



# Challenged

**Living Our Faith  
in a Post Modern Era**

**John H. King**

Challenged: Living Our Faith in a Post  
Modern Age

by John King

*“Your children are the greatest gift God will give to you, and their souls the heaviest responsibility He will place in your hands. Take time with them, teach them to have faith in God. Be a person in whom they can have faith. When you are old, nothing else you've done will have mattered as much.” – Lisa Wingate*

*“And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another advocate to help you and be with you forever –the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you.”  
John 14:16, 17 New International Version*

Dedicated to

Believers in Christ who grieve the loss of the faith of someone they love and those whose faith is being challenged by a postmodern academia.

Cover: *The Forgotten Road*

“I hope you remember that if you encounter an obstacle on the road, don’t think of it as an obstacle at all... think of it as a challenge to find a new path on the road less traveled.” — Hyeonseo Lee

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## The Preface

Why write this book?

“Challenged” was written after much discussion with our eldest son who has left the faith to become an atheist. This is in part the story of my journey through those discussions and the feelings they engendered as I sought an understanding of his 'deconversion' and as I sought for the rock of hope I might stand upon in a sea of emotional quicksand. Writing is therapeutic.

I write this book to encourage the faith of a generation of believers growing up in a postmodern, atheistic academia. The faith of christian youth is being challenged by a flood of college bound literature that disowns God as our personal Creator. This is a generation of young believers that must learn to read between the lines, to be able to filter out the scientific fiction or the scientific hypotheses from actual, provable, reality. I wrote this work to highlight the major issues that need to be addressed, but without fudging or ignoring those parts of the story that might embarrass the church.

I write this book, also, for christian families who have sons, daughters, parents, grandchildren who have announced they are no longer persons of faith. The thought of a family member losing faith in God can overwhelm the senses and could exceed the ability of some of us to register that pain. It hurts too much. I imagine myself disappearing into a fog of pure shock. I picture myself lost forever from everyone except God with Whom I would have a lot more to talk about.

I had been a pastor and was in christian ministry for 24 plus years during which time I was privileged to study many of the same issues that are now raised by leading atheists.

My research over these years has provided me with a different perspective. My purpose here is to provide christians with that perspective that hopefully challenges the philosophical babble

that deceptively claims science—and all truth—“*atheist-friendly*” and “*believer-unfriendly*.”

Science, because she has given us modern conveniences, extended our life span, and holds the promise of a better future, has been objectified by an evolutionary worldview which in many ways abuses the soul of true learning. The subtle conflicts of interest between a scientific worldview and an evolutionary worldview have gone unnoticed while a new atheism falsely accuses the christian’s worldview, in a devious twisting of the facts, of being incompatible with real, scientific truth. Christians are called ‘*delusional*.’

### Calvary

Seminary and Bible college may not be addressing this assault on faith. Apologetics is so clichéd. I agree with Dawkins: “*garbage in, garbage out*.” Pascal’s wager, Thomas Aquinas’ proofs—with all due respect for the much good these men have given us—are in a postmodern age a waste of print and only useful as a laugh for those who so totally disrespect our faith.

Atheism appears incapable of an honest appraisal of our worship of God. Jesus’ death on the cross, Dawkins labels ‘*sadomasochistic*.’ Sam Harris finds our talk of sin that necessitates the Savior’s death a ‘*prudery*’ that links somehow to our first parents’ ‘*nakedness*’ and which now daily contributes to a surplus of human misery. ‘*Conviction*’ is misrepresented as a culturally induced shame. Accordingly, sin becomes nothing more than the invention of a religious zeal wanting to manipulate the consciences of weak minds. They’re very wrong but the church has engaged them in this by its methods and teachings that do not support a true biblical message and emphasis.

We should preach Christ and Him crucified (and resurrected)! That’s it!

### Profiled

My faith has been linked with all religion; my trust in God which is very private and respectful of the beliefs and opinions of others is being incorrectly defined and misunderstood. I am being profiled and I am *not* what the profile says I am.

### Rocks

The christian church will never outlive the cruelty she has inflicted on an unforgiving world. Judgment day is coming—and on that both God and the atheist's belief in '*natural selection*' seem agreed.

If, as we believe, we are God's ambassadors, God's feelings are too often misrepresented. We should speak to rocks and not strike them but our own spiritual weakness tempts us. We fight battles and say things which never should be fought or spoken and as Salman Rushdie, as the voice of atheism, mistakenly concluded, "*The problem's name is God.*"

And it is falsely assumed that:

- I think gays, and for that matter all LGBTQ persons, are by their life choices inherently evil or dangerous; or
- I buy into none of the aspects of the evolutionary process—or I believe evolution in all its dimensions and forms to be merely theoretical—; or
- I assume that the ultimate 'cause' behind tsunamis and earthquakes and other natural disasters is God's judgment; or
- I support religious crusaders who unwittingly—at least I hope unwittingly—reek social havoc, break laws and disrespect the faith in God that Jesus exemplified.

Atheists presuppose in their writings that I am represented by some leading religious figure that they selectively drag into their dialogue. They are so, so wrong!

There is a '*faith*' that transcends all this, a trust in God and relationship with Him, that prays rather than rushes in to

change things and that has no part in malicious criticism of another's life. And I am of *that* stripe.

If I am to offend people who are culturally far removed from the simple life I have assumed, I will do so only with the gospel message, Calvary. The gospel *is* offensive—I'll grant you this—because it talks of our need to reconnect with God.

### Concerns

Unbelieving family members may have lovingly raised real world issues. We need to cultivate an appreciation for their thoughts and when they are receptive to the idea to talk to them about their concerns and the reasons faith in God doesn't hold an endearing value for them any longer. The subjects in this book are concerns they might raise.

### Why I Write

This work was never intended to dissuade any believer from their understanding of Scripture. While hopefully opening our minds to develop a more reasoned appreciation of the views held by loved ones who are not supporters of our faith, we must remain true to that faith. I write in the hopes of giving reasonable explanation of what our unsaved friends and family might maintain living in this postmodern age, at the same time supporting our most common and precious biblical faith.

## **Acknowledgments**

I must express my gratitude to Noreen Saemenes, my cousin through marriage, who has spent hours proof reading this work and offering timely suggestions and corrections. Her efforts have been invaluable.

I want to thank my son, Josh, whose expertise in graphic designing made the cover possible.

And I appreciate my son, Tim, whose technical expertise and recommended reading material put form to my passion in writing this book.

It is customary to commend a spouse and I do so, also, for reasons less obvious. Not only was she widowed to an amateur writer but she has had to observe the back and forth between father and son with tear filled eyes while we dialogued over differing perspectives on matters closest to her heart. I love you, honey.

## Introduction

My wife and I love our sons unconditionally and equally. Talking with one of them about his atheism<sup>1</sup> has brought me to a new dimension in my relationship with him, to a review of my own christian beliefs, to a more critical examination of the church,<sup>2</sup> and to a different understanding of ministry in today's world.

An unseen benefit in all this, perhaps, is: I find myself discussing these matters more with God.<sup>3</sup> Prayer has renewed vitality for me. Of course, research for this book includes a lot of scripture. That has to be a plus for my faith, too.

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1. Dawkins defines an atheist as someone who "believes there is nothing beyond the natural, physical world, no supernatural creating intelligence lurking behind the observable universe, no soul that outlasts the body and no miracles—except in the sense of natural phenomena that we don't yet understand." *The God Delusion* (New York:Houghton Mifflin Co., 2006), 14.

2. References to 'the church' is not a reference to the Catholic church but to churches and denominations in Christianity, in general. My observations over the years came more from 'protestantism'.

3. Perhaps, it is important to focus in on an understanding of who we are writing about. Professor David Hart, whose works I have yet to review, stated,"There is no note of desperation or diffidence in this language; it forthrightly and unhesitatingly describes a God who is the infinite fullness of being, omnipotent, omnipresent, and omniscient, from whom all things come and upon whom all things depend for every moment of their existence, without whom nothing at all could exist" - David Bentley Hart. *The Experience of God* (London, England:Yale University Press, 2013), Kindle Locations 145-147.

"As a practical reality, the God of faith and the God of the philosophers are in many crucial respects recognizably one and the same." - *ibid.* Kindle Locations 167-168.

The Westminster Catechism could also be referenced: God is a Spirit, infinite, eternal, and unchangeable, in his being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness, and truth.

My son and I had spent endless hours in our history learning the original languages of Scripture, and discussing the Bible. Any more, discussions are in short supply because we tend to walk slowly through the field of potential disagreements.

It wasn't that long ago—or so it seems—he played a major role in the music and sound departments in a couple churches I pastored. And neither my wife nor I ever thought we were coercing him into doing any thing.

There is a certain discomfort that threatens family cohesion and that sense of belonging when our get-togethers include different beliefs and no belief at all. We cannot talk religion.<sup>4</sup> The Bible has joined politics, evolution, and a list of other subjects no one talks about. We are no longer—and actually have not been for a while now—the perfect family at the dinner table discussing how our day went and plugging in some obscure Bible reference to show how it must have been God's will. I watch the T.V. Series *'Blue Bloods'* for their Sunday afternoon dinner scene. Few families—my guess would be—enjoy such moments together. I

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4. Nicholas Wade in "The Faith Instinct: How Religion Evolved & Why It Endures" (New York: Penguin Press, 2009, 15) defined religion as "a system of emotionally binding beliefs and practices in which society implicitly negotiates through prayer and sacrifice with supernatural agents, securing from them commands that compel members, through fear divine punishment, to subordinate their interests to the common good."

Wade's whole premise is that religion as a communal and social force has evolved to guarantee the survival of the community. Its evolutionary beginnings are considered self-evident in that religion is a universal aspect of all human cultures.

"Max Weber, the great sociologist 'ducked the task' of defining religion says Wade [p. 11] which informed us that identifying the religious element in a society or culture is not to be considered an easy observation—though many might think so.

Regarding Christianity, Wade confesses, "[their] origins ... are still shrouded in considerable mystery." [p. 16]

I have chosen to take a closer look at christian faith—not the religious accoutrements that embellish it. There is such a thing as communal faith usually defined in a set of beliefs or tenets but I want us to gaze inward at a personal faith that is enriched by a communion with God. The two are part of one experience.

look forward to holiday meals together but conversation now is more restricted.

It sounds sad but it isn't. It's life.<sup>5</sup> It is predictable that as we grow as individuals and then into adult life we find ourselves in different worlds, having different experiences, valuing different lifestyles and coming to conclusions regarding modern life that are logics apart. I am Okay with this because I also know that if we stay young at heart we will always be expanding our interests and our understanding of life. And in this lays all our hopes for the future.

Family is everything to me. My family is irreplaceable; so, my reader must understand that, although I am driven to write about atheism to believers—in an outside-the-box sort-of way—my love of family is ever as strong as it was.... No! ...stronger!

Ken Daniels describes his own wife's adjustment to his de-conversion which tells you my discussing such things is not original:

"As you might imagine, my journey away from faith has introduced into our marriage a set of difficult challenges we did not previously face. Charlene has asked God, "Why me? Why did this have to happen to me?" .... She feels like a single mother when she takes our children to church, and she can no longer pray with me, read the Bible with me, or join me in

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5. "I can relate to the pain of Charles Darwin," wrote Ken Daniels, "who remained faithful all his life to his believing wife Emma and to their ten children. He never succeeded in changing Emma's mind, nor she his. Darwin's autobiography includes the following excerpt from a letter Emma wrote Charles to persuade him to reconsider his freethinking views."

Emma wrote: "Your mind and time are full of the most interesting subjects and thoughts of the most absorbing kind ... May not the habit in scientific pursuits of believing nothing till it is proved, influence your mind too much in other things which cannot be proved in the same way, and which if true are likely to be above our comprehension."

(Darwin, Darwin, and Barlow 1958, 236). cp. Ken Daniels. *Why I Believed: Reflections of a Former Missionary* (Austin TX:Kenneth W. Daniels, 2010.), 323-324.

meaningful conversations about spiritual matters. We simply no longer see eye to eye about God, the Bible, Jesus.... For her, it must be in some sense like being married to a spouse affected by Alzheimer's Disease: the person she is now married to is not the same person she first married, and she feels a real sense of loss.<sup>6</sup>

### Two Way Street

I am writing because the street goes both ways. P.K.'S [pastor's kids, as they were known] and ministers of different faiths having turned atheist have written autobiographical works—or contributed to those of others—explaining their exodus. Some have come out in Facebook groups and in blogs.

Bible stories and religious rituals make no sense to them any more.<sup>7</sup> If it is Okay for them to write it has to be Okay for me. It is fair for me to respond publicly to their defection from the faith because through their books and articles this is now public information. As many have detailed their reasons for leaving the faith of their fathers, it is fair for me, one of those fathers, to write my thoughts as well.

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6. Daniels, Kenneth W. *Why I Believed: Reflections of a Former Missionary* (Austin TX:Kenneth W. Daniels, 2010.), 323.

7. My conversion from Christianity to a non-believer was not an 'instant' change – it was for me, and would be for others in a similar situation, a gradual process. Step by step, over a period of several years, I discovered answers to my questions and evidence which convinced me that everything I had been taught since I had been 'born again' in an Anglican church in England in 1972 – was based on myth, hearsay and human thought and invention rather than by alleged proven revelation from an almighty divinity or God. I could not find credible historic or scientific evidence for anything I had believed to be fact as recorded in the bible. — Baker, Brian *NONSENSE FROM THE BIBLE*. Kindle Locations 29-34

I have read a few books<sup>8</sup> written by or about P.K.'S and other clergy that have de-converted. They share personal responses that are worthy of our reading. Their works are not raw theologies infused with bitter gibes but honest stories of their departure from the faith. Although they may adhere to the new atheism of a Dawkins, Harris, Dennett or Hitchens, I read them differently. Unlike some of the caustic sarcasm that some believers hold the new atheists write, former believers have a legitimate claim to question Christian faith. They lived through the unanswered questions and painful surprises of congregational upheavals. They observed church leaderships that wielded Phinehas<sup>9</sup> javelin interpreting the love of God in hard, militant terms.

They are not writing to dissuade but to explain, to record their journey from faith. Theirs is a heartfelt account from apprehension to peace and not an attempt at ridding the world of religion.

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8. The Bad People Stole My God by Doug Philips

Caught in the Pulpit: Leaving Belief Behind interviews of former clergy by Daniel C. Dennett and Linda LaScola

NONSENSE FROM THE BIBLE by Brian Baker

Why I Believed: Reflections of a Former Missionary by Kenneth W. Daniels

Why I Became an Atheist: A Former Preacher Rejects Christianity by John W. Loftus

Why I am an Atheist Who Believes in God: How to give love, create beauty and find peace . Frank Schaeffer

Doug Tozier's The Journey That is Faith is an unpublished manuscript but available on Lulu.com. (Doug is a deist who believes God is transcendent.)

9.

Numbers 25:7-8 When Phinehas son of Eleazar, the son of Aaron, the priest, saw this, he left the assembly, took a spear in his hand and followed the Israelite into the tent. He drove the spear into both of them, right through the Israelite man and into the woman's stomach. Then the plague against the Israelites was stopped; NEW INT.

### My Objective

My objective in this work is a gentle look at what this all means to me as a father, as a church leader, as an example of the faith.

I am writing to believers also who have experienced a sense of panic because their theology tells them that the people they love more than words can say are on their way to a flaming judgment. Let's talk about that.

Obviously, our sons and daughters who no longer hold to our beliefs don't see it that way. They don't affix blame anywhere because they see their atheism as a life choice, a new found freedom from religion and the guilt it inflicts on the ignorant and innocent. We should talk about this, too.

My interest in this work is not to explain atheism as a psychological or spiritual phenomenon. I want to think outside the box, the box that is full of overused responses to overdone arguments. I try to imagine what atheists might think of me. I wonder if they would say that I have been listening to them. I have no interest in interpreting their thoughts nor confronting their lack of the faith I claim.

But they, like me, need to own their own thoughts. I don't like pickled atheism no more than I like to hear the ho-hum, clichéd responses preachers are tempted to use in rebuttal. For a thousand unbelievers who have left the faith there must be a thousand different experiences and a thousand different shades of logic that explain the journey they took. Canned Dawkins is uninteresting. Their stories are alive with meaning. I want to understand what they are saying and recognize their point of view as logically legitimate and reasonable all the while knowing that my faith in God remains strong.

I am thinking that in all of this back and forth, God is not as violently enraged as our theologies make Him out to be. Let's discuss this, too.

### A Gentler Faith

A lot of what atheists maintain is common sense and need not be argued down in a defense of the Gospel. Christians should be conscience of a paranoid defensiveness that has come to fight for the faith simply because we are talking to atheists. In some ways, atheists, all non-believers, are misunderstood—in our world of unconditional love[?]. Christians are also prone to rush in to fix what doesn't need fixing or what they are powerless to fix.<sup>10</sup>

There are many rejoinders written, arguments put to print, to belittle as ignorant or foolish the very persons we love—as if we now must disinherit them. (And some atheists return the favor which only aggravates an already volatile discussion.) We lash out in an anxious anger and what feels like an endless hurt. But I have no intention of doing such, of arguing needless points of contention that are only denied by our sons and daughters who are no longer into our sermons or parlor talks.

“No weapon formed against you shall prosper,”<sup>11</sup> to quote God. When rushing in hurts relationships and contradicts biblical Truths, leaving the future with God is a wise choice.

### Intellectual Atheism

Like my son, the clergy who have left the faith are no intellectual slouches. They know bible—and some know the classical Hebrew and the Greek of the New Testament far better than I do. ‘Ignorant’ is an inappropriate term. My son often references web sites<sup>12</sup> that speak to his contention that the reason for his

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10. “Don't try to do everything. Every need is not a call.” Francis Schaeffer. *True Spirituality* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1971), Kindle Location 103.

11. Isaiah 54:17 no weapon forged against you will prevail, and you will refute every tongue that accuses you. This is the heritage of the servants of the LORD, and this is their vindication from me,” declares the LORD. NEW INT.

12. <http://www.patheos.com/Atheist.html>

deconversion is that he, butterfly-like, morphed into it. His *"becoming an atheist was a long, slow process that happened over many years."*<sup>13</sup> (His words) If we are their intellectual equals, we, christians, will not try to confuse them in angry debate. We should find a more civilized way of honoring our faith. Thinking for themselves, PK's and clergy that no longer believe in God conclude that there is more reason, now in an age of science, to deny God's existence than to believe in it.

In the words of John Loftus, a former conservative Christian apologist:

"At this stage in my life, I probably had no doubts about my faith at all, and with good reason. I had never encountered anything at all to the contrary. It just all made sense. Later I found out that none of these initial reasons for believing had any real merit to them."<sup>14</sup>

### Called to Account

It is the church that is being called to account and with whom I wish to have this discussion. By church I mean each christian, not the institution. And by each christian, I am writing to those believers whose relationships have suffered because of differing dogmas and none at all.

As personal as I make this all sound, my family represents a thousand families, a hundred thousand and more, who have sat in painful silence because religious differences have taken away their voice. They tire of confrontation, angry

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13. Why are we atheists?

Because we thought about it and it made sense.

Because there are intellectual reasons for it.

Because the evidence doesn't conflict with our beliefs.

Not because of some fictional reasons pastors teach you

in church.

taken from: <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/friendlyatheist/2015/05/05/pastor-cant-understand-why-anyone-would-be-an-atheist/>

14. John W. Loftus. *Why I Became an Atheist: A Former Preacher Rejects Christianity* (Amherst, New York: Prometheus Books, 2008), (Kindle Locations 273-275). Kindle Edition.

discussions, verse hurling and jabbing one another with theories over every conceivable divisive issue.

My son's view on atheism is a launching off point because we have had such talks about evolution, gay rights, religion, Bible stories, and of course, the existence of God. And we disagree virtually on every point. But family is not built on theory but on love. This is a major contention of this book written to the believers in such exchanges.

My relationship with my son is Okay. Yes, we don't talk Greek words any longer, but we do have a meaningful relationship and we do talk about other things. As my son and I deepen our relationship despite the differences—and we are—we just might have a template for others to use. That is something I would love to share.

### My Response

My response to all this? I want to encourage the disenchanting believer that thought that no member of their family would ever depart from the faith and then their worse fear came knocking. I want to say: things are not what they seem.

Arguing has proven harmful if not simply useless. I would encourage us not to depend on books and canned responses. Speak your heart but with a gentle spirit.<sup>15</sup> I detest the use of outdated arguments, a homemade concoction of apologetics and hermeneutics that convinces no one. Dr. Len Evans wrote: *"To tell of Christ's present day activities is far better than argumentative apologetics!"*<sup>16</sup> Atheists will respect us more if we own our faith and live it, if our hearts, not just our heads, are into a commitment to God.

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15. I Peter 3:4 Rather, it should be that of your inner self, the unfading beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is of great worth in God's sight. NEW INT.

16. Rd. Len Evans, *Love, Love, Love* (Plainfield, NJ:Logos International, 1978.), 42.

Christians need to call themselves to account in an honest evaluation of their faith. I must review my beliefs to be sure I am not just believing something because I read it somewhere or heard it in a sermon. I must 'own' my faith in God. It has to be real ...real to me.

Christians need to be willing to reconsider even time honored beliefs, hopefully without endangering their faith, because open honesty is the secret to making relationships work.

And, as regards our sons and daughters, love of family should have veto power over any impulse to defend mere doctrine. When Jesus spoke about hating family<sup>17</sup> I maintain He was telling us to commit, as He did, to serving God whole heartedly. Family will not challenge genuineness.

It is a powerful idea that those who do not share our faith should know that we do. And there is no greater voice for the Truth than to live by it.

The denouement (I just wanted to use this word) to all this is yet to be written.

## Content

Some of my chapters will probably read like mini-thesis papers since my view of some of these issues is uncommon—to my knowledge.

1. In *Under Review* I ask us to consider a simple but profoundly workable view of faith that atheism does not consider.
2. In *Disguised Blessings* I suggest some very positive things that have come out of what appears as a tragic end to faith.

