding the nature of God and salvation. In this story, God the Father appears as a large African-American woman. In contrast, the Bible teaches that the Father never takes on physical form. John 4:24 teaches that God is spirit. 1 Timothy 4:16 states, "God, the blessed and only ruler, the King of kings and Lord of lords, who alone is immortal and who lives in unapproachable light whom no one has seen or can see." To add to this, God appears as a woman named "Papa." It is true that God is neither male nor female as humans are, and both feminine and masculine attributes are found in God. However, in the Bible God has chosen to reveal Himself as Father and never in the feminine gender. This gender distortion confuses the nature of God.

In the story, God the Father has scars on His wrists (p. 95). This is contrary to Biblical teaching in which only Jesus became human and only Jesus died on the cross. It is true the Father shared in the pain of Christ's suffering, but God stood as the judge of sin, not the one who suffered on the cross. Christ bore the burden of our sins; God the Father was the

judge who had to render His judgment on His Son.

God the Father says “When we three spoke ourselves into human existence as the Son of God, we became fully human” (p. 99). Young teaches that all three members of the Trinity became human. However, scripture teaches that only the Son, not all members of the Trinity, became human. This distorts the uniqueness and teaching of the incarnation.

Confusion Regarding the Son

In this story, Jesus appears as a Middle Eastern man with a plaid shirt, jeans, and a tool belt. In the Bible, Jesus appears as a humble servant veiling His glory (Phil. 2). After the resurrection, Jesus retains His human nature and body but is revealed in a glorified state. He appears in his glorified and resurrected body and His glory is unveiled (Revelation 1).

As the incarnate Son of God, Jesus retained His divine nature and attributes. His incarnation involved the addition of humanity, but not by subtracting His deity. During His incarnation He chose to restrict His use of His divine attributes, but there were occasions in which He exercised His divine attributes to demonstrate His authority over creation. However, in *The Shack* God says:

Although he is also fully God, he has never drawn upon his nature as God to do anything. He has only lived out of his relationship with me, living in the very same manner that I desire to be in relationship with every human being. He is just the first to do it to the uttermost – the first to absolutely trust my life within him, the first to believe in my love and my goodness without regard for appearance or consequence. . . . So when He healed the blind? He did so as a dependent, limited human being trusting in my life and power to be at work within him and through him. Jesus as a human being had no power within himself to heal anyone (p. 99-100).

First, it is not true that Jesus “had no power within himself to heal anyone.” Jesus, as the incarnate Son of God, never ceased being God. He continued to possess full and complete deity before, during, and after the incarnation (Colossians 2:9). He did do miracles in the power of the Spirit, but He also exercised His own power (Lk. 22:51; Jn. 18:6). Young appears to be teaching the incorrect view of the incarnation that Christ gave up His deity, or aspects of it, when He became human.

Confusion Regarding the Holy Spirit

In this story, the Holy Spirit appears as an Asian woman named Sarayu. In contrast, the Holy Spirit never appears as a person in the Bible. There is one time when the Holy Spirit appears in physical form as a dove at the baptism of Jesus. Moreover, the Spirit is never addressed in the feminine but is always addressed with the masculine pronoun.

Confusion Regarding the Trinity

The first inaccuracy regarding the Trinity is that in this story, all three members of the Trinity take on human form. This confuses the doctrine of the incarnation, for Scripture teaches that only Jesus takes on human form.

The second inaccuracy presented in *The Shack* is the idea that the relationship taught between the members of the Trinity is incorrect. In the book, “God” says, “So you think that God must relate inside a hierarchy like you do. But we do not” (p. 124). Young teaches that all three members of the Trinity do not relate in a hierarchical manner (p. 122-124).

In contrast, the Bible teaches that all three members of the Trinity are equal in nature while there also exists an economy, or hierarchy, in the Trinity. It describes the relationship of the members of the Godhead with each other, and this relationship serves as a model for us. The Father is the head. This is demonstrated in that the Father sent the

Son. The Son did not send the Father, (Jn. 6:44, 8:18, 10:36). The Son also is the one who sends the Holy Spirit (Jn. 16:7). Jesus came down from heaven, not to do his own will, but the will of the Father (John 6:38). The Father is the head of Christ (1 Cor. 11:3). 1 Cor. 15:27-28 speaks of creation being in subjection to Jesus, and then in verse 28, Jesus will be subjected to the Father. The Greek word for "will be subjected" is *hupotagasetai* which is the future passive indicative. This means that it is a future event where Jesus will forever be subjected to the Father. These passages teach that there is indeed a hierarchy within the Trinity in which all three members are equal in nature, yet the principle of headship and submission is perfectly displayed in the Trinity. This critical theological principle is incorrectly taught in *The Shack*.