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17. Luke 14:26 If anyone comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters—yes, even their own life—such a person cannot be my disciple. NEW INT.

3. In *Pursuit of Truth* I address the believer's lingering doubts and fears, hurts, guilt and the feeling that as a parent 'I let them down.'
4. In *Sesquipedalian [big] Ideas* I introduce some of the technical jargon that in a war on words has been disarming for us, simple and humble believers.
5. In *Evangelism* I provide a brief look at the 'revival' of the '70's.
6. In *Traditions* I re-evaluate my own religious experience.
7. In *A Personal Quest* I ask myself "Why go to church, anyway."
8. In *The Times* and *The Greater Society* I propose a theory using history to explain how atheism could thrive in the cultural petri dish of postmodernism.
9. In *The Gauntlet* I shock our christian sensitivities by alerting us to conflicts between a traditional view of the Bible and science and introduce a compromise that misunderstood might shake our faith. The wind of controversy if it blows hard enough can strengthen the roots of faith.
10. In *You're History* I review mythological thought in a biblical context.
11. In *Fundamental Ideas* I take a realistic look historically and biblically at the fundamentals of an evangelical faith.
12. In *Sacrifices* I address what is—or should be—the foci of all points of christian theology: *The Death of God*, which is most offensive to atheism and which seems minimized in today's seeker friendly churches.
13. In *Eternal Flames* I come to my own conclusion about an eternal and tormenting punishment of non-believers.
14. In *The Personality of Mercy* I address the particular nuance of the Hebrew language that marries the ideas of mercy and judgment—and which is grossly misrepresented by atheism.

15. In *A Holy God* I grapple with how a non-repent God could repent.
16. In *Undeniable Grace* I read the acrostic not as 'God's Riches at Christ's Expense' as much as 'God's Reach At Calvary Extended.' There is a difference.
17. In *A Post Modern World* I suggest some radical changes in the church's view of its ministry and the ability of our faith and biblical message to transcend postmodern culture.
19. *A Final Thought* offers two aspects of my experience that have been primary to my faith in God.
20. *An Epilogue* sums things up for us.
21. *Leftovers* includes some interesting additional essays on such subjects as:
  - *Intelligent Design*
  - *Prayer*
  - My son's view of all this '*in his own words.*'
  - *Postmodern Theology*

## **Who Knew?**

The Discovery

“Man cannot discover new oceans  
unless he has the courage to lose sight of the shore.”

— André Gide

## Under Review

*I believe in Christianity as I believe that the sun has risen: not only because I see it, but because by it I see everything else.*

— C.S. Lewis

Analyzing someone else's relationship with God appears to be a very human trait. My faith should not be subject to the chance interpretation of someone else's logic. I want to be free to tell my story as I remember it. I want to explain how I see God in my life without being judged by another's faith. I want to be free to talk about my faith to people of no faith without being called blind or superstitious. And I want to be able to explain things in totally human biological or sociological terms and not be accused of being a fool.

In January 1979 I spend one glorious week in Coronary Intensive Care, CICU, and post-coronary recovering from an unknown drop in blood pressure. On returning to the church I pastored I was scolded by one couple who thought if I had had faith I would not have been in the hospital in the first place. For me, it was a vacation, a time to study for a conference I was scheduled to speak at the following May and a time to re-ignite the flame of romance with my wife. I felt a renewed closeness to her while being in the hospital. The monitor showed a marked rise in BP when she appeared in the door way of my room. My faith told me it was the best thing that could have happened to me at the time. I felt so close to God.<sup>1</sup>

We have every right to our beliefs and how we interpret things by them. Sometimes we explain things as some great move of

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1. Acts 14:27 On arriving there, they gathered the church together and reported all that God had done through them and how he had opened a door of faith to the Gentiles. NEW INT.

God in our lives. And at other times we explain our experiences in all natural, human terms. Either review possesses the dynamic of a living faith to a believer, but we need to understand what we mean here by '*faith*.'

### Trusting God

In saying that some of our closest relations have left the faith I am referring to them no longer having any trust in a God they no longer believe is there for them. I find myself wanting to define this faith<sup>2</sup> and put a verse or two to it. But I must not dogmatize its meaning, that is, make faith some practice or ritual that if one performs it habitually they would be said to have faith or if one is said to have memorized or confessed it they have faith.

Faith can mean many things from our walk with God to our church's doctrinal position. But here, I am specifically understanding faith as *an awareness of that relationship we enjoy with God* and which is well documented in the record of Scripture. Faith, then, is the source of all conviction and confirmation in the existence of God.

Peter in his second epistle, chapter one, explains that our christian way of life is built upon this foundation. He wrote here of urgency and commitment to build upon our *faith* such traits as virtue, knowledge, temperance, patience, godliness, kindness, and finally love. He affirmed that this sums up the promises of God and in building on our faith this way, we become like Christ. This is the fulfillment of all the promises of God. If we need to know that the grace of God is active in our lives, here it is. If we need to be at peace about our circumstances, here it is. If we need an assurance that when Christ returns we are numbered with the saints, here it is. If we need to find a way to love those who have made '*forgiveness*' a real word to us by the harm they caused, here it is. If we need to find a way to be

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2. Atheism defines 'faith' as 'belief without evidence.' This is NOT...NOT..what I am defining it as or understanding it to be here.

victorious over temptations, here it is. And it is all built on one unshakeable foundation: *Faith*.

I don't want to analyze faith. I only want my faith to peacefully acknowledge the presence of God in my life. In a metaphor: I don't want to analyze the brush strokes, I just want to step back and enjoy the painting, letting my eyes interpret subtle themes—feel the painting of my life as God intended me to.<sup>3</sup>

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3. Peter clarifies that there is only one faith. And he calls it "precious" [From *τιμή* [time] meaning deserved respect or honor.]

I wrote in *Jots and Tittles*: "I am amazed at times to read something which I considered should have been above and beyond the scope and knowledge of the person who wrote it. Peter is an example of a writer, in 2 Peter 1, who penned details of what I would call the development of the godly life. I have studied the language there, and thought to myself that his use of terms, and the order in which he used them, was profoundly ingenious. If I am right—and the burden of this chapter is to show as much—then we have another glimpse into the divine inspiration of the text, and therefore of Scripture."

Little did I realize then that this has led those whom Bart Ehrman calls "the most critical scholars" to believe that 2 Peter "was not actually written by Peter but by one of his followers, pseudonymously." Bart. D. Ehrman. *Misquoting Jesus*. Pg. 31.

The genuineness of Peter's writing is documented. I prefer explaining the language as inspired.

2 Peter 1:

1 To those who through the righteousness of our God and Savior Jesus Christ have received a faith as precious as ours:

2 Grace and peace be yours in abundance through the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord.<sup>3</sup> His divine power has given us everything we need for a godly life through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. 4 Through these he has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature, having escaped the corruption in the world caused by evil desires.

5 For this very reason, make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; 6 and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; 7 and to godliness, mutual affection; and to mutual affection, love. 8 For if you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. 9 But whoever does not have them is nearsighted

Albert Einstein cautioned about describing everything scientifically. Like a beautiful piece of music as a variation of wave pressure, faith can be understood merely in theological terms, lifeless descriptions, dead dogmas, instead of the very quality that inspires vision and breathes life into hope.<sup>4</sup> Faith is not the foot, but the step in our walk; it is not the eye but the twinkle that shows us alive and in love, it is not the face but the peaceful smile upon it that responds with a joyous anticipation of better things to come. Faith is the breath of God reviving dead form because by it we come alive to love and to live for Christ.

Faith in God, admittedly, needs some definition in words. We need language to give expression and witness to our thoughts and our experiences. We depend on some doctrine, to define our faith as a living faith and not just an emotion, not just a feeling or an idea written in poetic verse. Faith, like love and hope, has, as it should, real meaning for anyone who desires a

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and blind, forgetting that they have been cleansed from their past sins.  
 10 Therefore, my brothers and sisters,[a] make every effort to confirm your calling and election. For if you do these things, you will never stumble, 11 and you will receive a rich welcome into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

4. Hebrews 11:1 Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see. NEW INT.

relationship with God.<sup>5</sup> It has, as the writer to the Hebrews (11:1) affirms, *substance*.<sup>6</sup>

### Davidic Faith

Our faith should have a Davidic quality to it. David said in Psalm 37:25: *I have been young, and now am old...* Study the Psalms and see what the old man discovered. He discovered a simplicity to faith. While young, the explanation for life and experience is found in the theology, for theology is best studied by the young who are wanting to discover and to resolve the mysteries of life. Youth is capable of imagining that all things are explainable and one's knowledge of Truth can be complete enough to give answer to the questions of life. But with the years we learn differently. When old, life becomes a Psalm, where wisdom means learning only to wait on God, to trust in His ability and His wisdom to know what to do and when; and to cling to a

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5. It is often a mistake to refer to a religion as a "faith," or to its adherents as "believers." As odd as this might sound, faith and belief don't matter much in most religions. Often ritual is far more important, as in Confucianism. Or story, as in Yoruba religion. Many Jews do not believe in God, and the world's Hindus get along quite well without any creed. When it comes to religion, we are more often what we do than what we think. ... but to be a Christian has typically been to care about both faith and belief. .... Today the price of admission to the Christian family continues to be orthodoxy (right thought) rather than orthopraxy (right practice). "We believe," the Nicene Creed begins, and two hundred or so words later Christians the world over have summarized their collective faith. As the term Christianity implies, this faith revolves around the person of Jesus...

— Stephen Prothero. *God Is Not One: The Eight Rival Religions That Run the World--and Why Their Differences Matter* (New York:Harper Collins, 2010), 69-70.

6. Hebrews 11:1 faith is the substance of things hoped for. KJV

faith that says He will.<sup>7</sup> Simple faith has a perception of God that He is not far off in our circumstances.

Faith does not deny our reality. We can study science, and should, but faith accepts our reality not needing to always understand how it connects with the past or the future. It is in this framework that faith is at peace as Paul noted, the peace that passes understanding.<sup>8</sup>

Faith is more than a theology, it is a way of life. For Isaiah, scholarship teaches, faith and *being* were identical. Not seen in the English translation is a play on word forms in Isaiah 7:9: *If you do not stand firm in your faith, you will not stand at all.*<sup>9</sup> The word '*stand*' is the word '*believe*' used in two different ways: *If you do not trust God, you will not survive.* Scholarship affirms that "*Faith is for Isaiah the only possible mode of existence*"<sup>10</sup> It is Isaiah's way of saying with Paul: "*For in him we live, and move, and have our being...*"<sup>11</sup>

The psalmist's understanding of faith approached this bold declaration of Isaiah in Psalms 116:10 "*I trusted in the Lord when I said, "I am greatly afflicted."*

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7. "the mutual relation between God and man is of the very essence of faith. ... it can come to embrace the total relation between God and man." Gerhard Kittell. *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1974), vol VI. Pg187.

see Ex 14:31 וַיִּירָאוּ הָעָם אֶת־יְהוָה וַיִּאֲמִינוּ בְּיְהוָה the people feared the Lord and put their trust in him

8. Philippians 4:6,7 Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. NEW INT.

9. to stand is a passive of the verb to trust (causative). Isaiah's use of 2 separate stems using the same root clearly shows the equation between trust and being.

אִם לֹא תֵאֱמָינוּ כִּי לֹא תֵאֱמָנוּ:

10. Kittell. vol VI. p.189

11. Acts 17:28 KJV

I am reminded of Immaculee Ilibagiza's struggle to survive the Rwandan genocide. Encouraging a good friend of her younger brother, Vianney: (All of them were in hiding—Immaculee eventually found herself in a three by four foot bathroom huddled with seven other tutsi women.)

"Don't panic, Augustine. As long as we're together we can look out for each other and we'll be okay." I don't know where I got the strength to say such things, since I was terrified and completely unsure if we'd survive. But I had to have faith that God would help us; otherwise, why would we endure all the suffering, anguish, and betrayal?"<sup>12</sup>

Her heart beat in sync with Isaiahic inspiration:

"I realized that my battle to survive this war would have to be fought inside of me. Everything strong and good in me—my faith, hope, and courage—was vulnerable to the dark energy. If I lost my faith, I knew that I wouldn't be able to survive. I could rely only on God to help me fight."<sup>13</sup>

### Childlike Faith

Faith at its root is traceable to a relation with God. Faith is not a wish to believe in something. Faith is a genuine believing in *someone*.

Faith does not know what it wants. Faith knows who it wants. Faith does not believe in God for things. Faith simply believes in God.

A.P. Simpson, the Nazarene hymn writer correctly echoes the voice of faith:

Once it was the blessing,

Now it is the Lord;

Once it was the feeling,

Now it is His Word;

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12. Immaculee Ilibagiza. *Left to Tell: Discovering God Amidst the Rwandan Holocaust* (Carlsbad, CA: Hay House, Inc., 2007), 60.

13. *ibid.* pg. 80

Once His gift I wanted,  
Now, the Giver own;  
Once I sought for healing,  
Now Himself alone.

This clarifies why a lack of faith in old Israel was so grievous to God. It wasn't a lack of doctrinal knowledge (They had the Law). It was a pronounced unwillingness to give God some credit for His constant oversight of their journey as He led them through danger after danger. (Psalms 78:22 *for they did not believe in God or trust in his deliverance.*)

(If you need a definition for sin, here it is!)

"On God's side [in our faith and relation with Him] this carries a reference to all the elements whereby God is God and seeks to establish a relation to man, namely, His might, His miraculous power, His electing will, His love, His steadfastness and faithfulness of His conduct, the actualizing of His Word and plan."<sup>14</sup>

In the classics of the Greek world before the writing of our Bible no one spoke about putting their trust in God.<sup>15</sup> Greek skepticism spoke of the gods but only in a philosophical context, never as a relationship with man. To believe in the gods simply meant to think they existed.

But belief takes on a new meaning in the scripture. The idea of trusting and trustworthiness applied to human relations<sup>16</sup> was now applied to God.<sup>17</sup>

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14. Gerhard Kittell. *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1974), vol VI. pp. 187.

15. In the older greek world, "to believe in the gods" was more the expression of νομίζω, to reckon or guess. It was used "in the debate with skepticism and atheism." *ibid.* pg. 180.

16. to believe in the Greek classical language speaks of trust and trustworthiness and therefore speaks to relations. *ibid.* pp. 175ff

17. "As the Old Testament understands it, faith is always man's reaction to God's primary action. Thus a wealth of usage begins to appear only when the individual breaks free from the collective bond,

In the Psalms and later in Isaiah the idea of trusting God is emphasized using a second word which we translate *trust* but it carries the sense of *earned trust*, a sense of feeling *secure* from danger and living with hope based on the relationship we have with God. Isaiah bore prophetic witness to this.

You will keep in perfect peace those whose minds are steadfast, because they trust [are secure] in you.<sup>18</sup>

Faith in God is, therefore, the guarantee that gives trust its meaning and value. Faith in God, in other words, becomes an assurance of His reliability.<sup>19</sup> His trustworthiness according to the Old Testament record is what makes God God.<sup>20</sup> This is all the theology we really need!

### World Views

But why suffering and grief? I do not smirk at the inquiry of a non-believer asking this question. We like to philosophize an answer about world views in which suffering perfects us or strengthens faith. As true to us as this must be it isn't helping the relationship we want with the people in our lives who do not believe. Why not simply say, "I don't know... God knows." An intellectual response can never answer a question of the heart.

Jim Palmer, in his book *Divine Nobodies*, tells the story of a friend, Bill, who lost his wife in a freak accident. She was thrown from a horse and died. She left two daughters, a four

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and on the basis of his own experience devotes special attention to the attitude of man to God." *ibid.* pp. 182-183.

18. Isaiah 26:1 NEW INT.

see also: Psalms 25:2 I trust in you; do not let me be put to shame, nor let my enemies triumph over me. NEW INT.

19. "Concretely πίστις [faith] means the 'guarantee' which creates the possibility of trust, that which may be relied on, or the assurance of reliability." Gerhard Kittell. *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1974), vol VI. pg. 177.

20. "Similarly, the OT speaks of God's אמונה faithfulness [as] ..that which makes God God." *ibid.* pg. 185.

year old and a fifteen year old, and Bill, her husband of 16 years and her college sweetheart. Jim, who tells the story, could make no sense of this tragedy in terms of God's goodness and he struggled with any make-believe explanation.<sup>21</sup> Jim questions:

"I was starting to personally know many believers with similar stories of tragic loss, which disturbed me. Maybe I was next. Was anything of mine safe in God's hands?"<sup>22</sup>

But this wasn't the widower's interpretation of things.

In Jim's account we observe Bill at the side of his dying wife, Carol Ann. He is reading the Bible.

"Bill turned to chapter 39 of Job and began reading, "Do you know when the mountain goats give birth?" Before beginning verse 2, God made his presence known to Bill. Revealing himself as the God who never changes, he impressed upon Bill once again his immensity and reminded Bill of the unimaginable intentions pondered during that glorious and special drive with Carol Ann, which were no less true at that moment as she slowly drifted away. God was telling Bill he was present whether it was the best or worst day of his life. Overcome by this divine exchange, Bill muttered, "Oh, my God. He's real. The drive, the mountain goats, Job 39:1 . . . he has known all along. God knew then and he is here now. Somehow I'm going to get through this." Standing before his deceased wife, Bill remembers thinking as horrific, disorienting, and unexplainable as it all was, he at least had a mustard seed of faith to say God is real; he is present and is bigger than all of this. In the days, weeks, and months ahead, this proved to be the seed God watered, pruned, and doted upon to grow a tree of shelter and hope in Bill's life. Though not softening the agony of losing Carol Ann, the recurring experience and assurance of God's presence sustained Bill and each of his children in the days ahead, indeed proving, beyond comprehension, that God continued being present in Bill's life and manifesting himself in sometimes supernatural ways."<sup>23</sup>

The biblical example of suffering was Job. We want to take away some theological constant from this story that offers an acceptable reason why God would allow Job to lose everything. But like Job's friends, and no matter how inspired

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21. Jim Palmer, *Jim. Divine Nobodies: Shedding Religion to Find God (and the unlikely people who help you)* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2006), ch 10. p. 113. ff

22. *Ibid.* Ps 118.

23. *Ibid.* Pp. 120-121.

we feel, there remains details that are only between God and Job. In a purely academic sense we see anguish like child birth; We have to think: something wonderful will come of this pain. But while on Job's ash heap there is no lesson of good that can lessen the agony.

### Uncle Angelos

On a visit home to Western New York from pastoring in Pennsylvania, my wife and I visited my Aunt Lorraine and Uncle Angie. He was managing his own business, an auto repair shop next to their home. He had refinanced the house to mortgage the shop. I remember his delight in seeing us. After he filled my tank, he gave me a wad of bills instead of taking money from us. He was in the moment of a vision he had that was now coming true. He wanted to share his bountiful joy with us.

But life would not remain this way for long. It wasn't long before his strength could not last the long hours needed to make it work and the mortgage on both house and shop lapsed. He lost it all. We visited him the next time in West Virginia where he lived now with my aunt near their eldest daughter and her family. His joy turned to discouragement as he asked me, a pastor and someone who suppose to know scripture, why ever would God allow this to happen. What sin did he commit that he hadn't repented of. He spent his last working days making ends meet financially out of the laundry room of a local hospital.

My uncle was my modern day Job and he was a saint in my book. Does life have to make sense always for us to know that God is trustworthy? My trust in God should transcend my current circumstance if my history shows Him trustworthy. A relationship with God means that our walk together has not been only through beds of flowers but also around dangerous corners and past foreboding shadows.

Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.<sup>24</sup>

It means God has already proven His faithfulness and I should live now in hope of His next act of kindness. Often the disconnect between our thinking and God's is that we live in the now, we are temporal thinkers and God isn't.

One truth is evident, though. To quote Randy Alcorn, the founder and director of Eternal Perspective Ministries,

"The book of Job forever refutes the notion that every tragedy that befalls people is a judgment on sin."<sup>25</sup>

Atheism finds this line of reasoning gullible and compartmentalized, and I get that. It makes more sense to nonbelievers to accept the ups and downs of this life existentially—we get what we deserve; we are our own god. Otherwise, chalk it up to fate and get back on your feet and do something about it! (The advice is good. The explanation for me? Not so much.)

Because atheism does not see any future past this life, they see this life as the only one we get, they tend to consider material possessions and physical comfort as more important.<sup>26</sup> To say that God isn't there or to assume that God does not care about my setbacks and hard times is to say that my trust in Him is misplaced, my sense of security transient, my dependence on Him a false hope... and my sense of fulfillment must be accomplished in this life because there is no next.

Our trust in God sees things differently, because logic is never sufficient to tempt us to toss away a relationship we have

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24. Psalms 23:4 NEW INT.

25. Randy Alcorn. *If God Is Good: Faith in the Midst of Suffering and Evil* (Colorado Springs, Colorado: The Crown Publishing Group, 2009 Kindle Edition), 89.

Job 2:3 Then the LORD said to Satan, "Have you considered my servant Job? There is no one on earth like him; he is blameless and upright, a man who fears God and shuns evil. And he still maintains his integrity, though you incited me against him to ruin him without any reason.. NEW INT.

26. The definition of materialism

in so many circumstances and in so many ways come to depend upon. Prayer is real to us. We know that life is lived in the context of our realities not our dreams and nothing awakens us more quickly than calamity, but this life was not intended to be the paradise we anticipate in the next. Trying to argue past this divide is futile. Only God can bridge this chasm. He is the bridge builder.

### Honey Bees

I can understand the reasoning of a non-believer and at the same time cherish my faith. My faith makes as much sense to me as a non-believer's explanation of the dynamics of their circumstances. Neither of us have the right to challenge that of the other. But sometimes just as difficult to understand is the good things that happen to us if it appears God is showing favoritism.

I was enjoying an afternoon in the woods with a neighbor friend, Mike, his brother Johnny and their dad, Lt. Bennett of the Buffalo Police Department, 13th Precinct. We were moving small tree trunks and branches clearing an area that was suppose to display the future home of the Bennett family. Suddenly, Mr. Bennett is barking orders for us, boys, to run to the fire, a bonfire he had built to consume much of the underbrush we gathered. We ran and a swarm of bees followed. I was the only one not stung and I am sure non-believers would advice against giving credit to God for my rescue since He didn't rescue the others.