Confusion Regarding Salvation

In this story, Young appears to be teaching pluralism, which is the belief that there are other ways to salvation beside faith in Jesus Christ. In this story Papa states:

Those who love me come from every system that exists. They are Buddhists or Mormons, Baptists or Muslims, Democrats, Republicans and many who don't vote or are not part of any Sunday morning or religious institutions. I have followers who were murderers and many who were self-righteous. Some are bankers and bookies, Americans and Iraqis, Jews and Palestinians. I have no desire to make them Christian, but I do want to join them in their transformation into sons and daughters of my Papa, into my brothers and sisters, into my Beloved. (p. 182)

Young states that Jesus has no desire to make people of other faiths Christians, or disciples of Christ. One then wonders what this "transformation into sons and daughters of my Papa" entails. What does it mean to be a son or daughter of Papa?

Jesus commanded us in the Great Commission to “Go into all the world and make disciples, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey all that I have commanded you.” Being a disciple of Christ requires us to know and obey the teachings that God has revealed in His Word.

Mack asks Jesus, “Does that mean all roads will lead to you?” To this question, Jesus replies, “Not at all. . . . Most roads don’t lead anywhere. What it does mean is that I will travel any road to find you” (p. 182). Although pluralism is denied here, there is confusion regarding salvation. It is a strange statement by Jesus to say, “Most roads don’t lead anywhere.” In actuality Jesus stated in the Gospels that most roads lead to destruction when in Mt. 7:13-14 He says, “Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it.” Young fails to mention eternal judgment for those who do not receive Jesus whereas Jesus makes it clear in John 14:6 that He is the only way to life; all other roads lead to destruction.

Things are further confused when the Jesus of *The Shack* states, “I will travel any road to find you.” The message appears to teach that Jesus will reveal Himself to people no matter their road or religion. Jesus does not ask them to leave that road and follow the narrow path of salvation.

Moreover, in a later conversation on the atoning work of Christ on the cross, Mack asks, “What exactly did Jesus accomplish by dying?” Papa answers, “Through his death and resurrection, I am now fully reconciled to the world” (p. 191-2). Mack is confused and asks if the whole world has been reconciled or only those who believe. Papa responds by saying reconciliation is not dependent upon faith in Christ:

The whole world, Mack. All I am telling you is that

reconciliation is a two-way street, and I have done my part, totally, completely, finally. It is not the nature of love to force a relationship but it is the nature of love to open the way" (p. 192).

Young appears to be saying all people are already reconciled to God. God is waiting on them to recognize it and enter into a relationship with Him. These dialogues appear to teach pluralism. Although it is denied on page 182, the ideas presented by Young that Jesus is not interested in people becoming Christians, that Jesus will find people on the many roads, and that the whole world is already reconciled to God presents the tone of a pluralistic message of salvation. Thus, the book presents a confusing message of salvation.

Emphasis on Relationship

Throughout the book, Young places an emphasis on relationships. He downplays theological doctrines and Biblical teaching and emphasizes that a relationship with God is what is most important. However, Jesus stated, "Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in spirit and in truth" (Jn. 4:23-24).

It is not possible to have a relationship with God that is not based in truth. In order to have a meaningful relationship with God, one must understand the nature and character of God. Truth is rooted in the very nature of God (John 14:6). A relationship with God comes through responding to the truths revealed in His Word. Thus, a believer must grow in his relationship with God through seeking emotional intimacy as well as growing in our understanding of the Word of God.

Throughout his book Young emphasizes the relational aspect of our walk with God and downplays the need for proper doctrinal beliefs about God. It is true that Christians are to have a

vibrant relationship with God, but this relationship must be built on truth as God has revealed in His Word. Seeking a relationship and worship of God built on false ideas of God could lead one to discouragement and even false hope. As one grows in Christ, one's understanding of God should move toward a more accurate understanding of God's character that is revealed in His word.

An essential part of growing a deep intimate relationship with God involves the learning of Biblical and doctrinal truths about God. The Apostle Paul refers to this in Ephesians 4:13 when he says, "until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ."

Simply knowing doctrine without the involvement of the heart leads to a cold faith. I believe Young was trying to emphasize this point. However, a heart religion without truth as its guide is only an emotional faith. We must have both heart and mind. In fact, Jesus commanded Christians in Matthew 22:37 to "Love the Lord with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind."

Conclusion

The Shack attempts to address one of life's toughest issues: the problem of God and evil. Although this is a work of fiction, it addresses significant theological issues. However, in addressing the problem of evil, Young teaches key theological errors. This can lead the average reader into confusion regarding the nature of God and salvation. I found this to be an interesting story but I was disturbed by the theological errors. Readers who have not developed the skills to discern truth from error can be confused in the end. So although the novel tries to address a relevant question, it teaches theological errors in the process. One cannot take lightly erroneous teachings on the nature of God and salvation.

I believe this book would make a great subject for discussion groups. The topics presented in the book such as the problem of evil, the nature of God, and salvation are worthwhile topics for all believers to discuss. We can often learn and become more accurate in our beliefs when we analyze error, compare it with scripture, and articulate our position in light of the Bible. I do not believe Christians need to run from error as long as they read and study with discernment.

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Understanding Our Mormon Neighbors – As Evangelical Christians

Mormon missionaries are sounding more and more like evangelical Christians. Has something changed in Mormon theology? A group of evangelical theologians have opened a dialogue with their Mormon counterparts and argue that the LDS movement is indeed changing. Don Closson considers these changes in Mormon thinking and how it affects our dialogue with our Mormon neighbors.

Mormon Neo-orthodoxy?

Have you noticed that Mormons are sounding more and more like evangelical Christians? In the last few decades individuals inside the Mormon Church, and many outside, have noticed a shift in the content and presentation of the Mormon faith. Certain aspects of Mormon theology, like the physical, limited nature of God, are either downplayed or left unsaid. Other aspects, like salvation by faith in the justifying work of

Jesus Christ, are highlighted. Is something significant happening within Mormonism? Although Mormon theology has been somewhat fluid over the decades, some feel that a new band of Mormon scholars are indeed moving the religion in a new direction and that Christians need to be aware of these changes if we are to have effective dialogue with our Mormon neighbors.

Mormon sociologist Kendall White has been writing about this change in Mormon thinking since the 1960's. He writes that traditional Mormon theology produced in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries by B. H. Roberts, James Talmage, and John Widtsoe, centered on an "optimistic humanism, finite theism, and [an] emphasis on human merit in attaining salvation."[{1}](#) The new movement, called neo-orthodox Mormonism by some, "stresses the omnipotence and sovereignty of God, human sinfulness and inability to merit salvation, and the necessity of salvation by grace."[{2}](#) The primary theological sources for neo-orthodox Mormons are the Bible and the Book of Mormon. The later writings of Joseph Smith, including sections of the Doctrine and Covenants, the Pearl of Great Price, and the King Follett Discourse are seen as less helpful.

White argues that this theological trend is actually a return to the earliest form of Mormon beliefs found in the 1830s. It's interesting to note that, while White admits that Mormon neo-orthodoxy is a valid form of Mormonism, he's not in favor of it. On the other hand, Robert Millet, past dean of Religious Education at Brigham Young University, argues that the neo-orthodox movement is a positive trend and more in line with the teachings found in the Book of Mormon.

In the book *The New Mormon Challenge* evangelical theologian Carl Mosser writes that neo-orthodox Mormons "promote an understanding of the relationship between works and grace that is openly modeled after noted evangelical pastor John MacArthur's expositions of 'Lordship salvation.'"[{3}](#) Mosser also argues that it is these neo-orthodox Mormon writers and

teachers who are influencing typical Mormons today rather than those who support a more traditional Mormon theology.

The result is a new Mormon synthesis that may cause the traditional Christian to ask himself, Have the Mormons returned to the historic orthodox Christian faith? In what follows we will highlight some of this new Mormon theology in order to help the reader decide how orthodox neo-orthodox Mormonism really is.

Recent Events and Historical Patterns

It was a bit of a shock recently when I discovered that Ravi Zacharias, a highly respected Christian apologist, had addressed a mixed crowd of Mormons and evangelicals at the Mormon Temple in Salt Lake City. Even more interesting is the fact that after his hour long discussion on the exclusivity of Christ, Zacharias received a standing ovation from the entire crowd. The apologist was introduced by Dr. Richard Mouw, president of Fuller Seminary. Dr. Mouw began his comments by saying "Let me state it clearly, We evangelicals have sinned against you . . ." He added that not every evangelical has sinned against Mormons, but he feels that too often we are guilty of misrepresenting what most Mormons believe and ignoring their pleas when they protest. He went on to argue that traditional Christians and Mormons have enough in common to profit from a dialogue. He explained that, "when my good friend [and Brigham Young University professor] Bob Millet says that his only plea when he gets to heaven is 'the mercy and merit of Jesus Christ,' I want to respond by saying with enthusiasm, 'Let's keep talking!'" Topped off with the music of Michael Card, this was a unique event. It had been over 100 years since the last evangelical spoke in the Temple; Dwight L. Moody preached there in 1871.