No one is arguing that a bee sting is one grade removed from—say—I found the lost dime on the ground before they did. Some of life's bumps in the road are too little to make a bigger philosophical case out of it. Was anyone allergic to formic acid? No. But on another trip, Mike climbed a tree and falling out of it, lay unconscious on the ground for awhile. And Johnny once played in a bonfire and set his clothes on fire. They both survived. I went home and lived most of my childhood with lung problems. My point is that we tend to isolate one event and

even one moment of one event and make unwarranted comparisons.

Is it beyond the possibility to believe that God's providence sees reasons for allowing and preventing different experiences in all of our lives depending on the lessons He chooses to teach us or the memories He chooses to leave us with? The non-believer, I understand, is in sympathy not with me, the one who received God's alleged protection, but the others, and by proxy the countless others, who didn't.

As Rabbi Harold S. Kushner explained in *"When Bad Things Happen to Good People"*.

"Like most people, I was aware of the human tragedies that darkened the landscape—the young people who died in car crashes, the cheerful, loving people wasted by crippling diseases, the neighbors and relatives whose retarded or mentally ill children people spoke of in hushed tones. But that awareness never drove me to wonder about God's justice, or to question His fairness. I assumed that He knew more about the world than I did."<sup>27</sup>

This is not an abstract idea nor unreasonable. It was a life-changing faith for Immaculee Ilibagiza who lived through the Rwanda genocide in 1994. She wrote:

"I believe that God had spared my life, but I'd learn during the 91 days I spent trembling in fear with seven others in a closet-sized bathroom that being spared is much different from being saved...and this lesson forever changed me. It is a lesson that, in the midst of mass murder, taught me how to love those who hated and hunted me—and how to forgive those who slaughtered my family. I discovered God during one of history's bloodiest holocausts."<sup>28</sup>

Dr. Victor Frankl, founder of the *"Third Viennese School of Psychotherapy"* asked, *"Is it not written in the Psalms that God*

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27. Harold Kushner. *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* (New York:Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2007),. 5.

28. Immaculee Ilibagiza, *Left to Tell: Discovering God Amidst the Rwandan Holocaust* (Carlsbad, CA:Hay House, Inc., 2007), Introduction.

*preserves all your tears?*<sup>29</sup> *So perhaps none of your sufferings were in vain.*"<sup>30</sup>

I will not deny that a person's faith that God will protect can be challenged by human logic since not every believer is always kept from every tragedy—and not every non-believer lives a life of woe. There are too many examples to need to substantiate this. Everyone has a personal record of pain, some more than others. So, the larger question that should be asked is " *Why does pain drive some to prayer and others from it? Why do some see more reason to trust God in catastrophic circumstances and others find a personalized proof that God isn't there at all?*

Also, good things do happen to—those whom we might judge as —bad people. But the problem with this statement is that it is built on assumptions about the terms good and bad that are in large part based on our own experiences. It sounds reasonable to ask: Why? Why do bad things happen to good people and good things happen to bad people? But this question has no value other than to reason God doesn't care or that God isn't even there. For non-believers it is the absence of evidence of God's presence, and the absence of evidence is for them evidence of His absence. It is only a play on words that works for you unless you are a person of *faith*.

This was the prophet Habakkuk's complaint. In the words of the Message translation of Habakkuk 1:1-4:

"God, how long do I have to cry out for help before you listen? How many times do I have to yell, "Help! Murder! Police!" before you come to the rescue? Why do you force me to look at evil, stare trouble in the face day after day? Anarchy and violence break out, quarrels and fights all over the place. Law and order fall to pieces. Justice is a joke. The wicked have the righteous hamstrung and stand justice on its head."

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29. Psalms 56:8 *Record my misery; list my tears on your scroll — are they not in your record?*

30. Frankl, Viktor E. *Man's Search for Meaning*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2006. Kindle Edition. Location 1235.

But I would argue to the believer only that the trial of faith is priceless as an opportunity to draw closer to God.<sup>31</sup>

### Out on a Limb

I offer a few personal stories taken from my book, *"I Remember."* I take the liberty here to edit these accounts to fit them into this narrative without embellishment or dramatization. These are moments in my past that I often reflect on when I need a gentle reminder that God has to be as real in my present as He was then because He never changes.<sup>32</sup>

I was on a bridge—part of the New York State Thruway—in Hamburg, New York, south of Buffalo. I worked on the paint crew for low level bridge painting, up to 50 feet elevation. This was a summer job and, dare I say, a politically appointed opportunity to work and earn the next semester's college tuition.

It was between school years in the summer of 1966. Upon arriving home from Bible College, dad met me and instructed me to go immediately to our local barber. He would direct me next. John, the barber, gave me a note to take with me the following morning to Dingens Street East Buffalo to the main garage where the bridge repair crews gathered to work on the Thruway, bridges and roads.

I handed the note John gave me to the man in charge who immediately went into a tirade complaining that he now had to order new trucks just to employ me and a few other note bearers. Within the week I was on the bridge crew.

This particular day I was nursing a throbbing headache while working downwind from a dog food factory. The cooking

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31. I Peter 1:7 "These have come so that the proven genuineness of your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed." NEW INT.

32. Hebrews 13:8 Jesus Christ the same yesterday, and to day, and for ever. KJV This version was written above many a pulpit and still is.

aroma was actually a painful stench—sorry Fido. I sat on a kicker—a plank positioned between two steel T beams which supported a section of the bridge floor. I was positioned under the bridge 49 feet above a railroad track.

On this occasion I wore no safety belt. My head throbbed, my mind went blank, my eyes were closed as I ever so gently rocked and bounced to the rhythm of the plank as it swayed beneath me like a shock absorber responding to the disturbance of my movements. (I tend to move when in pain.)

I forgot where I was while thinking only of that unpleasant smell and the pain rippling down the entire right side of my face. My headache started to ease as I relaxed; so, to disarm the explosions in my head I went Zen-like into a meditative state hoping to forget all things painful and think only on what would encourage an Oxycontin high. It was working because my headache began to ease as I relaxed and—yes—I began to—or was thinking to—fall asleep, 49 feet up.

Just then a co-worker yelled my name and startled me awake just as I began to rock or thought to lean forward. My head bobbed forward. I still shiver to think about it. I cannot be convinced that this had nothing to do with God. I am convinced I was no more than one second from falling—most likely—to great injury or even death. I was over 3 stories above railroad tracks embedded in gravel and stone. I cannot help but believe in a God who has cause to watch over us.

For he will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways.<sup>33</sup>

### Missed the Bus

I was crossing the street in the city of Buffalo looking to my right for oncoming traffic. I did not see the bus coming from my left. As I turned to look forward—all the while continuing to walk—the bus flashed by me a few inches from my face. I had to wave my arms with open palms in a circular motion as if rowing backwards to break myself and avoid hitting what before my

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33. Psalms 91:11 NEW INT.

eyes was a streaking sheet of chrome. (The side of the bus at eye level.) I missed my bus! God?

Perhaps, one could maintain that all of us have such near misses in life and for a non-believer it is chalked up to pure luck. I remember Jackie, a friend of the family while I was growing up, who was a World War Two veteran who had missed the Battle of the Bulge while laid up sick in a London hospital. So, Jackie had excellent 'luck' but it never led him to consider God a friend. In fact, he joked about shoveling coal in hell.

One might wonder, how can I say God protected me from something as incidental as a city bus racing by me but not Jackie from six weeks of vicious fighting that cost the lives of tens of thousands of soldiers from both sides. Non-believers find this a remarkable example of wishing it so. But I cannot escape the conviction that somehow God is present. Jesus, Himself, recognized our puzzlement. When a tower collapsed killing 18 Galileans, were they exceptionally wicked? Or are believers alone worthy of God's love?

"Those eighteen who died when the tower in Siloam fell on them—do you think they were more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem? Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered this way?<sup>34</sup> [And blessings?] God also causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.<sup>35</sup>"

And to be honest with myself, I never found out what eventually became of Jackie. When mom refused his hand in marriage after the death of dad, Jackie disappeared.

I, for one, must not sacrifice my faith to incomplete histories or a logic that presupposes too much to be anywhere near conclusive. Others may and I will not second guess them nor disparage their convictions. But—if I may use Israel's wilderness journey metaphorically—even after 40 years (a lifetime) of the burning sand of hard times, rasping desert

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34. Luke 13:2, 4 NEW INT.

35. Matthew 5:45

winds of controversy and the hoped for interpretation of God's promises still unfulfilled, I, with Joshua of old, will stay resolved to put my trust in God.

"But if serving the LORD seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served beyond the Euphrates, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you are living. But as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD."<sup>36</sup>

### DeConversion

Each of us has a personal story to tell about rescue, near misses, and dangerous situations we avoided by some last second turn of events. To unbelievers these are co-incidences or twists of fate. But to believers, these are often associated with the providential care of a concerned God. Some times believers might get it wrong because they are always looking to interpret their life in this way. We are the firemen always sniffing out smoke or the policemen who just know that we are interrogating a liar. Some see the devil behind every curtain and God calling him out to battle.

Maybe I didn't get stung by bees simply because I ran on a different angle to the fire and my friends had the bees' attention. It could have happened to anyone. Maybe God isn't behind all our sermons, though, we, preachers, would like to think so. Maybe God does transcend most of the day to day decisions we make and providence only kicks in for the big ones or the dangerous ones or the risky ones. And yet some—even—believers live through anguish beyond words, tragic loss and grief, and God is seemingly silent.

### The Year of the Panic

It was the year of the panic, my personal panic, 1978, when my wife, Joyce, and I were not on the best speaking terms. All marriages encounter speed bumps on the journey. Ours must have been this year when the fog of career interests made family

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36. Joshua 24:15 NEW INT.

invisible. I imagine it all began the night my neglected wife was publicly degraded by a leading figure in the church, and I failed to take my queue in the mayhem of verbal bullets to come to her defense. I cowered behind the promise of a silence that I thought would protect us all from a war of words that could never be good. Joyce walked out. I didn't follow. And so began the first steps of two journeys of separate feelings, separate hopes, and separate dreams.

Her pain inevitably became mine driving me to panic and to prayer. I just knew that God had to do something or there would be no happy ending to this tale. It was after the new year that we reached the beginning of the end when I decided without notice to leave. I was heading to Jersey to talk to a friend for advice, for wisdom, for help, for some way to cauterize the emotional bleeding. I wasn't sure when or if I would be back because I wasn't thinking. It was a Wednesday and I was planning the follow day to disappear.

My departure would be scheduled for Thursday since I had to conduct a Wednesday night study. Nothing here makes sense.

Senselessly, I spent that late morning using paint remover on an old piano in the basement. I was using a circular sander to make lighter work of it. I still remember our two sons, ages nine and five, standing at the top of the cellar stairs curious to know what daddy was up to. It hurts even now to think of it. I yelled for them to get back in the kitchen and close the door. Part of me still knew that what I was doing was harmful—without a mask, breathing in a fine sawdust coated with paint remover.

Later that day, I went for a ride into Pittsburgh to think and plan. I spent a few hours riding around trying to stay out of more trouble. I came home an hour before the study and gathering my notes I headed to the church, a short walk across the street. This was when the hiccup seem to occur in my schedule. This was when events were twisted. Jacob fought

with the angel who dislocated his hip.<sup>37</sup> I dropped my notes on the floor and couldn't pick them up. My chest hurt too much.

An hour later I found myself on an emergency room examination table, my eyes closed, feeling the touch of a nurse as she called for additional help trying to find a pulse. My BP had dropped dangerous low. Not to be too detailed but I opened my eyes to watch the nurse taking my shoes off. She then removed my dress pants remarking, "You're staying!" There would be no trip to Jersey tomorrow. I was in the intensive care unit with doctors trying to find out what went wrong in my chest. They never found the cause because they were looking at the wrong heart. But God knew.

Over the next few days every thing began to change. I missed Joyce when she was not visiting. I lay there in prayerful thought. It was then that I began to see the first chapter of Second Peter in a new light. It became a series of teaching for me at the Charismatic Conference at Duquesne University the following May. At that conference I spoke with an inspiration I had never known before that. A couple hundred catholic students seem to be pulling the words from me as I went from verse to verse. I had since listened to the tapes and I question if it was really me in the lecture hall that week. And it all began in a hospital bed the day I planned to leave my family.

Pain doesn't always leave in an instant of repentance like bursting a water balloon. Sometimes, as for me, it seeped away over the following weeks and months and years as I strolled hand in hand with Joyce down woodland paths or neglected, all but abandoned, railroad tracks. We strolled and talked, trying to put in perspective the year that just was.

To me, it was as if God wanted us to stay together. It is refreshing to know that it was God's will that we be together, especially since I was becoming more in love with Joyce as the days progressed.

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37. Genesis 32:24.

### A Final Word

The sum of this matter is that our faith declares the reality of God and is capable of seeing His hand often in the circumstances of our life. My wife's pastor of many years, Pastor Harry Snook, wrote that faith develops or matures in steps from a belief in a Savior to unconditional trust in our Lord which he called "the top of the ladder."

"To trust means that we believe in Him regardless of our circumstances. We may not understand, there may not be any light at the end of the tunnel but we have full confidence in Him, that He knows what He is doing, and that He loves and cares for us, in spite of whatever happens."<sup>38</sup>

I have to quote the writer to the Hebrews here:

So do not throw away your confidence; it will be richly rewarded.<sup>39</sup>

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38. Harry Snook. *God's Plan & Purpose for Your Life*. p. 139.

39. Hebrews 10:35

## Disguised Blessings

*“People sometimes get so lost in their own beliefs that they fail to gain truth and understanding. You can’t get the whole picture just by relying on your own perception. Never be afraid of the truth.”*

— Amaka Imani Nkosazana

There is an unexpected good born out of personal crises. Perhaps, saying that *“all things do work together for the good”*<sup>1</sup> is not a bad way to put it, especially for those who desire to trust God.<sup>2</sup> It is easier for me to prayerfully trust God than to try and choose from all the possible directions I might take at a crossroad experience. Besides, I am too old, too brain shrunk, to argue for one personal decision over another. There is a benefit in not knowing but being so totally dependent on God for direction. And this is how I see myself in a postmodern society in which the people closest to me are not sharing my enthusiasm for wanting to serve God. I will not play a mental game of chess with a son or daughter, a parent, a sibling in an attempt to ‘win’ them over to my side or my worldview. I simply want to embrace them emotionally where they are at and, without their permission, trust the rest to God.

Without sermonizing a list of scriptural references, it is easy to see, especially in the Old Testament record, that trusting God excites Him to action at a devotee’s bidding (prayer). A friend asked me if Noah was a proud man—he had heard it said. My answer was an unequivocal: *“Not at all!”* Noah found *grace* in the eyes of the Lord and, as James reminded us, He resists the

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1. Romans 8:28 And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. NEW INT.

2. Proverbs 3:5-6 Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways submit to him, and he will make your paths straight

proud but gives grace to the humble.<sup>3</sup> So in my theology, my humble resignation to a circumstance which I cannot change is a better option than arguing on endlessly about subjects I have little knowledge in and probably less interest. Playing at ‘smart’ never works.

When a beloved in-law, not immediate family but not far removed, came out of the closet, what was I to think? My heart gave me no option to disown them. When a son isn’t sure about God for reasons not immediately clear to me, besides crying my eyes dry into my pillow at night, what was I to do? And when another son claims atheism as his new found freedom of mind, what was I to do? If God is anything like me, none of this would dissuade Him from loving them just as ardently as He loves me. (I keep wondering if because I am made in His image<sup>4</sup> and being transformed into Christ’s image<sup>5</sup> that this might mean we share a common burden and love for all of my family.)

So, besides the obvious benefit of being prone to prayer more often these days there are—I can think of at least—a few other blessings.

### Reliving Innocence

For one: although I may not be asked to die for my faith, I am now being encouraged to live for it more ardently, more completely, and more resolutely. Church, for me, is no longer a Sunday Morning concert. Worship has become serious business—as it should be. Little did I think that my family’s dedication to God—or lack of it—would impact my world this way.

I find myself seeking my roots. I know memories are not current realities but I discovered that a large part of myself

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3. James 4:6.

4. Genesis 1:27 God created mankind in his own image NEW INT.

5. Romans 8:29 For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters. NEW INT.

still longs for that closeness with God I once enjoyed in my innocent years before church splits, TV MA, phobias and depression. I find that I am still comfortable with that part of yesteryear that lingers on in my longings for more of Him—like an old friend reacquainted. I find myself wanting to worship God with a childlike faith as I used to before theologies defined that faith. I am rediscovering that part of my youth worth reliving.

I live for the chance to show my family that there is a reality in Christ that was, perhaps, hidden from them for too long. I want a chance to show them that there is such a thing as a love that can extend itself beyond the humane, beyond the expected, beyond the rule of life that demands it, beyond natural affection, beyond personal need. I want a love that reaches to the heart of God on behalf of everyone in my life that, simply because they are here, simply because they are human, simply because they met me, deserves a chance to see at least one more small glimpse of the reality that is in God.

One of my favorite verses is Psalms 71:18.

Even when I am old and gray, do not forsake me, my God, till I declare your power to the next generation, your mighty acts to all who are to come.

I am more than ever impressed by the Psalms because they are not to be dissected to see what made them alive with inspiration. They are not theological corpses of truth to be studied piece by piece. The Psalmist's message is alive with pathos and praise. His song served him in desert caves and on quiet hillsides with new born lambs. It served him in wakeful night watches and during playful times frolicking on sunlight slopes.

His voice sang of God's deliverance because for him it was not an idea hatched from mythological lore but a reality born out of dangerous times. His heart beat in sync with all humanity, needing in his spiritual weakness—begging—God to stay close and forgive. He knew failure, heartache, hurt. He knew the miracle of victory. His songs rang with the message of life and of God's mercy.

I want his song to be mine. I seek to be bolder—no, the word is *spontaneous*. I need to be more spontaneous—when asked a reason for the hope that I have within<sup>6</sup>, only, as Peter enjoined, “*with gentleness and respect.*” When it came to my faith, I have been so private, so reclusive, thinking I might disturb the peace and quiet of the day or be accused of soliciting or proselytizing. But now the line is drawn in the sand. Atheism is not a closeted thought anymore, and although I do not want to raise a debate or poke the hornet’s nest of controversy, I need to represent my Lord more openly. Back when we all lived in our separate worlds isolated and alone it didn’t seem to matter. But now I tell my story and hope that it finds a place on the bookshelf along side the writings of the new atheism—and if not my work, someone else that honors the God we serve.

I want to embrace all believers in Christ. I cease separating myself from Lutherans because I am Presbyterian, or Baptists because I am Pentecostal, or Catholics because I am Protestant. I am protesting nothing. It’s a new day in Christendom! We express our worship in rituals and forms that are different—yes—as different as our many ways of living out our faith but this does not—nor should it—separate us. The theology says Christ’s body is one.<sup>7</sup> Our faith is one.<sup>8</sup> Our message of the Cross is one.<sup>9</sup>

Being a Christian means taking Jesus’ tough sayings to heart as well as the ones that support my interests. It means

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6. 1 Peter 3:15 But in your hearts revere Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, NEW INT.

7. Romans 12:4 For just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, NEW INT.

8. 2 Peter 1:1 ...to them that have obtained like precious faith with us through the righteousness of God and our Savior Jesus Christ KJV

9. Ephesians 2:16 ...and in one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility. NEW INT.

listening to the Sermon on the Mount, lessons on forgiveness and loving those who are abusive toward me with as much eagerness to amplify the message through my example as when He spoke about dying for my sins or healing.

As Mark Twain allegedly quipped, "*It is not what I don't know about the Bible that bothers me; it is what I know.*"

### A Stronger Faith

We live in a time that challenges our beliefs, our doctrines. And this, too, is a good thing. I began to see some pet doctrines for what they really were and a greater emphasis in scripture on what is important to my faith. My faith in God took on a different value. It began to shine brighter as my lodestar to God's Truth.

"Losing weak faith may be God's gift to me. "Only when I jettisoned ungrounded and untrue faith, can you replace it with valid faith in the true God—faith that can pass, and even find strength in, the most formidable of life's tests."<sup>10</sup>

Many arguments Christians engage in are over matters that have no relevance to our Christian faith and frankly, I wonder why even discuss them unless religious history is our thing. The church has divided and divided and divided many times into hundreds of splinter groups over incidental points of theology that mean more to the experts than to us who simply want to worship God and be taught truth. In some, perhaps, unexpected way, conversations with my sons helped me see this. The dogma has been simplified and is something now that my faith can honor in unity with all believers.

### A Unique Faith

I have discovered in my course of studying these matters that our faith is unique.

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10. Randy Alcorn. *If God Is Good: Faith in the Midst of Suffering and Evil* (Colorado Springs, Colorado: The Crown Publishing Group, 2009 Kindle Edition), 13.

We are told: When the great Emperor Yao of China mounted the throne, an ancient philosopher of the time in that land is said to have remarked, "*Blow out the candles: the sun is up!*" Centuries later when in New York City, Dr. Lin Yu Tang, after a lifetime of study, made his profession of faith in Jesus Christ, he wrote:

"The world of Jesus is the world of sunlight by comparison with that of all the sages and philosophers and the schoolmen of any country. It is like the Jungfrau which stands above the glaciers in the world of snow and seems to touch heaven itself. Jesus' teachings have that immediacy and clarity and simplicity which puts to shame all other efforts of men's minds to know God or to inquire after God."

Then Dr. Lin Yu Tang added, quoting the ancient philosopher, "*Blow out the candles! The sun is up!*"<sup>11</sup>

Dr. Gregory Boyd, a professor at Bethel College, St. Paul, Minnesota, wrote:

There is no other belief which does this... Only the Gospel dares to proclaim that God enters smack-dab into the middle of the hell we created. Only the Gospel dares to proclaim that God was born a baby in a bloody, crap-filled stable, that He lived a life befriending the prostitutes and lepers no one else would befriend, and that He suffered firsthand, the hellish depth of all that is nightmarish in human existence.<sup>12</sup>

Professor Stephen Prothero, professor of religion at Boston University tells us that even our concept of '*a faith*' is unique to Christianity.