When considering the traditionally negative view that evangelical Christians have of Mormons, this kind of event can

be difficult to evaluate. Also challenging are the results of a recent George Barna survey that found 26% of those Mormons that participated were classified as “born again” by their responses. How can this be? Are all these Mormons being disingenuous regarding their true beliefs? Part of the answer lies in the fact that at any given moment there are more first generation converts within Mormonism than there are second generation. Since Mormon evangelism is primarily aimed at the Christian population, it is not surprising that many who attend Mormon worship services have carried with them a more traditional theology and are often there because of the youth programs and the accepting community that often exists within Mormon Wards.

But another part of the explanation is a movement within Mormon circles that began with the presidency of Ezra Taft Benson. It has called Mormons back to their roots by focusing more on the Bible and the Book of Mormon and away from the later writings of Joseph Smith. The leaders of this movement have worked hard to distance themselves from the more speculative thoughts and writings of past LDS authorities.

Many evangelicals are hoping that the Mormon Church will go through something similar to the recent changes in the Reorganized Latter Day Saints Church. This group was an early offshoot from the main LDS Church which never did accept many of the later writings of Smith. In recent years, its numbers have declined significantly because many have turned back towards a traditional evangelical theology.

The Mormon Neo-Orthodox Movement

Stephen Robinson is professor of ancient Scripture at Brigham Young University. He and Craig Blomberg, professor of New Testament at Denver Seminary, co-wrote the book “How Wide the Divide” which explores both the similarities and distance between evangelical and Mormon theology regarding revelation,

the nature of God, the person of Christ, and what one must do to be saved. Robinson passionately implores evangelicals to not give into a caricature of Mormon theology, one that few Mormons actually believe. He argues that there are legitimate reasons for misunderstanding between Mormons and evangelicals. They both use identical theological terms in different ways; in fact the LDS Church as a whole lacks a sophisticated theological language. Also, Mormonism's lack of professional clergy, creeds, catechisms, or theologians in the strict sense often contributes to the confusion.

In his book with Blomberg, Robinson complains that Mormons are chastised because they take the Bible too literally, actually believing everything in it that is written about God. He accuses evangelicals of accepting second and third century explanations of biblical truth that are dependent upon Greek philosophical thought rather than on what the Bible actually says. Both Blomberg and Robinson agree that the two sides hold to a very different description of God and humanity. But they also conclude that many of our differences are found in areas where the Bible is silent and where the Mormon canon has claimed to fill in the void with new revelation.

However, Robinson's greatest concern is that evangelicals take him and other Mormons seriously when they claim to believe certain things to be true. For instance, Robinson believes that "through the atonement of Christ, fallen humanity may be saved by accepting and obeying the gospel of Jesus Christ."[{4}](#) He also argues that Mormons believe in the God of the Bible, "the Eternal Father, and in God's Son, Jesus Christ, and in the Holy Ghost."[{5}](#) He adds that they accept the biblical description of God as three and also one, but not the post-New Testament attempts to explain how this can be reconciled.

It would be more than impolite to accuse Dr. Robinson of being less than genuine when he personally claims to believe something. However, he admits that there is much theological speculation within Mormon circles and that it can be difficult

to discover exactly what represents official Mormon doctrine.

Let's consider some specific examples of Dr. Robinson's beliefs and compare them to both traditional Mormon and Christian theology.

Robinson describes God as omniscient, omnipresent, infinite, eternal, and unchangeable. However, he also believes that God and man are of the same nature or species, and that God has a body of flesh and blood. He denies that this constitutes a finite theism, a charge often attributed to Mormons. Robinson also states that salvation is only acquired through grace by faith in Jesus Christ. He argues at length that Mormons do not believe that one can be justified by works in the eyes of a righteous and Holy God, but instead that works follow justification and conversion. He attributes evangelical claims that Mormons believe otherwise to confusion about Mormon terminology and a deficient desire to really understand what Mormons teach.