It is often a mistake to refer to a religion as a "faith," or to its adherents as "believers." As odd as this might sound, faith and belief don't matter much in most religions. Often ritual is far more important, as in Confucianism. Or story, as in Yoruba religion. Many Jews do not believe in God, and the world's Hindus get along quite well without any creed. ...to be a Christian has typically been to care about both faith and belief. ... As the term Christianity implies, this faith revolves around the person of Jesus, whom Christians have traditionally

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11. H. Kerr Taylor. *Event in Eternity "A Bible Timeline"* Atlanta, GA. John Knox Press, 1976.

12. Gregory Boyd *Letters From A Skeptic* (Colorado Springs, CO: Cook Communication Ministries, 2004), 151.

regarded as Son of God, Savior, and Christ ...the coming king who will remake the world).<sup>13</sup>

## Second Looks

Our Bible has been under scrutiny for centuries. Did you ever hear of the *Documentary Hypothesis*?<sup>14</sup> In our terms, it is a theory that attempts to prove that the first five books of our Bible were not written by Moses. This idea has been with us since the 19th century. Without laboring over the details of this controversy, suffice it to say that Rabbi Cassuto, in his work by that name, refutes all five points used to support it.<sup>15</sup> Having studied Classical Hebrew I find the rabbi makes sense calling into question the scholasticism that proposed it.

Nonetheless, there are even christian scholars, however, who adhere to this view and I was very reluctant to study it for fear I could not out argue such a hypothesis. I required a certain boldness and determination to take an honest look at this long held theory. My sons' questioning and personal inquiries into these matters gave me that academic boldness to take a second

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13. Stephen Prothero. *God Is Not One: The Eight Rival Religions That Run the World--and Why Their Differences Matter.* (New York:Harper Collins, 2010), 69-70.

14. "...it appear that instead of the whole Pentateuchal law having been given to Israel before the tribes crossed the Jordan, that law really grew up little by little from its Mosaic germ, and did not attain its present form till the Israelites were the captives or the subjects of a foreign power." — Julius Wellhausen. *Prolegomena to the History of Ancient Israel* (Kindle Locations 43-45).

15. The arguments in favor of the differentiation of various documents in the Book of Genesis, which constitute, as we have explained, the pillars supporting the entire structure of the documentary theory, are five, to wit:

- a) the use of different names for the Deity;
- b) variations of language and style;
- c) contradictions and divergences of view;
- d) duplications and repetitions;
- e) signs of composite structure in the sections.

— Rabbi Umberto Moshe David Cassuto. *The Documentary Hypothesis* (Jerusalem:Central Press, 2011.), 14.

look.<sup>16</sup> It was a blessing to discover that faith can hold its own against such disputable theories.<sup>17</sup>

### Challenged Ideas

Being challenged to study an idea for myself proved advantageous to faith. The saying goes: The same sun that melts wax, hardens clay. In like manner the same Bible message that drives some of us closer to God is considered of no personal value or scientifically unreliable by others. Looking at both sides, I came away with a stronger faith as well as a greater understanding of the non-believer's position on these matters.

I did discover that some criticisms were correctly observed by those who would discredit my faith but these were mere footnotes to the message without altering its emphasis or meaning to me. I have been studying the Bible, the Classical Hebrew of the Old Testament and the Koine Greek of the New Testament since 1966 in Bible college. My credentials will not serve anyone else. I don't consider myself a scholar. But my studies suggest that each believer should prayerfully within themselves take an encouraging look at the message.

Not everyone who looks at atheism turns atheist and some have strong doubts while considering what they might be giving up if they do. There are some who have found themselves second guessing what they might leave behind if they did.

Jim, an Episcopal priest and a believer, who was interviewed by Daniel Dennett, one of the Four Horsemen of the New Atheism, admitted:

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16. "... after Biblical research had become greatly enlarged and ramified in accordance with the analytical method, which had been perfected in every aspect and detail, this argument lost some of its earlier importance, and sometimes is no longer counted as one of the theory's chief proofs." *ibid.* p. 16.

17. Any scholarly effort even if its major premise is wrong is a lesson in some aspects of truth worth our study.

[If I became a nonbeliever], I'd probably gain an easier life, in some ways. The life I lead right now is very challenging. ... I really think I'd be happier in another field... I mean, happier in the sense that it would be a better fit for my collective skills and interests. [As for what he would lose:] ..... I suppose I would lose my prayer life, and that would not be good.<sup>18</sup>

Sometimes our discussion gets a little technical. We can't seem to help that when we are reading big words (more about that later). But my faith is simple. As the winds of controversy blew, I not only didn't uproot but my roots seem to go deeper holding me more secure, grounded in the Word. I am not an oak more like a palm. I sway, but I have not broken.

Isaiah consoled (42:3), "*A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out. In faithfulness he will bring forth justice;*" And I think at times that has been me. I have been angry, hurt, dragon-fire hot with rage, and tearfully silent. I have doubted and like Jim, the Episcopalian priest, I weighed the pros and cons of giving in to human logic or what sounded reasonable coming from reasonable men and women. After many hours of prayer, more hours of reading, more hours of YouTube debates and more discussions, I finally was able to go back to church with a new perspective.

Challenging myself to look closely at these matters has actually benefitted my faith.

### Acceptance

Family continues to give me pause for reflection and I am better for it. I am more real, understanding, sympathetic, and accepting. (Well, that's my impression of me.) But that's not where this started. Acceptance is the final stage of grief after denial, anger, depression, and bargaining. Two sons disenchanted with Christianity brought me to grief.

My immediate thoughts went to King David and his sons, or Samuel and his, or Eli and his or Hosea and his children

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18. Daniel Dennett; Linda LaScola. Caught in The Pulpit: Leaving Belief Behind (Durham, NC:Pitchstone Publishing,2013), 183-184.

—which is an unfair comparison. But when the heart is drowning in grief, the mind is grasping for any piece of drift wood now a sliver of the wreckage of a ministry once thought destined for some great land of a satisfying career.

I was in denial. This only happens to other people's kids, in other pastor's congregations. Besides, if you are once saved, you can't lose it. Our theological machinations often lead us into the labyrinth where most likely we will get lost in the center of an agonizing doubt in the chamber of eternal questions.

I just needed to know that I was not alone. Then I read that "[Francis Schaeffer] *knew only too well himself that a Christian could be on the verge of giving up their faith.*"<sup>19</sup> It was his own son, Frank, who wrote about his deconversion in *Why I am an Atheist Who Believes in God*.<sup>20</sup> All of this is both mind-blowing and yet comforting to realize that such crises are not unique to any one person's experience. Our sons and daughters leaving the faith places them in the mainstream of a generation that is re-thinking the fundamentals of our Christianity. We ought to be re-thinking those fundamentals as well.

I was angry, angry at the church for wasting my career, angry at my ignorance through the years when the boys were little, angry at higher education that turned materialistic in the name of good science, at politics for enlisting whole churches in their re-election schemes or made my faith the brunt end of a piece of political sarcasm, and at the world that seems as a whole to be slowly but discernibly slipping away from the biblical message of God's grace.

And from time to time I would like to have given a few believers a slap the side of the head to encourage them to think through what they were presenting as the Gospel to onlookers.

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19. Francis Schaeffer. *True Spirituality*. (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1971), Kindle Locations 206-207

20. Frank Schaeffer. *Why I am an Atheist Who Believes in God: How to give love, create beauty and find peace*. (North Charleston, South Carolina: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2014).

In one of the churches in which I was privileged to be their pastor, an elder scolded me for preaching psychology instead of Bible. My problem was and remains the fact that the Bible is the most informed, principled, and complete work of psychological insight ever written—at least to this preacher. My sermons did not lack for such content. I lacked the theology, though, the systematic approach to explaining the mysteries of God and godlessness. When someone is hurting, hearing the theories of the Fall of man does not help. I have often noted that theology fails us in the hour of our need. The touch of God is often His response to our cry for help regardless our theological leanings and His miracles are just that: miraculous and mysterious. The message for us is what Dr. Leonard Evans called a *Theology of Love*<sup>21</sup> and it is crammed full of good psychology.

I was depressed. I wanted to withdraw from everything and everyone and I daydreamed about a small cottage in the woods somewhere outside Sumneytown, Pennsylvania. There is such a place where one can go and never be found again. This town on the map is a dot that can be lost in print. When I speak of living outside it, I am hiding away from the critics of the world.

In such a down mood, I questioned the benefit of church since it failed me in the matter of two sons. Choruses seemed void of inspiration; the drums pounded out noise. The music was ear piercing. The sermon seemed to me a powerpoint sales pitch and I don't know what was on sale. Missing church became just another day to spend in personal seclusion.

I questioned: why deny myself the sweeter vices of life if no one was hurt by them. I love chocolate—my metaphor for so much more that we were denied through the years from dances to movies Joyce and I might watch.

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21. see [http://webjournals.ac.edu.au/journals/ADPCM/202\\_vision-magazine/vm20\\_05-the-theology-of-the-love-commandment/Vision Magazine, no. 20, Mar - Apr 1977](http://webjournals.ac.edu.au/journals/ADPCM/202_vision-magazine/vm20_05-the-theology-of-the-love-commandment/Vision%20Magazine,%20no.%2020,%20Mar%20-%20Apr%201977)

When we visited friends who started each day together with bible reading, I felt dirty, shamed by my attitude. I knew I was wrong about some things but not sure which ones.

Dr. Francis Schaeffer once spoke of “*freedom within limits.*” If the Bible doesn’t say that something is wrong, maybe it isn’t!? In any case, my self-respect was at an all time low. My pride was invested in my sons’ achievements and I was wondering by what criterium—now that the will of God for their lives was not to be part of my rumination, by what criterium—I could now evaluate their achievements and the meaning to their lives.

Bargaining for me meant attempting in prayer to trade my soul for theirs. Moses<sup>22</sup> did it and Paul<sup>23</sup> would have. The evangelical idea of hell came taunting me with the horrors to come for the people I care most about. But this has led me through a review of the doctrine of eternal torment—that, in itself, is tormenting. (Later. We need to talk further about this.)

But at last I arrived at acceptance. Finally, I found myself more accepting of things that before I would never have consented to. I felt beaten into submission to accept the Truth of the Word regardless how it read—what one scholar called ‘*surrendering to the text.*’ I wanted to be open to what Scripture might allow. Is God seeing things differently? Could some of our theologies be wrong? Is all hope dead because we have labeled people beyond grace? I began to wonder whether, at least, part of the doctrine I gave credence to over the years was made up to encourage subscriptions to church membership and not the kingdom of God.

I decided to accept my sons for who they were, who they had become and were becoming.

I needed more time to think... and pray.

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22. Exodus 32:32 But now, please forgive their sin—but if not, then blot me out of the book you have written NEW INT.

23. Romans 9:3 For I could wish that I myself were cursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my people, those of my own race, NEW INT.

### Bookmarked

I read about the Great Horse Manure Crisis of 1894. In 1898 at the world's first international urban planning conference in New York it was predicted that in a hundred years the city of New York would not exist because it would outgrow its ability to handle the number of horses whose 'deposits' would make the streets impassable. (One horse produces between 7 to 15 kilos, 15-35 pounds, of manure daily.) There would not be enough resources in time and personal to keep the streets clear.<sup>24</sup> While cities like London and New York were shoveling out, Henry Ford was designing the Model 'T'. Obviously, no connection was made in the conference between these two events—probably because no one would drive away with Ford's idea until the turn of the century. In 1898 no one figured on a Henry Ford.

I am discovering that even though everything that happens in my life has some meaning to me, to get to that meaning I might need a more complete picture. I am tempted to predict things but this might even be laughable—so much horse manure.

Tormenting us at times are projections of the future that map the way to bridges we will never cross. And over the years I have imagined myself crossing a few putting myself through needless stress. Why should I guess the end of the story when I have only read the first chapter? Why predict a future that will most likely turn out differently to my surprise?

My wife and I sometimes watch British mysteries and they're different from the American brand. It took me a while to figure out what that difference was but now I think I know. The clues are in the narrative not the action scenes. When someone is stalking about, we get a glimpse of their shoes not their faces,

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24. <http://bytesdaily.blogspot.com/2011/07/great-horse-manure-crisis-of-1894.html>

as on American T.V. This means I have to stay focused—not because the script is technical, space-age jargon and made-up science—startrek-ish—but the opposite. In the simplest of words the plot is hidden in the dialog. In the end it isn't the butler in the library with a candlestick but an octogenarian in the nursing home with a pillow or someone else totally unexpected that commits the crime. I have yet to guess correctly.

Life doesn't always follow the script in our heads. Family doesn't always follow the script in our hearts. Family seldom follows that script. Okay, family never follows the script. Reading a chapter of their lives somewhere in the middle of their story without waiting patiently for the remaining episodes is as unfair as it is subject to misinterpretation. To think that we have figured out where they are going is like interrupting them in mid sentence—something that is just plain rude.

Love is not rude! [I Corinthians 13:5]

One of my sons in an email cautioned me: *The story is not finished yet, ... and I don't know yet how the last act will play out.*

I think this is sound advice, especially when it comes to family. My last chapter isn't written yet. I am still learning. I am still dealing with some pesky temptations that are none of your business. I am in the process of studying me. I am continuing my self-taught approach to learning some of the issues that dominate in intellectual circles. I am evaluating once again my feelings and thoughts while sitting in church. As I said in my short work: *A Monologue of Life*, if I learn to accept me, I can accept you. I know my sons will not seem so distant as my phobic imagination thought.

And my sons who no longer express an interest in my faith? They love me as I love them and that's a good place in our story to place the bookmark.

### A Better Dad

I have come to realize how little I knew about my sons and how important it was for me to be part of their day. Parents are in

general unaware of their children's lives after the pre-school years. Please tell me I am not alone in this.

Typically a child's personality development means keeping secrets. And as they become adventurous and set out to discover their world, it is less likely they will bring home a bouquet of flowers stolen from the neighbor's yard for your dining room table (true story) or tell you about their first kiss or the fight they were in. Childhood exploration is a very private thing between them and their friends which in the case of our sons went unnoticed—at least by me. By dribs and drabs over time and in family gatherings the stories leaked out how they did this or that happened to them when they were growing up. And I have been wondering where in the world was I when it all went down.

I do have a few memories with each of them that marks the high point of parenting for me. When Jim and I used a new deep runner to catch probably the largest large mouth bass in the lake, or when Josh scored—I don't know: maybe 10 points — to lead their basketball team as the underdog at the 'Y' to a victory leaping into my arms in the excitement of the moment. My heart has forever imprisoned these memories. As well when Tim and I spent a considerable amount of time soldering connections on a perf board he etched. It had a timer chip... and everything. A few years later, during his first year of high school, he received recognition in a computer programming contest in Lancaster, PA. for his game design written in machine code.

But I was unaware of their questions, unaware of their challenges and fears, unaware that they ever had a nightmare. When they lost a romance, it was mom that gave them a comforting hug.

Life begins innocently for a parent even if they think themselves unqualified to raise an infant. Hug and kiss them daily, keep them fed, healthy and clean, and just be yourself—your loving, non-stressed, calm and got-it-all-together self—and they grow magically past demons of the pots and pans to surprise you how utterly ingenious they can be.

Joyce and I discovered early to never leave an infant alone, awake, in a crib. Whatever is in reach of little arms and hands—and there is a lot more than you think—they find a way to work with it to design your next surprise. One day—I admit it was risky and if I could live life again, I promise now I would never do it again—I fell asleep watching our four year old while mommy was at work. (I worked graveyard which explains the sleep part.) When I awoke probably only minutes later—sure!—I had a room to repaint. Mustard was all over two walls, the ceiling and the floor because my son—and I will forever be proud of him—had to make himself a mustard sandwich. He was hungry!

I smile now at the antics of four year olds. There was the time one son jumped into the car and popped the gear into neutral—on a hill. I chased after him and caught up to him before reaching the corner. I learned that the second you take your eye off a child, they disappear in a puff of mischief.

But ask me what I remember about them in third grade and I draw a blank. Oh, yes, there were vacation trips, football in the front yard, hide and seek in the state forest (totally organized and safe), lots of visits to the ‘Y’ for our youngest and a few visits to persons in the church I pastored. We pre-occupied them with ice cream while we visited. I don’t know what I would do differently today—other than to stay awake.

We were also too poor to provide for them as adequately as I would have liked. Contrary to popular opinion, when we visited Florida and never made Disney World only a few miles down the road, it wasn’t for a lack of interest in their fun. I was pinched for money and time and my focus was on a personal career interest in meetings that I went there in the first place to attend. Okay, I guess I wasn’t into their fun and that might have been the first sign of a disconnect. I wrote a 208 page book, available on Amazon, apologizing to them and trying to explain how a minister sees life and all that folderol.

I miss those early days of innocent play, carefree adventure, hot summer night rides to put them to sleep. I have a thousand and one isolated glances at a past filled with mayhem

and merriment and notwithstanding my grief over two sons no longer having an interest in God, they remain my 'boys.'

It is important to understand that a son or daughter does not need to become president to realize a parent's absolute pride in their achievements. They do not need to be famous preachers to brighten our lives with who they have become. I never wanted them to grow up to be me, anyhow. I wanted them in the normal process of development to find out who they were, each in turn, and to absolutely know they were—and are—loved, loved by their mom and me ... and God. And when they hurt, so do Joyce and I and we are equally as excited with them over anything they look to do and succeed at it.

Should I be haunted with unanswered questions?

Why? Why let my past imperfections eclipse the good memories. I am not willing to lose the joy that my current relationship with them provides. I am not willing through a despondent look at yesteryear's bad times—throwing blame in the air to see on whose head it lands—to risk the chance now of becoming a better dad.

### Love's Theology

How serious am I at improving as their father, my wife's husband and my God's servant?

When we were young parents and we held the little ones' hands as they toddled into the sanctuary, Sunday was fun. Sunday was a time to dress up. Sunday was a time to show off handsome children. It was almost as if we went there to brag on them, not worship God, but would never admit it.

Sunday was an enjoyable time to be with persons who held with us a common theology and a common ritual—hand shakes and hugs all around. We knew we were on our way to heaven because we were there. Church was the undeniable proof of our commitment to and love for God. We appreciated pastoral confirmation in every sermon. We were not cliquish, at least not in our minds. There was only simple affirmation and a good feeling that we were true worshippers of God and soon,

after service, it would be time to go to the restaurant. We looked forward to our times of ‘fellowship’.

I compare all this with my college days. College was a very serious time for the professors and their teaching aids. When I walked into class I knew it was going to be an intense 45 minutes of learning. Aside from the week before Christmas, no one threw a party for students. But because of grace, we tend to view the time we spend in church less seriously. You can’t flunk out of church or heaven—at least theologically speaking, I don’t think so.

But now I am rethinking all of this—re-evaluating my commitment to God in real time, in real life terms, not theological constructs or ritualized metaphors. The title of this work, *Challenged*, is my way of encouraging my fellow christians, especially those of us who have family members that see no meaning in our weekly pilgrimage to—what they might call—religious theatre, to join me in basing our beliefs in an ardent interest in living the Savior’s message of love. Ritual and doctrine should play a supportive role to that message.

I know all this already, but still when it gets down to essentials—is that why we are called fundamentalists?—I would like to set my little boys down once again and pound some sense into their heads about God and heaven and hell. I guess this is what Dr. Leonard Evans might call “*vicious love*.” I can’t pull myself to admit that I am defensive about everything we brought them up to honor and now they are discarding.

“You’re being manipulated by the devil, son! You are being brainwashed and deceived by people who don’t know what they’re talking about! We didn’t bring you up this way!”

We don’t need to defend what we do for one hour a week on the other side of stained glass windows. We don’t need to pretend we know the doctrine or church history when we don’t. We don’t need to shore up our arguments with books and seminars on testifying to atheists. We don’t need to persuade family members of anything other than our desire to remain

family and our love for one another. As basic as this idea sounds, it is the heart of our opportunity to share Christ.

My sons, unintentionally, are calling me to account. My faith is being challenged—but not by them. I have been shocked into de-valuing any desire for religious play. For me, thanks to them—all three—this is an age of fish or cut bait. This is the age of being genuine and true to my beliefs or discarding those beliefs in the name of simple honesty. After conversations with my sons and after much reading I have discovered some ideas long held as part of a sincere and true christianity are not that at all.

I have discovered that real—or what Francis Schaeffer called *true*—Christianity is capable of embracing people I might have once shunned and it calls for a re-examination of my own heart to see just how loving my loving in Christ is. I am overwhelmed attempting to study from Scripture what love means, how extended, how non hypocritical, how spontaneously generous and unconditionally sacrificial it is, how like Christ but in a social or familial sense it gladly suffers the pain of another it forgives. Here is the real confirmation of our salvation.<sup>25</sup> Of this our non-believing family members will take notice.

True faith I am finding out can survive outside of the church walls—though I recommend we keep going. It is freeing to discover that my love for family is a more powerful witness than any sermon.

In the words of Pastor Jim Palmer:

DESPITE ALL THE DENOMINATIONAL DISTINCTIONS I'VE COME across along the way, for the life of me, I cannot find any other litmus test Jesus insisted upon to authenticate his followers except love. This was unsettling when I realized that despite knowing Greek and Hebrew and the boxes in my attic filled with hundreds of my sermons on tape telling others how to be a Christian, I wasn't very loving. Winston Churchill cautioned, "However beautiful the strategy, you should

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25. I John 2:5 But if anyone obeys his word, love for God is truly made complete in them. This is how we know we are in him: NEW INT.

occasionally look at the results." My version of Christianity wasn't making me much like Jesus.<sup>26</sup>

My sons, all three, two no longer in the faith (or at least for now) and one who is, were encouraging me to be as real a dad, a husband, a christian, as I could, to take my knowledge of the Bible and think through the parts of the story that are livable, to find out if the principles by which Jesus governed His sojourn on the earth could work for me, as well.

Dr. Leonard Evans called this *A Theology of Love*.

In 1 Thess. 3:12-13,<sup>27</sup> I found again that the thrust was not toward intensification of religious experience, but toward real relationships and real fellowship. God is the infinite faucet of love. By faith, we hook the hose of our life up to Him. Then we make the mistake of trying to shoot the water back to the faucet, rather than to our fellow man.

I was becoming very excited. I began to ponder what would happen if we loved this way. In the systemization we did at seminary, we had answers, but the world is looking for people who will demonstrate the power of the love of God<sup>28</sup>.

If we are living in the last days, as we say we are, we need to accept the responsibility that comes with living in anticipation of Christ's return.

Even Dr. Francis Schaeffer found himself in the stock room of his most treasured memories taking inventory of his past to decide what to throw out and what to keep as part of his own reality in Christ:

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26. Jim Palmer. *Divine Nobodies: Shedding Religion to Find God (and the unlikely people who help you)* (Nashville, TN:Thomas Nelson, 2006), 173.

27. 12 May the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else, just as ours does for you. 13 May he strengthen your hearts so that you will be blameless and holy in the presence of our God and Father when our Lord Jesus comes with all his holy ones.

28. [http://webjournals.ac.edu.au/journals/ADPCM/zo2\\_vision-magazine/vm20\\_05-the-theology-of-the-love-commandment/](http://webjournals.ac.edu.au/journals/ADPCM/zo2_vision-magazine/vm20_05-the-theology-of-the-love-commandment/)

"I realized that in honesty I had to go back and rethink my whole position. I had to go all the way back to my agnosticism."<sup>29</sup>

There is an old Southern Gospel song that asks: "Will the circle be unbroken?" Only love has the power to decide otherwise.

### Tragic Optimism

I dare say: my hope has reason to be optimistic. Furthermore, my faith has cause to hope in God's ability to represent Himself, to speak loud enough to the hearts of my family that they hear Him. After all, He got my attention.

I use the word optimism even though it has a temporal, worldly ring to it. The expectation of my faith can view the promises of God beyond the horizon of mere optimism. But it was Dr. Victor Frankl's word and its spiritual as well as psychological value to the way we perceive things is inestimable. Dr Frankl endured a Nazi concentration camp. He lived to share with us how the most unthinkable nightmare in history could be endured if hope could stay alive. He called this *tragic optimism*.<sup>30</sup>

I speak of a tragic optimism, that is, an optimism in the face of tragedy and in view of the human potential which at its best always allows for: (1) turning suffering into a human achievement and accomplishment; (2) deriving from guilt the opportunity to change oneself for the better; and (3) deriving from life's transitoriness an incentive to take responsible action.

My sons' leaving the faith has hurt. How can I deny that? The faith they have left is the faith that has been my passion for life, my source of strength to take—howbeit faltering—steps to climb up, not a few, sheer cliffs of doubt and despondency that would otherwise have made my way through

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29. Francis Schaeffer. *True Spirituality*. (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1971), Kindle Locations 145-146.

30. Viktor E. Frankl. *Man's Search for Meaning* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2006), (Kindle Locations 1370-1373).

this life impassable. And now that same faith must serve me in this matter as well.

This is my opportunity to serve Christ with tragic optimism: turning misunderstanding, distance, tension within family into a ministry of reconciliation; using my sense of guilt—only the guilt that I must own—as an opportunity for constructive change through, yes, true repentance; deriving from life's transitoriness, the time I have left, an incentive to take responsible and loving action.

When I worked for an investment firm, I remember the homemade sign that hung framed on the office wall of a co-worker. His daughter of—if memory serves—seven years had terminal cancer. She had written him in bold letters running in squiggly lines the length of a letter size sheet of paper: *Never give up*. The child's message is an undying reminder of what faith should be all about.

Some believers are probably thinking how blessed they are because their entire family and everyone they care about is "serving the Lord." I hear them saying: Sorry for your troubles. And they stroll by as if none of this was ever about them.

But it is! This is about all of us. This is about the church. We live in a time when biblical truth is being interpreted by intellectuals who claim they know what it says and they can show through science that the Bible is wrong and that we are misled. And we are, in academic terms, out argued and out reasoned. Our families live here in the land of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. We dare not depend merely on our wit or how ingeniously we can straighten what we think they have twisted. For us it should always be as it always has been a matter of faith. And although, they call that the ridiculous opinion of closed mindedness, we know that we are in love with Christ and that our relationship with Him is an undeniable reality.

We are rightly being called out to show, not prove, that our faith is genuine. It is humbling to know—even though we have never denied it—that we need to extend our love beyond its current boundaries, to forgive, for some, the most

unforgivable hurts. Yes, our concern for family may have given us a boldness and a freedom to proclaim our faith but we must remain sensitive if we care that they listen.

Francis Schaeffer is correct in cautioning us:

Until you are grounded in the truth of God and are living it, you have nothing to defend in the marketplace of ideas.<sup>31</sup>

And I am quick to add, that once grounded in that Truth, living it is the only message we need for family.<sup>32</sup>

We have become street-wise, world-wise, in ways grandma and granddad would never have thought possible because we, unlike they, live in a time when society no longer accepts as normal or reasonable what we have all along been calling *christian*. But our only obligation according to our Lord's final word to us is to not allow our witness, the influence of our love and faith, to lapse. Love always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.<sup>33</sup> What Jesus told John, the beloved apostle, while on the island of Patmos, is God's final instruction to His church. I see it now! We best listen!

"strengthen the things that remain."<sup>34</sup>

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31. Francis Schaeffer. *True Spirituality* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1971), (Kindle Locations 113-114).

32. I Peter 3:1 Wives, in the same way submit yourselves to your own husbands so that, if any of them do not believe the word, they may be won over without words by the behavior of their wives, NEW INT.

33. I Corinthians 13:7 NEW INT.

34. Revelation 3:2. KJV

## **"Seek and Ye Shall Find"**

The Pursuit

"To love someone with all of your heart requires  
reaching them where they are  
with the only words they can understand."

— Shannon L. Alder

## In Pursuit of Truth

*“She was aware that reason had left the room. She was not sorry to see it go.”*

— Libby Creelman, *The Darren Effect*

Ken Daniels had worked for Wycliffe Bible Translators in Africa. When he walked away from his faith in God, well-meaning friends tried to understand: Why? How?

"It's so sad." This is the most common response I have heard from family, friends, and other interested believers upon learning of my loss of faith on the mission field. I have been told that if I had embraced a slightly different brand of Christianity, I could have avoided coming down this path. It was because I believed incorrectly, or because I wasn't truly a believer in the first place, or because I did not seek God earnestly enough, or because I did not submit to his sovereignty, that I ended up abandoning the faith.<sup>1</sup>

But Ken disagreed with their analysis of his life.

Our decision, far from being "sad," as many of my friends and family perceive it, represents a move from unquestioning acceptance of tradition to a spirit of openness and adventure that pursues the evidence wherever it leads. We left in pursuit of truth.<sup>2</sup>

There's almost a primitive quality to some of our perceptions of life and our conceptions about God or how He relates to us. We are like children trying to live in an adult world. Much of what we call truth requires a more grown-up understanding—which means a spiritual mindedness.<sup>3</sup> We are fish in a fish tank

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1. Kenneth Daniels. *Why I Believed: Reflections of a Former Missionary* (Austin TX: Kenneth W. Daniels, 2010.), 3.

2. *ibid.* p. 4.

3. 1 Corinthians 2:14 The person without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God but considers them foolishness, and cannot understand them because they are discerned only through the Spirit. NEW INT.

imagining it is the ocean. There is a limitless universe to yet be discovered compared to the small amount of knowledge we currently pride ourselves knowing. When it comes to spiritual things: we deny as real anything we cannot wrap our logic around and we imagine things possible only because they fit better our experience and explain away other things we flatly deny. Both believers and non-believers are susceptible to this mindset. In religious scholarship it is called *eisegesis* or reading into scripture something we want to read but that isn't there. Atheists, too, can disregard any evidence that contradicts their no-god hypothesis.<sup>4</sup>

My wife and I were coming back from the mall riding on the six lane at the speed limit in heavy traffic. There was a line of—perhaps as many as—100 vehicles queued up to make the turn unto an upcoming exit. And in the middle of that lineup was a police car with blue lights flashing and behind it was a small blue sedan with its nose collapsed in upon itself. I stayed with traffic in the middle lane while remarking to my wife about the accident. She totally missed seeing the police cruiser but had fixed her attention on the exit. I told her after passing that we just came upon an accident—an accident she failed to see because she wasn't looking for it. Her attention was drawn to something else. The principle here is that we tend to miss what we are not looking for. The same can be said about spiritual matters.

Ken Daniels was honest in speaking of his quest for truth but where we look determines a lot about what we find—or think

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4. Jim, a cradle Episcopalian and the rector of a thriving suburban Episcopal church admitted according to Daniel Dennett:

"I picked up *The God Delusion* [by Richard Dawkins] at the used -book store the other day, and it was the most insufferable reading I've ever had to endure . It's incredibly disingenuous, if not equally as bigoted as the right-wingers. The arguments are laughable to me, and yet he's earnest and sincere and he really believes he's pursuing this ethical agenda. But I think he's willfully obtuse, and it bothers me, because both sides in this debate are yelling past each other."

Daniel Dennett; Linda LaScola. *Caught in The Pulpit: Leaving Belief Behind* (Durham, NC:Pitchstone Publishing,2013), 152.

we have found. Faith, however, for the believer, is a Sherlock Holmes' magnifying glass able to see beyond what is often called the obvious and view what is happening in the spiritual realm where God rules. Faith is the spiritual archeologist's brush gently brushing aside years and layers of hurt that may have covered lost truth. Somewhere deep in a believer's heart is the divine promise of answers—even to questions we have not yet asked. In this world of the yet undiscovered mysteries of life we are like children ever learning, ever feeling new emotions churning out strange passions, curious beyond our ability to know what inevitably comes only with time and prayer.

Living in the moment rather than recklessly driven by apprehension about the unknown future makes more sense when using the term 'believer.' Allowing myself to discover today's joys, to reaffirm today's reason for being alive, to believe that God is supplying today's needs<sup>5</sup> and letting faith reassure me whatever I need for today is in the mail—I just need a tracking chapter and verse—makes more sense if I am proclaiming to be a believer in the immanence of a God of love.

We are ever changing, changing our minds, changing our opinions, expressing remorse for things once thought proper, rethinking a thousand decisions upon which we once hung our future hopes and dreams. If I am willing to wait quietly, prayerfully, lovingly on God's opportunity to make clear what is now in a fog, if I am willing to let my faith guide my thoughts, if I look to the promises of God, I can live above all this confusion and the unnecessary stress that comes with it. I am talking about talking... to God instead of theologizing solutions or as the song writer so aptly wrote:

Sweet hour of prayer, that calls me from a world of care.

Faith is not the believer's magic wand to poof away painful realities or explain them as praiseworthy. When life hurts, it hurts! The pain may not stop right away but by faith hopefully we sense the peaceful arm of God about our shoulders. Faith is a

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5. Matthew 6:27 Can any one of you by worrying add a single hour to your life? NEW INT.

process of discovering, finding God where non-believers least expect Him to be.

I applaud answered prayer, a love that transcends hurt, a faith that will serve God even though His reasons for allowing our circumstances to be what they are might be far from clear. I applaud a believer who accepts life as it comes with their Bible still open and their knees humbly bent.

We all live with questions and hidden concerns: unspoken doubts, cruel realities, unidentified hurts, illusions of certainty, hidden guilt, and what the previous generations have bequeathed us that we care not to inherit. For some believers these possess the memories like demons from a surreal childhood. We must trust God—because that is what we are all about as believers—to address each of these scary monsters from the past and putting them to death grasp a renewed hope in His promises.

## Unspoken Doubts

*"We'll never survive!"*

*"Nonsense. You're only saying that because no one ever has."*

— William Goldman, *The Princess Bride*

Jesus meets a man who confessed that he was filled with doubts (Mark 9:24), who cried in his desperation, *"Help thou my unbelief"*—(help me with my doubts!<sup>1</sup>) To doubt is to be human. Rabbi Kushner encouragingly added:

"One of the most important things that any religion can teach us is what it means to be human."<sup>2</sup>

All Christians have doubts, doubts about the accuracy of their theology, even—from time to time—embarrassing doubts about God's existence or if He will answer prayer in a timely manner. John Loftus, who turned atheist after years pastoring, expanded on this beyond where I might go:

...consider Os Guinness's book titled *In Two Minds: The Dilemma of Doubt and How to Resolve It*. Guinness discusses the main reasons why people, including Christians themselves, have doubts about Christianity: there is doubt from a faulty view of God; doubt from weak intellectual foundations; doubt from a lack of commitment; doubt from lack of growth; doubt from unruly emotions; doubt from fearing to believe; doubt from insistent inquisitiveness; and doubt from impatience or giving up.<sup>3</sup>

Os Guinness might in part be on to something.

He mentioned a *'faulty view of God.'* How accurate and consistent can our view of God possibly be if we are still

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1. Timothy Keller. *The Reason for God* (New York:Penguin Group, 2008)

2. Harold Kushner. *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* (New York:Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2007), 81.

3. John W. Loftus. *Why I Became an Atheist: A Former Preacher Rejects Christianity* (Amherst,New York:Prometheus Books,2008), (Kindle Locations 523-526). Kindle Edition.

learning, still growing, still discovering the dynamics of our relationship with God? And what if we haven't been talking with Him about these things.... Well! Little wonder! Any doubt I have as a believer—as I grow in Christ—then, should be a temporary expression of my incomplete knowledge of God and His Son, Jesus, whom someday I shall know even as I am known by Him.<sup>4</sup>

Doubts are often introduced by the things we hear and the people with whom we have entrusted our education, who might be selectively offering us biased explanations of life and God. These ideas might first confuse us and then lead us away from our beliefs. They are salesmen, of sorts, selling us a Pinto, Ford's mysteriously exploding compact car of the 1970's, when we really could afford and want a Cadillac.

Richard Dawkins, one of the Four Horsemen of the new Atheism, (in *"The God Delusion"*), admitted that his book was a blatant attempt at winning us to his side. *"If this book works,"* he wrote with assured intention, *"religious leaders who open it will be atheists when they put it down."*<sup>5</sup> His woven web of sticky logic may sound plausible for a believer whose prayer life is practically non-existence, whose fellowship with other believers is painfully damaged and missing or whose ability to think for themselves and study issues is not part of their modus operandi for dealing with life's bigger questions.

### Doubt and Faith

Doubt boils down to a shortage of trust which means that faith and doubt in the scriptures are mutually exclusive. Doubt hesitates to rely on God which makes praying to Him a bit of a paradox, but He won't mind hearing us say: *Help me with my doubts.*

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4. I Corinthians 13:12 For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known. NEW INT.

5. Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (New York:Houghton Mifflin Co., 2006), 5.

James wrote:

But when you ask, you must believe and not doubt, because the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. That person should not expect to receive anything from the Lord. Such a person is double-minded and unstable in all they do.

The context here is not doubting the validity of our walk in Christ,<sup>6</sup> needing to confirm the Spirit's leading,<sup>7</sup> needing to confirm God's promise.<sup>8</sup> Here we are not doubting God's ability to curse a fig tree,<sup>9</sup> or move a mountain into the sea<sup>10</sup> on our behalf.

James is asking God for wisdom. To ask the counsel of someone whom you do not or cannot trust is a contradiction in terms. Doubt is the result of a lack of a trust in God. That's a bit like saying dryness is the result of no water.

I asked my son, "*Do atheists have doubts about God? I understood them to claim a scientific curiosity instead.*" My son informed me:

"An atheist does not believe there are any gods. He doesn't necessarily believe there are no gods, although many atheists do. Most atheists are formally also agnostics. (They're agnostic atheists.) That doesn't mean atheists couldn't be convinced otherwise. In fact, one study found that atheists were on balance fairly non-dogmatic, and could be persuaded to change their mind by the right evidence... which is not human nature: the human mind usually works by first figuring out how to react and then finding evidence to support that conclusion."

By now, if you are a philosopher you have to be experiencing brain-swell. But my biggest doubt is: I doubt we know what we mean by '*doubt.*' I might rather talk about *unspoken unknowns* or those areas where we are yet to develop a fuller appreciation for divine things.

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6. Romans 14:23

7. Acts 10:20; 11:12

8. Romans 4:20

9. Matthew 21:21

10. Mark 11:23

### Once Upon a Time

Once upon a time, our story begins, an old man lived in a cabin in the woods on the far side of a mountain he claimed his own. I don't know if it was ever mapped. The outside world didn't exist for him. He had never ventured beyond the fence he built in his own mind and past which he would never go. His closest, his only, friend used to regale him with impossible stories of a world on the other side of his world which made no sense to him.

His friend took to traveling whenever an adventurous spirit overtook him or when his own surroundings seemed lifelessly unmoving or when he just needed to find some excitement exploring what for him would have seemed surreal had he not seen it with his own eyes. As if walking into a dream, the old man's friend would gaze upon impossible things, unimaginable because he had no language to describe to his closeted confidant this new world outside his world. The world outside was an amazing dreamland of unbelievable inventiveness: horseless carriages, voices captured in small boxes as people chatted about their day, whole orchestras playing off black discs. Word was, they could even look inside someone without cutting them open! And what do you call these things?

The old man failed to understand any thing his friend tried to explain. Each time he returned with new stories to tell that were fantastic beyond the simple use of words. The old man, secluded as he was, doubted such tall tales, nor would he leave the mountain to discover them for himself.

He was born on this mountain. It was his life, the only life he knew, There was beauty here that was undeniably addictive, capable of capturing any traveler who would wander too close to its enchantment with its alluring smells and sounds. It would be an invitation to stay forever. The trees and the creatures of this forest were the only reality the old man could speak of. They shared in the only paradise he could ever hope to describe or believe in.

### The Unnamed God

There is much that our language cannot explain. We all live in our own little world, sphere of friendships and relations, and the limitation of our education that mark the border of our realities. This is our woodland life in the mountains. You and I are this mountain man or the bushman or the man from the lost Amazonian tribe though we think otherwise about ourselves. But our experiences are work to home to work again. Our friendships are constant and few. Our routines entrap us into a 24 hour cycle from which we might break free on an occasional holiday or vacation. There is much happening that is new and different outside our purview. Outside our world lies mysteries for which we do not even have words. No wonder we are prone to doubt so much of what we have been told. No wonder stories about God are questionable because they are not our stories, they are not our words and, until faith comes, He is not our God.

This is the missionary's challenge.

"Moffat in his *Missionary Labors and Scenes in South Africa* gives us a very remarkable example of the disappearing of one of the most significant words from the language of a tribe sinking ever deeper in savagery; and with the disappearing of the word, of course the disappearing as well of the great spiritual ...truth whereof that word was at once the vehicle and the guardian. The Bechuanas, a Caffre tribe, employed formerly the word 'Morimo,' to designate 'Him that is above,' or 'Him that is in Heaven," and attached to the word the notion of a supreme Divine Being... Thus is it the ever repeated complaint of the Missionary that the very terms are well nigh or wholly wanting in the dialect of the savage whereby to impart to him heavenly truths, or indeed even the nobler emotions of the human heart."<sup>11</sup>

Professor Trench gives the example of the "residence of Van Diemen's Island, that in the native language... there are four words to express the taking of human life... while at the same time... any word for 'love' is wanting."<sup>12</sup>

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11. Richard Trench, *On the Study of the Words Lectures* ( New York: W.. Widdleton, publisher. Unknown), 23

12. Ibid. Page 25

We also tend to reuse terms, without knowing it, to paint word pictures that help us to imagine ideas impossible otherwise to describe. Some of our vocabulary are simply convenient modes of conversation where we hope we are communicating something real and we hope our listener is understanding. When it comes to talking about God and heavenly realities, we are the old man and his friend.

Is what you mean by faith what I understand by faith? My uncle years ago worked as a machinist and one tool he used the crew called the 'mickey mouse' because it was made of three circular pieces resembling a round face with ears.

What's confusing about all of this is that ideas are fluid and we tend to describe things more often than define them. And our descriptions leave room for confusion and doubt. It is no wonder to me that God never attempted a description of heaven.

### The Unknown God

When Paul at Mar's Hill found an inscription to an unknown god,<sup>13</sup> he began doing his thing to explain who that god is and how they might know him.

He had their attention, Greek minds, deep thinkers, philosophical socialites<sup>14</sup> and then called them *ignorant*.<sup>15</sup> Probably not the best term. He understandably lost many of them with talk about a resurrection. This term appears

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13. Acts 23::23 For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: to an unknown god. So you are ignorant of the very thing you worship—and this is what I am going to proclaim to you. NEW INT.

14. Acts 23:18 A group of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers began to debate with him. Some of them asked, "What is this babbler trying to say?" Others remarked, "He seems to be advocating foreign gods." They said this because Paul was preaching the good news about Jesus and the resurrection. NEW INT.

15. Acts 23:30 In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent.  
NEW INT.

according to Albrecht Oepke “to be misunderstood by the hearers as a proper name.”<sup>16</sup> Scholars tell us that

“The idea of a general resurrection at the end of the age is alien to the Greeks.”<sup>17</sup>

Paul affirmed—perhaps for many unconvincingly—that God created us all:

“so that they would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from any one of us.”<sup>18</sup>

So, it is no wonder that with our limited understanding, limited vocabulary and limited experience we might, now and then—at least in the early years of our interest in knowing God, it is no wonder—we might entertain doubts from time to time about spiritual things.

While a teen, I used to occasionally walk here or there and ponder the mysteries of the universe, and whether or not God was out there. I was bemused and befuddled—what teenager isn’t!—wanting God to give me a strong conviction, an indestructible faith, a no-doubt understanding that He is there.