How do these theological positions compare with traditional Mormon thought? Is this a new or neo-orthodox Mormonism? Mormonism has always held that God has attained his position via a path of eternal progression, and comments to that effect by past Mormon leaders seem to conflict with Robinson's statements. For instance, when Mormon Apostle Orson Hyde said that God was once a child who rose step by step to be where he is today, it appears to contradict the idea of an unchangeable deity. Apostle John Widtsoe states the issue even more plainly. He says that God "must now be engaged in progressive development and infinite as God is, he must have been less powerful in the past than he is today."[\[6\]](#)

Robinson argues that there was once a time, before the beginning of our creation, that God was human. But he adds that any speculation about the events of that time is done so without support from the Bible or LDS literature. Robinson is different from earlier Mormons in being unwilling to speculate

on how, or even when God rose from a finite human to an infinite God, but he still believes that it happened.

Robinson's beliefs about God are dramatically different from traditional Christian, and I believe biblical, teachings. The Mormon god is contingent or dependent on matter rather than its creator. He is finite in the sense that there was a time when he was not God, no matter how long ago that might have been. He is obviously not the First Cause or only self-existent being. Even though Robinson refuses to speculate on the origin of God, Mormon views imply that God is the offspring of other Gods, leading to polytheism which the Bible calls idolatry. As God said through Isaiah long ago, "I am the LORD, and there is no other; apart from me there is no God." [{7}](#)

Are Mormons Christian?

Above we introduced ideas about salvation from the Mormon scholar Dr. Stephen Robinson, professor of Ancient Scriptures at Brigham Young University. He states that individuals are saved by accepting the gift God has provided in his perfect Son, Jesus Christ. Robinson believes that "If humans accept this gift and enter the gospel covenant by making Christ their Lord, they are justified of their sins, not by their own works and merits, but by the perfect righteousness of Jesus Christ accepted on their behalf." [{8}](#) He admits that the LDS Church is thoroughly Arminian, rejecting the Calvinist doctrine of eternal security, but that this shouldn't remove them from the sphere of biblical Christianity.

While not doubting that Dr. Robinson believes all this to be true, it is difficult to interpret Mormon doctrine in light of past statements by Mormon leaders and in Mormon writings. For instance, how do we interpret the Book of Mormon when it states "for we know that it is by grace we are saved, after all we can do"? [{9}](#) Or when Joseph Smith writes "We believe

that through the Atonement of Christ, all mankind may be saved, by obedience to the laws and ordinances of the Gospel”?[{10}](#) Even more disconcerting are statements made by Bruce McConkie, a popular Mormon writer. He writes that, “Repentance is a gift from God conferred upon those who earn the right to receive it. It comes by obedience to law.” And again, he writes, it is a gift “reserved for those who abide the law that entitles them to receive it.”[{11}](#) These statements point to an earned salvation based upon individuals fulfilling legalistic obligations, the kind of religion that Paul condemns in the book of Galatians.

Mormon teaching tools, such as the booklet *Gospel Principles*, also make statements that appear to contradict a gospel of grace. In a chapter titled “Freedom to Choose” the book states, “We began to make choices as spirit children in our Heavenly Father’s presence. Our choices there made us worthy to come to earth. Our heavenly Father wants us to grow in faith, power, knowledge, wisdom, and all other good things. If we keep his commandments and make right choices, we will learn and understand. We will become like him.”[{12}](#) Not only does this teach that salvation depends on works during this life, but also on works performed during a pre-existence as spirit beings.

In spite of the recent changes in Mormon theology, a person who holds to the full spectrum of Mormon teachings has a view of God, salvation, and particularly the relationship between mankind and its creator, that is radically different from what traditional Christians believe and what we think the Bible teaches. This is not a reason to stop talking with Mormons; in fact, it is why we need to continue to express the reasons for the hope that we have in Christ.

Notes

1. Carl Mosser, *The New Mormon Challenge*, ed. By Francis Beckwith, Carl Mosser, and Paul Owen (Grand Rapids, MI:

Zondervan, 2002) p. 78.

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid., p. 79.

4. Blomberg and Robinson, *How Wide the Divide* (InterVarsity Press: Downers Grove, IL., 1997) p. 16.

5. Ibid.

6. Bill McKeever and Eric Johnson, *Mormonism 101* (Baker Books: Grand Rapids, MI, 2000) p. 28.

7. Isaiah 45:5

8. Blomberg and Robinson, 144.

9. 2 Nephi 25:23

10. Blomberg and Robinson, 177.

11. Ibid., 178.

12. *Gospel Principles* (Corporation of the President of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1979), p. 19.

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