Laura Story sings a timely song that most believers can relate to titled *Blessings*:

And we cry in anger when we cannot feel You near  
We doubt Your goodness, we doubt Your love  
As if every promise from Your Word is not enough  
All the while, You hear each desperate plea  
And long that we have faith to believe

'Cause what if Your blessings come through raindrops  
What if Your healing comes through tears  
What if a thousand sleepless nights  
Are what it takes to know You're near  
What if trials of this life are Your mercies in disguise

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16. Gerhard Kittell. *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1974), vol 1, p. 369.

17. *ibid.*

18. Acts 23:27 NEW INT.

I am somewhat curious why Moses wanted to see God's glory.<sup>19</sup> Did he have doubts? Did he need reassurance? Israel was diagnosed as a nation of stiff-necked complainers. Moses was already enjoying face time with God. It was during this one on one with God, Moses asked God for two things: He needed help, perhaps some assistant in charge of the complaint department, and he needed to know God would never abandon him to these people. That's the context of Moses requesting, "*Lord, I need to see you!*"

I found myself, also, wanting to negotiate assurances with God. Is that why Gideon needed proof of calling?<sup>20</sup> Sometimes we are simply overwhelmed with the mysteriousness that accompanies this whole idea—God—even though, in prayer we are having our own face time with Him.

Doubting does not make us unbelievers. Sooner or later, if we are honest, we wrestle with some degree of doubt. Some believers live through unexplainable tragedy and understandably may question how such things could happen, seemingly sight unseen by a God of love.

### The Unobserved God

God is unknown because He is unobserved by those who are not looking for Him. "*The most committed atheists were once Christians,*" said Professor Radisson in the 2014 drama, *God's Not Dead*, "*but we took the blinders off.*"<sup>21</sup>

Atheists claim they are not driven to a disbelief in God. To them mom and dad are not to blame. They simply have their doubts about God. For them it is based on study and

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19. Ex 33:18 Then Moses said, "Now show me your glory." NEW INT.

20. Judges 6:39 Then Gideon said to God, "Do not be angry with me. Let me make just one more request. Allow me one more test with the fleece, but this time make the fleece dry and let the ground be covered with dew." NEW INT.

21. A line from the 2014 drama, *God's Not Dead* spoken by Professor Radisson played by Kevin Sorbo

observation. Their decision to explain life without explaining God as a part of it, they assert, is based on a reasonable understanding of life. He is simply not on their mountain.

Most atheists are not belligerents. Most do not regard theism or our belief in an immanent and personal God as culturally dangerous.. They view life without biblical explanations.

And not all atheists are atheists.

What!?

Doubt has many shades. Frank Schaeffer, son of Francis and Edith Schaeffer of L'Abri Fellowship International<sup>22</sup> fame, wrote,

"These days I hold two ideas about God simultaneously: he, she or it exists and he she or it doesn't exist. I don't seesaw between these opposites; I embrace them."<sup>23</sup>

### Pete 's Dragon

My doubts about my future or my relationship with God have driven me to seek more of the God whose wisdom could put my heart at ease. Doubt became an early friend like Disney's Pete's Dragon that left Pete when the lad no longer needed him. Through the years there have been too many blessings, too many answers to prayer, too many inspiring verses of scripture that resolved the otherwise unresolvable for me, and too many interventions by God for me to doubt any longer. My dragon has moved on.

Doubt for us is in some ways the twin of curiosity because what we don't know enough about we investigate—but curiously enough 'curiosity' is not a New Testament idea.<sup>24</sup> I

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22. <http://www.labri.org>

23. Frank Schaeffer. *Why I am an Atheist Who Believes in God: How to give love, create beauty and find peace* (North Charleston, South Carolina: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2014), 13.

24. περίεργος is the Greek word for curious which in our New Testament means 'busybody' in I Timothy 5:13 and 'curious arts' in Acts

recommend, though, being curious about the things of God. We need to, in prayer, find Him. Beyond this? To figure out God in the terms of our logic, to use Joshua Wilson's words in the title to one of his albums,<sup>25</sup> we are "*trying to fit the ocean in a cup.*"

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19:19. It is primarily a 'girdle' in the Old Testament, Exodus 28:8 NEW INT.: finely twisted linen.

25. <http://www.amazon.com/Trying-Fit-The-Ocean-Cup/dp/B0016AKoOO>

## Cruel Realities

*"I think ... there may well be a God somewhere, hiding away. Actually, if he is keeping out of sight, it's because he's ashamed of his followers and all the cruelty and ignorance they're responsible for promoting in his name. If I were him, I'd want nothing to do with them."*

— Philip Pullman

Doubt is not alone in alluring some away from the message of a saving faith. Some of our youth who have left the faith had grown up in religious war zones of doctrinally inspired conflicts. They do not see themselves as casualties of those conflicts. Many of them couldn't wait for adulthood and to be freed from, what for them was, a meaningless hour each week. They target the Bible stories as reason enough to leave. For them these stories never did ring true, and they walk away in unbelief.<sup>1</sup> For Doug Philips, speaking no doubt for countless individuals who have left the faith, these stories are mostly 'silliness' and 'fairytales.'<sup>2</sup>

Notwithstanding the bad wrap our Bible gets, it is the christian church that should assess her own witness and how well she has represented God's Word, or the Great Commission. The church has instead fine tuned a defensive posture using her doctrines to give her a sense of mission. But I can't imagine how church infighting and church splits inspire evangelism. I can't

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1. I'd come to realize that the Bible was nothing more than man screwing up what God and Jesus had set out to reveal. What would one expect from imperfect creatures? Besides, my relationship with my God, and with Jesus, didn't require Biblical literalness— our thing was just fine with or without zombies, 1,000-year-old men, talking snakes, demon possessed swine, and nondescript, somewhat promiscuous giants. —

Doug Philips. *The Bad People Stole My God* (Sight66.com, 2012), (Kindle Locations 317-320).

2. *ibid.* location 289.

understand how defending distinctive doctrines draws anyone to the Cross.

President John Adams, whose father was a deacon of the puritan faith, wrote in his diary about *"ecclesiastical councils"* and what the historian David McCullough in his biography of Adams,, called *"the kind of contention that could surround a preacher."* Adams commented, *"I saw such a spirit of dogmatism and bigotry in clergy and laity, that if I should be a priest I must take my side, and pronounce as positively as any of them, or never get a parish, or getting it must soon leave it."* McCullough affirmed that Adams had not the "heart" for it and knowing innately that his dad would understand, Adams became a lawyer instead.<sup>3</sup>

Little has changed!

Dr. Leonard Evans wrote about the church's dysfunction in his day (the 1970's), what he called *"a deep seated hostility between pew and pulpit"*<sup>4</sup> and the accompanied *"pervading futility in the hearts of clergy."*<sup>5</sup>

### The War

For two decades 1973-1993 I was at war, myself, with the church. Looking back, it is all a blur. The motives, the causes, the goals, the plans, all things that motivate and impassion allies in arms are no longer remembered. Like fighting with a spouse over issues that cannot even be recalled now, I cannot put a face on my opposition anymore. I guess this is forgiveness?

But during those twenty years in six different places, a half dozen separate ministries, I felt the sting of verbal bullets—and no doubt fired back. Between the politics and the theologies little else was worth discussing and no other vision seemed important enough to promote.

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3. David McCullough. John Adams. Simon & Shuster. 2001. p. 37.

4. *ibid.*

5. *ibid.*

Each move from church to church was frying pan to fire. (Pastor Skymer, my pastor back in Buffalo, warned me of this.) Situations only worsened and the war escalated throughout the childhood and teen years of two of three sons. I went from depressed Mondays to a clinical version that lasted for months. It was then I decided to retreat and find another, more peaceful way of life.

These things are important to write about because I failed to see anything resembling christian ministry in all of this. I saw instead damaged relationships, deep hurts that last—for a lifetime in some cases. Life is said to be filled with drama. In the regular course of things, life isn't fair. That's what I was taught to expect and that's what I came to expect: persecution, devilish attacks, and, perhaps, a few mountain high challenges that exceeded my abilities or interests to climb over.

### Changing Sides

I substitute taught third and fourth graders back during our first pastorate before the war. The kids knew I was the reasonable friend only resembling a teacher which in one class meant free time to talk, toss things about and get in as much fun as possible before the principal appeared in the doorway.

There was one little girl, a quiet young lady well behaved, well taught in manners and for the most part attentive to my lesson plan for the day. She sat, as you could have guessed, in the first row, front and center. Regardless of the bedlam that went on behind her, I remember her with eyes forward waiting to see what I would do. She wore the cutest smile.

The principle must have been delayed this one day and even this delightful little angel began at first to get fidgety and then, to my utter surprise, she, too, began to get in the spirit of the commotion. The tidal wave of childish escapades had finally reached her at the shore of respectability and even she was swept out to sea. She left her desk to join in.

I recall this somewhat isolated memory because in one church even some of my most faithful supporters, people who had dedicated their efforts to my leadership as pastor, began to leave their desks. Persons of spotless character, spiritual giants among the saintlier ones, people whose love for God and me could never be questioned, whose attention to vision was indisputable—the same—began finding fault with my ministry and began to join in calling for my professional head.

I was dismissed from one church and put on permanent leave in another. A third, I resigned—of all days—on Mother’s Day Sunday. It was all simply insane, If psychiatry identifies spiritual psychosis someday as a legitimate illness and they invent a pill for it—sign us up.

For the better part: we are a generation that got the scripture half right:

~~a time to plant and a time to uproot,  
a time to kill and a time to heal,  
a time to tear down and a time to build,  
a time to weep and a time to laugh,  
a time to mourn and a time to dance,  
a time to [cast] stones and a time to gather them,  
a time to embrace and a time to refrain from embracing,<sup>6</sup>~~

If I thought myself alone in this, I don’t think I would write about it. But we all were the *defenders of the faith*.

### The Treaty

Many friendships have since been re-affirmed. Many tears and hugs later and a lot of forgiveness, a few luncheons and visits, and reconciliation found a way to cement back together what had been broken. But by now, teenagers became young adults and some were already beginning to distance themselves from it all. Shattered vessels put back together are, nonetheless, not new ones. The lines of brokenness, the scars where shards of

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6. Ecclesiastes 3:2-5 NEW INT. The word translated ‘scatter’ is more at ‘cast’ We only scatter them if there is not target.

hurtful memories have since been reassembled remain as a reminder of a more sorrowful time that we mistakenly called God's doings. Post traumatic stress may someday be diagnosable as a real condition left over from the religious wars we once fought in His name.

Since the battle field has gone silent I have been privileged to call her and him 'friend' who once was hunkered down in the trenches opposite me.

### War Plans Revealed

I have since been given details of the war plans and strategies of those who fought to remove me—plans unknown to me during the conflict. These serve no purpose except as a reminder that these were tragic days that no one cares to relive or repeat. (And yet repeat it we must until we learn that *reconciliation* is not just a theological term.)

While I was preparing messages or visiting the sick, a group of ladies, leading ladies, in one church were meeting, planning a way to remove me from the pulpit. One of them tearfully shared this detail with me years later. To be honest, had I know it at the time, I would've done nothing about it other than to mention it to my elders. Problem was: these were, in part, their wives. Checkmate.

At a men's retreat the leading men in the group didn't want me to hold any seminars. It was a retreat, but I learned later that that was the plan to minimize the influence I might have as a visible leader. Their plans were to encourage my departure. One elder boldly told me he was moving his title into missions instead of the general fund—from which I received my paycheck.

Looking back, I deeply and sincerely appreciated their honesty in all of this. Aside from the political necessity of keeping their maneuvers secret during the war, they never felt less than open in conversation with me.

A national official once mailed me the minutes of a secret meeting that had convened among the denominational

overseers to discipline me out of another church. The allegation was a change of theological position on a doctrine which is now no longer considered important. We fought hard, we fought doggedly and automatically—dogmatically?—to gain theological ground upon which now no church will ever be built. These were incidental teachings christians have learned since to forget in sermon and song.

At the time such discussions worked to convene a meeting between national, district and local officials—a meeting I was invited to by registered letter. Think of it. Something serious was going down and I failed to see it coming. The meeting was on a Wednesday night when I could not in clear conscience call for an appeal from the friends in high places I did have who were conducting midweek services elsewhere. It was a perfect plan. I said goodbye the following Sunday.

I began to miss the days when a disgruntled deacon would simply boycott my ministry instead of drawing up a strategy for war. I missed the days when they only opened my mail to mark my progress in unpaid bills calling me to account with them instead of now retaining a lawyer to force me out of their parsonage.

These were simpler times when personalities clashed but, in truth, all anyone wanted was to be used by God.

### Family

All this would be well and good if I were single, but I came with family—something some ministers tend to forget. My wife is pleased that I am retired from pastoring. My youngest son missed most of the action. I carried him on my shoulders—literally as well as figuratively. This was a subject beyond his comprehension. Today my joy of him has no boundaries. He is, himself, thinking of enrolling in a seminary program for full time ministry while he works out of the church office.

My two sons who experienced the conflict admit they currently have no interest in God and although to them this was an independent and intelligent decision based on much study

and reflection, I cannot help but think that the battlefield they played on had something to do with their choice.

I have many reasons to enjoy family get togethers with them. My heart always aches to know they are doing well, to visit with them and enjoy their company, to hear of their successes and achievements.

Well, tears aside, now you know why I told you my story, to underscore the need for family and to encourage any believer who is living with doubts and concerns about their children or parents or other relatives who are no longer dedicated to serving our Lord. Love them back in!

## Unidentified Hurts

*"A single event can awaken within us a stranger totally unknown to us.  
To live is to be slowly born."*

— *Antoine de Saint-Exupéry*

More often than we are willing to admit, we experience hurts in life that we cannot put a label on.

I enjoy watching medical series because the cure is not always obvious. A simple headache can signal a tumor though it is unlikely. I recall, sadly, when a dad and his teenage daughter went to the doctor with flu-like symptoms—during flu season. Doc didn't know they were dying from wild mushroom poisoning.

Life is riddled with crises of which we are not perceptive enough to figure a way through to peace or reconciliation. Grief can be suppressed, Traumas go unaddressed.

I used to program for a living and knew of a few scenarios where we didn't search for pesky computer bugs when it was just as easy to reboot a server each night to deal with the problem. People can not be rebooted... at least I don't think so. But we often hope that a good night's sleep will solve everything—and sometimes it does. We look for reasons for most things that happen to us and somehow those reasons are suppose to ring true in our feelings as well as our minds.

Some feelings are emotional tsunamis which carry us helplessly out into a sea of pain. We all know what it means to be overwhelmed by a problem. Dr. Joe Griffin diagnoses it this way:

...strong emotions overwhelm finer perceptions, just as raucous shouting drowns out a gentle whisper.<sup>1</sup>

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1. Joe Griffin; Ivan Tyrrell. Human Givens (East Sussex, United Kingdom:Human Givens Publishing, Chalvington, East Sussex:Human

### Suck It Up

One leader, and a good friend, within our denomination had been made aware of my plight when I was disciplined out of the pulpit in one church. Two years later he thought I had 'gotten over it' by then and advised me '*let it go.*'

He had a similar experience, when his board had put pad locks on the church doors to keep him out. He simply moved across the river and started a new work which today has grown exponentially. When I met up with him at one convention, he told me that he had officiated at the funerals of some of those board members.

But I'm not him! Some of my feelings, granted have passed the expiration date of meaningfulness. The label has fallen off; so, I am not sure what that feeling is all about any more. And to complete the metaphor, it smells rancid and only lingers as a reminder of something hurtful, regrettable. I need to toss it out. But how do I do that!?

### The Melody Lingers On

We should always seek to perceive the healthiest and most realistic reason why we are where we are in life rather than encasing our understanding of things in a hard shell of self-justification or projecting blame on the unsuspecting. But this is far from easy. Missing details that surround these emotions and buried or suppressed memories tend to mask the truth behind the hurt. That's why counselors make the big bucks. That's why at times it takes a considerably painful revisiting of the past to get our perception right.

It is a reasonable assumption that most people have absorbed a certain amount of hurt growing up. Most of us inherit at least a smidgeon of dysfunctionality. None of us are

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Givens Publishing Ltd., 2013): The new approach to emotional health and clear thinking (Kindle Locations 290-291). Taken from I Shah. (1998) Knowing How to Know. The Octagon Press.

immune to the impact of bad times. Perhaps, the most street-wise are the most damaged. Along with our innocence and naiveté, an understanding of what love is and even one's own identity can be lost.

What does all this have to do with living our faith in a postmodern world, in front of family members who no longer believe as we do? For many of us a son or daughter rebelling against the faith we continue to cherish brings such pain of heart that we seek answers as to the how and why of it all happening. Life seemed to be falling nicely into a rhythm of good things happening as a consequence of our worshipping and serving God. The blessings appeared to be flowing our way when unexpectedly some family member with whom we were very close now is distancing themselves because our understanding of Scripture is now coming into conflict with their interpretation of their own experience.

They have come out of some proverbial 'closet' and our acceptance is not spontaneous. We are in shock and then tempted to find reasons outside ourselves for what terrible things seem to be happening to our close-knit family. Christmas celebration will be different—if at all—going forward.

### Depressing

And then comes *depression* which Dr. Joe Griffin refers to as a "*very human vulnerability.*"<sup>2</sup>

... trapped in the tunnel vision of black-and-white thinking.<sup>3</sup>

We may begin to think we know something about ourselves or them that simply isn't true.

Patterns (previous negative events) setting off a train of introspection which gives rise to ... resultant thoughts (such

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2. Joe Griffin; Ivan Tyrrell. *Human Givens: The new approach to emotional health and clear thinking.* (East Sussex, United Kingdom: Human Givens Publishing, Chalvington, East Sussex: Human Givens Publishing Ltd., 2013), Chapter 11.

3. *Ibid.* Kindle Locations 3299-3300

as “I am useless,” “nothing ever goes right for me”) that the depressed person gets locked into seeing as absolute truth.<sup>4</sup>

As christian parents we add a few more misconceptions because we hurt over some family member’s departure from ‘the faith’ and we need to come up with reasons, with answers: *where did I go wrong? How could I not see this happening? I failed as a christian parent!* And if you like me were once their pastor as well as their parent, the questioning intensifies.

The problem with answers is that they depend on the questions being asked. And we tend to be asking the wrong ones in our hurt. There is, consequently, no chance we’ll get right answers. We are on the verge of an emotional recklessness, spewing out explanations that explain nothing—rationalizations that are merely the ramblings of a broken heart.

### Emotional Literacy

We need to discover what it means to be, what Daniel Goleman called, ‘emotionally literate.’<sup>5</sup>

Goleman describing emotional intelligence, spoke of being ‘*emotionally literate*’, as Joe Griffin translated: being enabled “*to sense other people’s moods... and to act and react appropriately and sensitively.*”

Far easier said than done, but here’s how it works:

Through intimacy we develop the ability to be close to others in relationship, to define the inner circle we call family. (Hopefully this was a big part of our childhood.) This in turn equips us emotionally to empathize instead of analyze, to listen rather than attempt unwelcome explanations, to seek reconciliation, to apologize, to recognize realistically our own shortcomings without beating ourselves up and without requiring everyone else to—as we used to say—come crawling to us on hands and knees begging our forgiveness.

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4. Ibid. Kindle Locations 182-184

5. Daniel Goleman (1996) *Emotional Intelligence: why it can matter more than IQ*. Bloomsbury Publishing, London.

We need sensitivity to develop a healthy relationship but that same relationship may need to help us with our sensitivity issues. Catch-22!? I am reminded of the truck driver who lived next door when I was a lad. I was perplexed to hear him say that you needed a license to drive truck but the license wasn't issued until you worked somewhere and had the truck to drive. Sensitivity in matters of the heart requires close relationships as the soil the plant grows in. But relationships need sensitivity and caring to develop.

"People who lack a developed sense of empathy have great difficulty in forming close relationships."<sup>6</sup>

### Do I Love Me

The first relation that I may need to re-visit is myself. What can overcomplicate my family relations is my need, first, to be emotionally close to myself, to know where I am heading in life. I need to be in touch with myself so that my emotions are tied more to my current experiences and not my past. I need a sense of self-worth that develops from a healthy self-evaluation and I must have a reasonably comfortable understanding of who I am. I am able to get close to others, then, if I can be close to myself.

'Love your neighbor as yourself.'<sup>7</sup>

Mercy is not just a theological term, then, and caring and sensitivity become the benchmarks of my relationship with others.

But if you ask me if I have arrived yet? No one has arrived, not completely or finally. I have a full time responsibility working on my own emotional well-being by facing my past with a realistic interest in repenting and reconciling where necessary. I need to learn that regret is not a future term and I shouldn't be dragging it into my future. I need

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6. Joe Griffin. Human Givens: The new approach to emotional health and clear thinking (East Sussex, United Kingdom:Human Givens Publishing, Chalvington, East Sussex:Human Givens Publishing Ltd., 2013), (Kindle Locations 2287-2288).

7. Luke 10:27 NEW INT.

to know that my faith in God is real and not just a feeling about how good Sunday's sermon was.

Life is the process of learning all this. As I learn I become more capable of accepting members of my family who by their own admission may interpret the meaning of life differently.

But we are still family.

## Hidden Guilt

*Rolling in the muck is not the best way of getting clean."*

— Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World*

There is a word in the Old Testament which speaks to a 'commotion' in the mind and true to the general use of the word in the non-technical world of the ancients, it can speak of *anger*, *fear*, or *grief*, depending on the context. It is metaphorically the earth quaking.<sup>1</sup> The translators have at times done a disservice to the dynamics of heaving emotions and churning feelings that this word describes. Take Psalms 4:4, for example:

Tremble and do not sin; when you are on your beds, search your hearts and be silent.<sup>2</sup>

Is David saying: "Fear but do not sin"? "Fear God so you do not sin."<sup>3</sup> Some translations say: 'Be angry and do not sin.' A few versions read: 'stand in awe' which probably should mean: *Stand in awe of God with reverential respect... lest you sin.*

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1. A similar wort from the same root means earthquake.

2. The word רָגַגְ is formed from a primary syllable belonging to a family of words that speak of movement, motion [emotion]. Another term from the same family translated 'evil' Psalms 106:32 means 'to be ill,' sorrowful, sad or Deuteronomy 28:54 and evil eye is another way of saying 'envious'

3. The commentaries suggest the meaning: Fear God so that you do not sin. But the term I generally associate with respect or awe for God is another Hebrew word. אָוָה

i.e. Psalms 66:16.

The word רָגַגְ can scarcely mean holy fear of God without [the adde phrase] from the face of

None of the English versions suggest that the inner commotion could be *grief* but suppressed grief can lead to depression which comes with its own set of don'ts.<sup>4</sup>

So, we may need to expand our understanding of this scripture to encompass the many meanings—plural—that are possible here. David warns his enemies against a '*blind passion*'<sup>5</sup> that is reckless and self-destructive, but his specific import may be an application of a more general principle. Why not say it simply:

You are shaken, disturbed? Okay. Get alone and search your heart and avoid doing something that would bring you to guilt. Do nothing. Say nothing until you are again at peace..

This war between peace and the commotions of the heart rages on in all of us. Although there may be many reasons for this battle to be waged, one stands out for the atheist: the 'holy war' that is fought within the conscience over religious practices that only seem to instill guilt and fear intended to guarantee the faithfulness of its adherents. "*I was beginning to see,*" confesses Jim Palmer,

"that it's not so much what one does but why one does it. Catholic Mass or Pentecostal praise-athon, High Church or home church, a person's motivation can be ... fear and guilt."<sup>6</sup>

As Christians we could only deny this if we were born-again yesterday. To this day, I feel guilty every time an offering is taken because I have been raised on the supposition that I could give more, and if I did, God would make the remainder of my money 'stretch' to meet my financial needs. I have been told that

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4. Compare Jonah 5:1 "And it is grievous unto Jonah -- a great evil -- and he is displeased at it;" YLT. Young's translation was the only English translation I found that wrestled with the meaning of the Hebrew text—Jonah was evil-ed with a great evil.where the meaning most likely speaks of a despondency that led to a depression over Nineveh's repentance. The Greek translates "Jonah was pained with a great pain."

5. Delitzsch: "he [David] warns his adversaries of blind passion, and advises them to quiet meditation and solitary consideration that they may not ruin their own salvation" The Psalms by Carl Bernhard Moll (Lange commentary vol 5) pg. 70.

6. Jim Palmer. *Divine Nobodies: Shedding Religion to Find God* (Nashville,TN:Thomas Nelson, 2006), 158.

to do less is to rob God. Rob? Am I a thief?! (Stewardship is another matter, though—said for all you tithers who are probably on to something meaningful in your own experience.<sup>7</sup> But isn't it ironic that I feel a need to apologize for the guilt I am feeling. My guilt feels guilty!)

I needed to catch up on my 401K to provide for the security I owed my faithful wife who had stayed with me through the hardest of times. We have three sons whom long ago I vowed not to leave capsized in an ocean of debt. My tithe through recent years had been closer to four percent.

When the little church we attended for ten years needed to carry on a fund raiser to support pastoral vision, Joyce and I decided it was time to leave. We still give to ministry but we look for needs to meet. I have no trumpet to blow or complaint here. I only wish to underline the commotion I feel inside when the subject is brought up and the guilt that reminds me how greedy I am as a Christian... even if this is all—as I believe it is—a misguided feeling.

I would rather be motivated by love rather than guilt.

### A Rest For Us

The Bible seems silent on the matter of feeling guilt. God never employed guilt to drive people to obey although this might have been an unfortunate natural by-product of the conflict between His holiness and man's sinfulness. If any emotion was used as a motivator by God, it was fear—<sup>8</sup>which Christ's death had brought to an end.<sup>9</sup>

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7. I Peter 4:10 Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God's grace in its various forms. NEW INT.

8. Hebrews 11:10 They will follow the LORD; he will roar like a lion. When he roars, his children will come trembling from the west. NEW INT.

9. Hebrews 4:9 There remains, then, a Sabbath-rest for the people of God; NEW INT.

Modern scholarship has super-imposed the idea of a *feeling* of guilt on the biblical text.

“What have you done to us? How have I wronged you that you have brought such great guilt<sup>10</sup> upon me? You have done things to me that should never be done.”<sup>11</sup> — Abimelek

Guilt has, therefore, become unwittingly the friend of church leadership to encourage congregants to be faithful because the Bible never explicitly disallowed it. The Bible never spoke to this issue because guilt was more a legal term associated with breaking the ‘*Law of God.*’ (An issue resolved at Calvary, as we already noted.)

The ceremonial law was an integral part of Israeli orthopraxy but for Christianity it embodies a type of Christ’s death speaking more to our need of a Savior rather than a warning of impending severe penalties for not following it.

### The Melody Lingers On

But our guilt is real—even if unproductive or even destructive. This has led Doug Philips to see the doctrine of ‘*original sin*’ as a ‘*popular Christian built-in guilt-trip.*’<sup>12</sup> Nonetheless, human failure should encourage us to reach higher for a loftier purity, to reach for a relationship with God that surmounts inherent moral weaknesses and to seek victory over temptation and sin. The story of Adam and Eve is not a story of guilt as much as it is a story of our need for God.

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I John 4:18 There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love. NEW INT.

10. The word נקי means free from blame, guiltless, blameless, innocent.

The word חַטָּא is more like our ‘guilty of’ some wrong done. The sense of guilt as an emotional torment is a more modern idea. In Greek: ἔνοχος means ‘worthy of punishment.’ I Corinthians 11:27 guilty of sinning.

11. Genesis 20:9. The word ‘guilt’ not used in the Hebrew.

12. Doug Philips. *The Bad People Stole My God* (Sight66.com, 2012), (Kindle Location 176).

Yet, explanations notwithstanding, non-believers see a case against our fundamental understanding of guilt. A rest from guilt, living above our addictions by finding peace in a closeness with God, atheism argues, is oxymoronic because all church did for those who left it was increase a sense of guilt, not assuage it. Christians who have left the faith even question how Calvary works. *"How can the guilt of one man be expiated by the death of another who is sinless?"* asked Michael Martin in his work, *Atheism: A Philosophical Justification*.<sup>13</sup>

And then there is the principle of *one fits all*:

"For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it."<sup>14</sup>

A woman cannot be partly pregnant and one sin makes a sinner, but this verse still overwhelms the sense of guilt for non-believers who see God's approach to dealing with our imperfections as unreasonable.<sup>15</sup>

One former pastor wrote:

"If you are a Bible believing Christian, it is not unreasonable to expect that you should obey all of God's laws whether they are in the New or Old Testament. Fortunately, most of these 'laws' have become illegal through the more humane legal system of laws and punishment instituted by most countries during the past century or so. As you consider some of the examples of God's laws and family values...you will appreciate

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13. Michael Martin, *Atheism: A Philosophical Justification* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990), p. 15, referenced by John W. Loftus. *Why I Became an Atheist: A Former Preacher Rejects Christianity* (Amherst, New York: Prometheus Books, 2008), (Kindle Location 2083).

14. James 2:10 NEW INT.

15. God decreed that a man who picked up sticks on the Sabbath day was to be stoned to death (Num. 15:32-36). God commanded that anyone who curses his father or mother was to be put to death (Exodus 21:17). Witches, and those of differing religious views, were to be killed (Exodus 22:18, 20). These are pretty stiff punishments, eh? - John W. Loftus. *Why I Became an Atheist: A Former Preacher Rejects Christianity* (Kindle Locations 1643-1645).

the need for these ancient Biblical laws to be abolished from human society whether God instituted them or not!<sup>16</sup>

By discrediting biblical principle as too harsh, atheists build a system of ethics on other principles and these are not bad. But non-believers fail to understand that this is exactly what God's grace did for believers.<sup>17</sup>

Micah 6:8 reduces hundreds of injunctions in the priestly code down to three:

He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.

And no non-believer could or would want to argue this down. For a believer, grace has made this a more practical code of ethics to follow. Ultimately, these, too, can be boiled down to "*love The Lord, your God and your neighbor as yourself.*"<sup>18</sup> Any guilt that pricks the conscience because we are not subscribing to these, is a guilt we deserve. But guilt might be the wrong term, As friendly as a condemning conscience might be when we are involved where we shouldn't be it is all too soon just a memory without feeling. We sometimes need to be shamed instead.

### Shame, Shame

Guilt has a half-life of one day. Over the years in counseling I have had persons wanting to see me because they had an affair or were unable to shake free from a temptation that repeatedly filled them with painful guilt. But a couple of days or a week or a month later they would be wanting my time again to deal with these same temptations, with these same feelings. We were back where we started. That's the beauty of temptation. It is a momentary feeling of pleasure followed by guilt. The devil

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16. Brian Baker. NONSENSE FROM THE BIBLE (FastPencil.com, 2012), (Kindle Locations 730-734).

17. Romans 8:2 through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit who gives life has set you free from the law of sin and death. NEW INT.

18. Luke 10:27 He answered, "'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind'; and, 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'" NEW INT.

never tempts us with a look ahead. He has no future and wants us to have none either.

If we really want to stop doing something we consider wrong—or for church people, sinful—we should try shame. In the New Testament it comes in three flavors, so you can order up the approach you feel best suits your situation.

One word for shame is a sense of honor that hinders us from doing an unworthy act. Shame in this way is an *'innate moral repugnance to doing something unworthy.'*<sup>19</sup> This shame is probably the repulsion that keeps some from enjoying porn sites or engaging in loose and vulgar talk, or telling a dirty joke.

Another word is translated 'modesty.' *"I also want the women to dress modestly, with decency..."* Paul admonishes. Decency is shamefacedness. All a woman need do is check herself in the mirror before walking out to meet her public and let her innate sense of modesty instruct her.

Shame is also, and primarily, the resulting feeling of being defamed by some action we tried to keep secret but which risks exposure to public scrutiny. It is the feeling that follows the very thought of being found out.

Perhaps, our conscience is numbed by despondency or anger or simply the passion to have something—or someone—we shouldn't. We rationalize reasons to indulge. We go to that website or promote that defamatory lie. We commit to that dinner with forbidden passions excited or to that meeting incognito with a throbbing desire to do what we know we shouldn't. There are those forbidden embraces that swoon away any consciousness of wrong and magnetic kisses from which we cannot seem to pull free.

We do something for which we are ashamed. We didn't have what it took to say 'No' before getting engaged in acts that can destroy our reputation and damage our relationships, but

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19. Richard Trench. *Synonyms of the New Testament*. Pg. 68. Trench adds, 'Αἰδώς is self-motivated and implies reverence for the good as good.'

shame is a friend that can remind us.<sup>20</sup> We are disgraced. Shame is the feeling that follows on having done it. Guilt is also present, but it is the thought of being discovered that shame provides that will make us call it off from happening again. ... and if we are discovered? The truth sets free...

Just the thought of being found out often works to privately shame us into not doing something we know we shouldn't do. It is the outward disgrace we fear. (Whew!, That was close!! I best stop this!) We are afraid of being found out. It is too risky a proposition. Paul is passionate about renouncing *"secret and shameful ways; ... On the contrary, by setting forth the truth plainly we commend ourselves to everyone's conscience in the sight of God."*<sup>21</sup>

When the T.V. Preacher was caught in an affair and he wept before his television audience and his church congregation, his tears were probably genuine. He was found out and now the healing can begin. Shame lingers long enough to allow us to fight our addictions. We are more prone, then, to seek help from the temptation that has been doing us in.

Lastly, but almost as a footnote in our understanding of this all important feeling, there is even a biblical idea of *"learning through shame"*<sup>22</sup>, and it is this shame<sup>23</sup> that Paul wished to arouse<sup>24</sup> in the churches.

20. The word αἰσχύνη is shame "to which a reputation is attached. It is not self-motivating. cp ibid.

21. 2 Corinthians 4:2 NEW INT.

22. Job 20:3 I hear a rebuke that dishonors me, and my understanding inspires me to reply. NEW INT.

23. The word ἐντροπή "hints at a change of conduct that results from wholesome shame." Richard Trench. Synonyms of the New Testament. Pg.69.

24. I Corinthians 6:5 I speak to your shame.... NEW INT.

2 Thessalonians 3:14 Take special note of anyone who does not obey our instruction in this letter. Do not associate with them, in order that they may feel ashamed. NEW INT.

### A Moral Issue

Guilt is the unhappy child of the union between a code of morality<sup>25</sup> and an individual's conscience. And so much of this self-blame is painfully unwarranted. It leads some to believe the code should be scrapped. Jonathan Lear in the Forward to Bernard Williams' work, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, tells us:

Philosophers, Bernard Williams argues, should stop propping up what he calls "the morality system"—a punitive structure of obligation, blame and guilt—supported by the construction of ever more complex moral theories, theories of obligation, of just punishment and so on. Instead we should focus on the question: What would it be legitimately to live with confidence in our ethical lives?<sup>26</sup>

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Titus 2:8 and soundness of speech that cannot be condemned, so that those who oppose you may be ashamed because they have nothing bad to say about us. NEW INT.

25. An interesting theory of the origin of the moral consciousness is presented by Nicholas Wade in "The Faith Instinct" in which he argues for the evolution of moral principle and that the philosopher's contention that a sense of right and wrong comes from reasoning is incorrect. As biologist Ed Wilson "wrote acidly... Sometimes a concept is baffling not because it is profound but because it is wrong. [Immanuel Kant's idea that base morality is outside nature in a world of pure reason] does not accord.. with the evidence of how the brain works." p. 19ff.

"...intuitive morality," says Wade [p. 123], "is wired into the brain's genetic circuitry."

Psychologist Jonathan Haidt sees the moral 'intuition' as partly genetic and partly cultural.

The main point in all of this is to realize that a definition of the moral conscience is being proposed that does not necessarily require any sign or signature of the divine. But nothing said or imagined here precludes the possibility that God instilled a moral consciousness at creation [Romans 1:21ff.] and He then allows cultural influences to play a providential role.

26. Bernard Williams. *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (Taylor and Francis: Routledge Classics) 2011. Kindle Edition. p. 227.

How should we live? Philosophers have been asking this question since the days of Plato and Socrates.<sup>27</sup> For believers the answer must be found in the holiness of the God we serve.<sup>28</sup> We cannot claim a relationship with Him or a friendship with Him unless we are in some way living within the same principles that define Him. Light and darkness cannot share the same space. God and sin cannot hold hands.

But the mystery of Godliness<sup>29</sup> has been made more baffling by the list of unnecessary—and, I might add, unbiblical—requirements imposed by the Christian church on her adherents. I grew up without learning to dance, without enjoying a glass of wine, without enjoying my puberty as a natural—and I must say: exciting—part of life. The list of don'ts was endless especially for women until the culture got us to rethink our code of ethics.

### Teddy

After the, then New York State Assemblyman, Theodore Roosevelt (yes, one and the same as our 26th president) lost his wife, Alice, in child birth due to renal failure, Roosevelt “resigned himself” to widowhood not only because he believed Alice was a once-in-a-lifetime love but because of, as Doris Kearns Goodwin points out in *The Bully Pulpit*: “Theodore’s victorian belief that second marriages ‘argue weakness in a man’s character.’”<sup>30</sup> When he became engaged to his childhood friend, Edith Carow, he kept it a secret for months. Even in his diary, he referred to Edith as ‘E’ And in his biography, he never mentioned Alice to the hurt of his first daughter, Alice’s girl, named after her mother.

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27. *ibid.*

28. I Peter 1:16 for it is written: “Be holy, because I am holy.”  
NEW INT.

29. I Timothy 3:16

30. Doris Kearns Goodwin. *The Bully Pulpit*. (New York:Simon and Schuster, 2013), 122.

"In fact," Alice lamented, "he never ever mentioned my mother to me, which was absolutely wrong. He never even said her name... I think my father tried to forget he had even been married to my mother.... He didn't just never mention her to me, he never mentioned her name, to anyone... He obviously felt tremendously guilty about remarrying.... It was awfully bad psychologically."<sup>31</sup>

### A Shrinking Morality

Today much of what was sinful a hundred years ago is becoming more and more common practice—even for believers. The list is shrinking. Perhaps Bernard Williams was on to something when he referred to "*responsibility, guilt, blame, and such like [as]... an illusion*"<sup>32</sup>

It is not atheism that is dumping the code, according to John Loftus.

The carrot-and-stick method of morality due to punishment and reward is, in the end, the same motivation an atheist has, except that the carrots and sticks are those rewards and punishments we receive here on earth, which are social and personal.<sup>33</sup>

Atheism correctly contends that the ten commandments have been part of our humanity long before—as the Judeo-Christian tradition goes—God reissued them to Moses. Atheists do not object to a system of morals but to the imposition of a religious code that painfully and unnecessarily denies a sense of well-being to the pious in the name of a self-sacrifice that is always on the edge of, what Bernard Williams called "*the remorse of self-reproach or guilt*."<sup>34</sup>

"In this respect, the morality system itself, with its emphasis on the "purely moral" and personal sentiments of guilt and

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31. *ibid.* p. 129.

32. Bernard Williams. *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (Taylor and Francis: Routledge Classics) 2011. Kindle Edition. p. 228.

33. John W. Loftus. *Why I Became an Atheist: A Former Preacher Rejects Christianity* (Amherst, New York: Prometheus Books, 2008), (Kindle Locations 656-658).

34. Bernard Williams. *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (Taylor and Francis: Routledge Classics) 2011. Kindle Edition. p. 212.

self-reproach, actually conceals the dimension in which ethical life lies outside the individual."<sup>35</sup>

This is a fancy way of saying that all those do's and don'ts and the guilt encased in our failures to comply as religious persons were non-essentials to our happiness or well-being! He adds elsewhere:

"if an agent never felt such sentiments, he would not belong to the morality system or be a full moral agent in its terms."<sup>36</sup>

Somehow guilt becomes a function of morality because no one lives up to the code—as it is understood. So when Daniel Dennett, one of the Four Horsemen of the new atheism, writes about "*Breaking The Spell*" of religion, he needs only convince us that morality is not owned by the church or temple or mosque. It is the property of all mankind including atheists.

"The widely prevailing opinion that religion is the bulwark of morality is problematic at best. The idea that heavenly reward is what motivates good people is demeaning and unnecessary; the idea that religion at its best gives meaning to life is jeopardized by the hypocrisy trap into which we have fallen; the idea that religious authority grounds our moral judgments is useless... and the presumed relation between spirituality and moral goodness is an illusion."<sup>37</sup>

### Save By The Grace Of God

But that's where grace comes in for the believer. Grace empowers a believer to live within the holiness—not moral—code of God. The moral code is a list of do's and don'ts that may or may not support our desire to live a principled life or a life that supports our desire for well-being. Holiness is a divine trait that comes with peace and love, forgiveness and the principles by which God governs His relationship with us. Whereas morality is a system, holiness in the person of God is a

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35. *ibid.*

36. *ibid.* p. 197.

37. Daniel Dennett. *Breaking the Spell* (New York: Viking Penguin, 2006), 307.

relationship. Morality as a concept is “*outside the individual*” but holy is what we are becoming in Christ.<sup>38</sup>

Holiness is an essential for a believer’s well-being—something no Christian denies and no atheist perceives. We need not argue the moral code as a divine standard—as reasonable as that sounds. We need to live a holy life before them if we want them to at least imagine the possibility that there is an eternal God walking beside us.

### Under Law

Paul informs us that we are not under the law<sup>39</sup> but under grace. I don’t think he and I attended the same church! If by ‘law’ he meant the practice of sacrificing lambs and sprinkling blood over everything, I am not under *that* law. But in the churches I have ‘worshipped’ there have been doctrines to promote, rules to follow, rituals to learn, practices to emulate as well as—in some cases—pressure to exhibit a popularized personality-type instead of allowing everyone to grow into the individual person God has ordained them to become..

A few persons have been less than gracious about it at times if I missed my cues, got things out of order, or failed to follow time-honored traditions which had become part of a recognized expression of church life—and therefore, one’s spirituality.

I was surprised to discover that much of what was part of a Sunday program was important because the ritual, and the doctrinal explanations of that ritual, gave structure to worship that in turn defined for a congregant what loving God was all about. When they did it right on a Sunday, their entire week

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38. Romans 8:29 For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters. NEW INT.

39. Romans 6:14 For sin shall no longer be your master, because you are not under the law, but under grace. NEW INT.

came together, the will of God was satisfied, and they lived with a sense of piety that affirmed their status as a child of God.

Their peace with God, their peace *of* God, was tied to that Sunday experience and when a guy like me comes along and asks them to own a faith that can survive without Sundays, some sincere and dedicated believers are ready to call for a meeting to dismiss me. When I redefine worship as service and not *the* service heads tilt in confusion as if I just told them that their church really didn't matter in the scope of things.

Well, it doesn't ...but I didn't tell them that. Fellowship matters. Loving one another in Christ matters. Witnessing matters. Even the Sunday morning ritual—and the doctrine—matter ... not as expressions of holiness in and of themselves but as expressions of a genuine faith that reveals that holiness.

There is nothing wrong with being Catholic or Baptist, Lutheran, Pentecostal, Messianic... do I have to name all Christian denominations? Our church time, rituals, doctrines—all of it—is alright with God if *we* are alright with God. No sermon, please. My point is that non-believers know the difference between veneer and solid faith. We should, too.

I was, also, surprised to find out that one's experience defines what is spiritual. So, if Brother Jones prays in tongues for an hour for Mrs. Smith and she is healed, that's how it's done. There are set questions to use when witnessing. And what if Holy Communion is a single Chalice and the person using it ahead of you is fighting the flu! God will honor your worship with health is our prayer.

Not everything is crazy in the wrong direction. What I love the most is when someone has to find me in a small crowd to thank me for saying something which I know I never said. That's anointed! But when I walk through scriptures that have no denominational significance—like preaching on the 'charismata' to a non-pentecostal group, I wander in where angels fear to tread—which was most of the time because I naively thought I was supposed to preach the entire book.

Not only is the Sunday service orchestrated and choreographed, it matters how you dress when you go—or at least it used to. Today, the pastor might be in shorts and flip-flops during the summer months. But while I pastored, formal, semi-formal or informal was a legitimate and important question. A missionary from those years told me that, where he labored for God, preachers had to wear conservative suits and ties if they wanted to gain the respect and ear of the listener.

I remember one young lady whose excitement with her new found faith was not matched by the worn dungarees she wore to church. She was told to come in a dress, but the only one she had was super short, clearly inappropriate for church. One of the leading evangelical types in one church, whose ministry alone kept the baptismal tank filled, came to church in shorts one Sunday. I was instructed by older women of sound wisdom to inform her to wear a dress. I was thankful that the following Sunday she did just that without complaint. It was the brightest yellow dress ever worn. She strolled in wearing a sunrise.

But the most damaging law, the mother of all laws, was requiring those who were seeking to know God to show signs that they knew whom they were seeking to know. Young men came with hippy cuts—or no haircut, I mean—young women of the night came dressed in their work clothes. It was enough to torment the more spiritually minded. Jim Palmer put it this way:

“Perhaps many more people would be open to what Jesus offers if his followers weren’t so bent on requiring you to clean up your act as a prerequisite for receiving it.”<sup>40</sup>

Atheists are not stupid. But what they have missed seeing is the heart of the saint while focusing their attention on forms and creeds which for them have no relevance. They possess no logical tree upon which to hang our ornaments of

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40. Jim Palmer. *Divine Nobodies: Shedding Religion to Find God (and the unlikely people who help you)* (Nashville, TN:Thomas Nelson, 2006), 24.

worship. I can understand why someone would leave a faith that for them was all motion and commotion but no emotion.

This is not a put-down. On the contrary, we, who profess to be for real, should thank them for pointing out to us that much of what we do has nothing to do with Christ. Much of what we believe gives us a sense of pride in our church and not the humble recognition of our need for a Savior. Some of what we do is directly out of a Hans Christian Anderson fairy tale<sup>41</sup>—it felt so good to finally say that!—because we have found the way to distinguish ourselves from a world of others who are just like us. We have found a way to condone the sins we commit while excommunicating, ostracizing, or marginalize others who do not follow our belief system but who may be genuinely in love with God. Fellowship, for us may have become a denominational assembly, a church dinner, or an evening with close friends from church. (There is nothing wrong with these.) But there are few, if any, strangers recognizable in many of our religious gatherings.

In this hut in the woods we call a sanctuary lives some 'for-real' believers, persons deeply in love with God, genuinely concerned for souls, But we live in the forest of missed chances to make a difference for God, where the underbrush of religious concerns has all but hidden the paths of witness once cleared by generations of impassioned missionary effort. Here lives you and I with honest interests in being used by God but finding ourselves lost among the trees of form and function. And atheists know this!

Daniel Dennett, one of the Four Horsemen of the New Atheism, contends:

"Church is morally uplifting theater, with rich traditions of music and ceremony, at least as socially valuable as grand opera or Shakespeare.... If churches could adopt the same features, they would be as unproblematically benign as Plimoth Plantation, but few if any apologists for churches are prepared to acknowledge that their ceremonies and creeds are really just a kind of participatory theater. There is a powerful reason for this reluctance. Any such acknowledgment, if it

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41. I am thinking of "The Emperor's New Suit" (1837)

became common knowledge, would instantly diminish the well-nigh hypnotic power of the rituals by framing them as make-believe, trading in real-life moral adventure for theme-park thrills and chills.<sup>42</sup>

Dennett is wrong. He just caught us being the kids we are at times playing with the box rather than the gift of God's love that came in it.

### The Carrot or The Stick

When I was a preteen, maybe eleven or twelve, I was with my mother at one religious gathering— probably one of those church services mom took me to for healing prayer. Thinking back, only one part of the evening was memorable and in an unexpected way. As usual, I was sitting eyes front, listening intently to the preacher. At the close of his sermon he instructed all of us in his audience to bow our heads and close our eyes— instructions I was very familiar with. But then he warned us that there was one more person there for whom this was their final chance to accept Christ as Savior. After this evening if they refused to come forward to accept Him, nothing but eternal torment was ahead for them.

This was the preacher's approach back then to an altar call. As I sat there hesitant but frightened I heard him repeat his warning over and over, perhaps four times, before I was scared enough to exit the comfort of my hiding place and expose my sinfulness to an auditorium full of people staring at me. I went forward. I don't remember saying any sinner's prayer; so, either mom convinced him I didn't need to or else that was not something he did.

I knelt tearfully at a chair begging the Lord to rescue me from the hell, which I learned later God had made for the devil—not me. All the while, mom stood behind me assuring the preacher that her son was already saved and she didn't understand why I went forward. This would have been the

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42. Daniel Dennett; Linda LaScola. *Caught in The Pulpit: Leaving Belief Behind* (Durham, NC:Pitchstone Publishing,2013), 172.

most embarrassing thing to ever happen to me in church had it not been for the grip of a hopeless terror that possessed me.

Steve McVey of *Grace Walk Ministries* tells us that evangelists like Charles Finney, back in the day would, "...use the law until you are bleeding from every pore."<sup>43</sup> This was the age of Billy Sunday and in the spirit of Jonathan Edwards' most famous sermon, "*Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God*" they yelled such threatening horrors until hearts melted from fear and souls pleaded for the mercy of God.

"They will use the law to bring you to a sense of guilt, so that you'll see your need for Jesus...."<sup>44</sup>

Through the teaching of men like Steve McVey the theological pendulum has swung completely to the other side from judgment to what Dr. Michael Brown called "*Hyper-Grace*." According to Dr. Brown, Steve McVey holds that

"It is a lie that 'God is disappointed in you when you do wrong.' He claims that, 'This lie is constantly used in the modern church world to motivate and manipulate people to straighten up and act right. It's a guilt-trip ticket passed out by many in religious authority to anybody who is willing to take it.'"<sup>45</sup>

Paul did speak of "*the ministry that brought condemnation*"<sup>46</sup> but he was talking about the law, the ceremonial law that—the Judeo-Christian tradition asserts—was given under Moses. Paul wasn't talking about Billy Sunday or Charles Finney as Steve McVey interprets.

But Paul, nonetheless adds that it was glorious in its day! It served its purpose to introduce the religious world to its need for the coming message of love that culminated in that single event on Calvary.

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43. Michael Brown. *Hyper-Grace: Exposing the Dangers of the Modern Grace Message* (Lake Mary, FL:Charisma House, 2014), 201.

44. *ibid*.

45. Michael Brown. *Hyper-Grace: Exposing the Dangers of the Modern Grace Message* (Lake Mary, FL:Charisma House, 2014), pp. 227-228. Referencing:

McVey, 52 *Lies Heard in Church Every Sunday*, 85.

46. 2 Corinthians 3:9.

So, where does this leave us?

Clark Whitten, author of *"Pure Grace: The Life Changing Power of Uncontaminated Grace,"* tells us that back when preachers were still talking about *hell, fire, and brimstone*:

"the Protestant church... taught a doctrine of 'saved by grace but perfected by human effort,' an approach that has produced a Church that is [among other things] judgmental, [and]... fearful."

Pastor Whitten contends that this doctrine has also brought 'personal devastation' to countless believers who have consequently checked out on church (or on God Himself.)<sup>47</sup>

The church according to him was in the *"behavior modification and sin management business."*<sup>48</sup>

I think it is the general exodus of church goers and a need to provide a more friendly atmosphere or religious experience that has framed what has been called *'Modern Grace.'*<sup>49</sup> It appears that preachers wish to downplay the message of hell and play up the message of love and I suppose we should ask ourselves whether or not that is an Okay thing to do.

But the point to take away from all of this, if you are a believer that needs some encouraging news, is that not just non-believers are talking about religious manipulation through fear and guilt. The church—perhaps with a faulty theological reasoning and perhaps for the wrong reason, to make the ministry seeker friendly, is beginning to re-evaluate decades of what is nothing short of an abuse of doctrine in the name of Truth..

Andre van der Merwe in *"GRACE, the Forbidden Gospel: Jesus tore the veil. Religion sewed it back up,"* contends:

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47. Michael Brown. *Hyper-Grace: Exposing the Dangers of the Modern Grace Message* (Lake Mary, FL:Charisma House, 2014), 8.

48. *ibid.*

49. see the Preface of Michael Brown's work *Hyper-Grace: Exposing the Dangers of the Modern Grace Message.*

"Once again in the church there is a struggle for a theological reformation that will liberate believers to break free from the yoke of bondage."<sup>50</sup>

Tony Ide, pastor of *Freedom Life Fellowship* in Perth, Australia, called it a "*grace reformation sweeping the earth.*"<sup>51</sup>

Jesus died to free us from guilt<sup>52</sup>—absolutely! but—by our living out holy lives. Unfortunately, talk about a grace that does not inflict guilt has produced for some a grace that overlooks sin.<sup>53</sup> A grace that recognizes no moral system in the name of an all embracing love becomes a grace that allows even believers to live their life anyway they choose. Such a grace is not an empowerment to live a holy life as much as it is a license to live a life free from self-condemnation, which opens the door for misdirected passions.<sup>54</sup>

Have we thrown away the baby of *conviction* with the bath water of self-degradation?<sup>55</sup> Self-debasing is wrong but it

50. *ibid.* p. 9.

51. *ibid.* p. 10.

52. Romans 8:1 Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, NEW INT.

53. Romans 6:1 What shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase? NEW INT.

54. Dr. Brown concludes: "There is no doubt in my mind, then, that the notion of a "grace reformation" (or "grace revolution") is highly exaggerated, that some of this new grace teaching is unbalanced, overstated, at times unbiblical, and sometimes downright dangerous—and I mean dangerous to the well-being of the body of Christ. In short, I do not believe that we are witnessing a new grace reformation. I believe we are witnessing the rise of a hyper-grace movement, filled with its own brand of legalistic judgmentalism, mixing some life-giving truth from the Word with some destructive error." [from *Hyper-Grace: Exposing the Dangers of the Modern Grace Message* (Lake Mary, FL:Charisma House, 2014), 15.

55. The burden of this work is not to prove or disprove the modern view of grace but to simply make the historical note that even theologians understand that non-believers do have a point. On the theology, Dr. Michael Brown admonishes: "The truth is that the modern grace message is quite mixed, combining life-changing, Jesus-exalting revelation with serious misinterpretation of Scripture, bad theology, divisive and destructive rhetoric, and even fleshly reaction. And, in all

is a greater mistake to silence the voice of conscience. We have redacted out the ‘wretchedness’ in John Newton’s *Amazing Grace*. It may not be so amazing anymore.

### Tough Love

Not every *sit-yourself-down-sinner-and-listen-up* is mean or wrong. Early in ministry I worked with a believer whose approach to evangelism he described as using a two-by-four the side of some people’s heads. He was a gracious and sensitive man who just knew when to get tough. Like President Teddy Roosevelt, now and then, we need the ‘Bully Pulpit’ or ‘big stick’ to impress emphatically some aspect of God’s Truth which otherwise would not be heard. This is the prophet’s fire<sup>56</sup> and it has a role to play in Christendom.

### Free At Last

Dr. Joe Griffin’s words might apply here to describe what happened—and still can happen—to many church attenders. They live “*a guilt-ridden, worthless, useless and unlovable self-narrative as ‘the truth’ from [a] ... locked-in perspective.*”<sup>57</sup>

The short of it is that ‘preacher-inflicted’ guilt has been a painful mistake that may have contributed to some leaving the faith.

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too many cases, it is being embraced by believers who are not just looking for freedom from legalism but also freedom from God’s standards.”

[Michael Brown. *Hyper-Grace: Exposing the Dangers of the Modern Grace Message* (Lake Mary, FL:Charisma House, 2014), 14.

56. Psalm 104:4 He makes winds his messengers, *fn* flames of fire his servants. NEW INT.

57. -Joe Griffin; Ivan Tyrrell. *Human Givens: The new approach to emotional health and clear thinking* (East Sussex, United Kingdom:Human Givens Publishing, Chalvington, East Sussex:Human Givens Publishing Ltd,, 2013), (Kindle Locations 192-193).

Jeb, a former Southern Baptist pastor who left the church and is now a secular activist confessed:

"What I lost was my marriage, a lot of my former friends, and a guilt-ridden lifestyle into which I was born and in which I was raised."<sup>58</sup>

Jacob, a humanist rabbi, formerly Conservative and then Reformed testifies:

"I've shed useless feelings of guilt about so many things, including sexual feelings, and replaced them with a realistic appreciation for all of the things I love about being alive."<sup>59</sup>

John Loftus, a former preacher, senses a release to tell us:

"I tried as best as I could to be a faithful Christian, and a good minister. Even though I believed it was by grace that I had been saved, I almost always felt guilty that I wasn't doing enough in response to God's purported love. This was something I fully understood only after walking away from the Christian faith. Whether it was spending time in prayer, evangelizing, reading the Bible, tithing, forgiving, or whether it was struggling with temptations of lust, pride, selfishness, and laziness, as I look back, I almost always felt guilty.<sup>60</sup> .... Today I am guilt free regarding the Christian duties mentioned above.... I just don't think anyone can live a passionate guilt-free Christian life.... According to Jesus, I should feel guilty for not just what I do but for what I think about-lusting, hating, coveting, and so on."<sup>61</sup>

I am not wanting to explain away embarrassing guilt much less to support the non-believer's self-observed happier conclusion now that he or she is no longer interested in church—though I understand. I am simply reporting. But this raises questions about another biblically important term: *conviction*.

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58. Daniel Dennett; Linda LaScola. *Caught in The Pulpit: Leaving Belief Behind* (Durham, NC:Pitchstone Publishing,2013), 186.

59. *ibid.* p. 203.

60. John W. Loftus. *Why I Became an Atheist: A Former Preacher Rejects Christianity* (Amherst,New York:Prometheus Books,2008), (Kindle Locations 477-480).

61. *ibid.* (Kindle Locations 483-485).

One topic that should be of interest to a believer is what role *conviction*, which is an activity of the Holy Spirit,<sup>62</sup> plays in our experience. Is it a form of guilt? A divine guilt? Is it just as verbally abusive a subject as the preacher's '*hell, fire and brimstone*' sermon or does it serve a completely different purpose? Has *guilt* become a counterfeited conviction which bankrupts the person who has treasured it instead of the real thing? Fool's gold. Is it just a sense of guilt that is mistakenly convincing the non-believer that Christianity is a *punitivoe* religion?

### Convicted

Non-believers see conviction and guilt as one and the same but they're wrong. Believers need to distinguish the two in their experience. Living a life guided by a God-given conviction leads us closer to God and proves Him real.

I realize that atheism—understandably—does not know this difference, the genuine from the counterfeit—as is true of a number of spiritual characteristics: God's love compared to natural affection or a joy in Christ compared to a natural happiness or faith in God compared to blind and unprovable beliefs or the fear of God that is a profound respect for Him compared to being frightened by the thought of a vengeful deity—something love purges from the believer's heart.<sup>63</sup>

Knowing it is conviction that maps my course enables me to keep perspective even when under the pain of a broken family relationship that needs healing. Knowing that I am reacting to conviction and not guilt encourages me to live out God's Word with real repentance as the driving principle of my

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62. 2 Corinthians 7:10 Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death. NEW INT.

63. 1 John 4:18 There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love. NEW INT.

life. Conviction fuels my determination to follow Christ. Guilt simply torments the mind and soul.

Debates with non-believers serve no fruitful purpose because the meanings of terms become confused. We are not talking about the same thing! An argument in defense of this truth is hopelessly entangled in philosophical jargon, angry words, and hurt feelings.

Guilt is, sadly, a counterfeit conviction by a religious leadership—and non-believers are correct about this, I'm sorry to say—that manipulates doctrine to its own ends.

One honest pastor in a town in which I also pastored envied me because of the 'liberty' (his word) that I had in my pulpit that he didn't. (Truth? I was no less enchained.) He didn't go into details nor did I ask but this told me that even the most sincere, dedicated, pious—saintly and caring—pastors find themselves trapped in the guilt web. Careers hang in the balance for them. They are like a parent trapped in a loveless marriage for the sake of the kids. But their child is their hunger to share God's Word and to love the people of God into a deeper commitment to truth. The unloving mate is the use of the language of scripture—brought down to them by denomination requirement—to coerce congregants into a certain type of action or set of beliefs.

A little guilt seems a harmless compromise—but it isn't, if it confuses young believers and arms non-believers who rightly criticize what should never be condoned in the name of Christ.

Conviction is a gift<sup>64</sup> from God that serves a primary interest: To distinguish right from wrong according to God's definition of good and evil.<sup>65</sup> (And if you ask me: this is a progressive and relational undertaking by God. My conviction

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64. Romans 2:4 Or do you show contempt for the riches of his kindness, forbearance and patience, not realizing that God's kindness is intended to lead you to repentance? NEW INT.

65. John 16:8 When he comes, he will prove the world to be in the wrong about sin and righteousness and judgment: NEW INT.

might not be the same as yours because our ministries require different levels of commitment to certain actions or because my level of maturity is far below yours at this point in time.) In Adam, whether you see this truth metaphorically or literally, mankind wanted to know what the knowledge of good and evil tasted like and now God needs to have this ongoing conversation with us.

Conviction has been seen as a disciplinary rebuke and is sometimes accompanied by punishment.<sup>66</sup> But it is more an education in right from wrong than a punishment.<sup>67</sup> Guilt serves no purpose but to inflict the pain of a false conscience on someone who is being accused of doing something wrong which they have not done or which is simply not wrong. Conviction only cares about the right path to happiness and loving relations and points this out to someone going astray.

Conviction is always and only administered by God—never the preacher. It takes wisdom about our present and a knowledge of the future that only God has to lead us down the right path. Conviction sheds light, then, on where we are walking. That is not always a rebuke unless we are stepping into a spiritually dangerous place.

But conviction can also be—and to me is primarily—a confirmation that we are going the right way.<sup>68</sup>

"I gain understanding from your precepts; therefore I hate every wrong path. Your word is a lamp for my feet, a light on my path."<sup>69</sup>

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66. Hebrews 12:5 And have you completely forgotten this word of encouragement that addresses you as a father addresses his son? It says, "My son, do not make light of the Lord's discipline, and do not lose heart when he rebukes you, NEW INT.

67. "The use of ἐλέγχω in the New Testament ... means to show someone his sin and summon him to repentance.... To set right. It implies educative discipline." Kittell vol II. P.474.

68. John 3:20 Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that their deeds will be exposed. NEW INT. 'exposed' is ἐλέγχω

69. Psalms 119:104-105 NEW INT.

And this for believers is a powerful<sup>70</sup> ally in our need, to paraphrase C.S. Lewis, “*To hear the band play while we march.*”

All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness.<sup>71</sup>

What a prayer for any believer! Lord, teach me, *convict* and correct me, train me in your ways! And He will do it in that order. Lessons in truth need to be taken to heart (become convictions) before they can be useful to correct our course and finally show us the path we should walk.

Show me your ways, Lord, teach me your paths.

Guide me in your truth and teach me, for you are God my Savior, and my hope is in you all day long.

Remember, Lord, your great mercy and love, for they are from of old.

Do not remember the sins of my youth and my rebellious ways;

according to your love remember me, for you, Lord, are good.<sup>72</sup>

Let me raise a footnote to the level of the text: Children will accept discipline that is guidance but they stand tall in deviance against discipline only meant to inflict pain. or guilt.<sup>73</sup>

70. Romans 1:16 For I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes NEW INT.

71. 2 Timothy 3:16 NEW INT.

πᾶσα γραφὴ θεόπνευστος καὶ ὠφέλιμος

πρὸς διδασκαλίαν teaching

πρὸς ἐλεγμὸν persuasion or conviction

πρὸς ἐπανόρθωσιν restoration “only God can give.” 2

Timothy 3:15

πρὸς παιδείαν τὴν ἐν δικαιοσύνῃ not an academic exercise but a maturing into spiritual adulthood (in righteousness).

“There is obviously a planned sequence in this list of nouns.” Gerhard Kittell. *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1974), vol V. P. 451.

72. Psalms 25:4-7 NEW INT.

73. “Never the goal, only the way. It is what God does... if we submit...” Kitten. Vol V. P. 622.

Eternal life is at stake: Hebrews 12:9 Moreover, we have all had human fathers who disciplined us and we respected them for it.

We, adults, have not outgrown this principle. If we are talking discipline and conviction, it is always constructive with God.<sup>74</sup>

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How much more should we submit to the Father of spirits and live!  
NEW INT.

74. Hebrews 12:10 ...God disciplines us for our good, in order that we may share in his holiness. NEW INT.

"God, however, exercises discipline to our advantage, i.e. In such a way that we may partake of His holiness." Kitten vol V. p. 622-623.

## Parental Influence

*"We must believe the things we tell the children." - Woodrow Wilson*

I love washing pots and pans which sometimes meets with my wife's disapproval when I set about cleaning them after a family dinner instead of socializing with 'the kids.' I have had this love relationship with the pots my entire life. When I was a kid myself, there were those occasions I would notice that one of mom's pots was exceptionally charred with baked on layers of rock-hard ...God alone knows. When I was finished with it, the pot looked new, recently store bought. Well, not quite. But mom appreciated my effort and told me so. The reward of her approval, perhaps, must have heightened my sense of achievement because I began to look for the next pan that needed a good scrubbing.

In college, my first job was cleaning the pots and pans after meals and the kitchen management came to depend upon my, now, expertise in this area. I still enjoyed it. I felt needed and appreciated and if they had a college degree in washing pots and pans, I might have been an instructor.

I, eventually, advanced to cleaning the cooker for Longacres Chickens, a factory in Eastern Pennsylvania that produced chicken and turkey rolls and a well recognized company now part of Hatfield Quality Meats.

For me, the pots I washed at Longacres simply got bigger and bigger and I found all of this soap and water, splashing and spilling, very rewarding. (The cooker I cleaned filled a room.) So, now when dinner is done cooking—even before eating it—I enjoy cleaning the pots and pans and putting them away. It's in my blood, I guess. They might find a *clean-pots* gene some day?

### Under the Influence

What cleaning pots has taught me is that much of my life as an adult is still the world of my childhood. Many of my likes and dislikes were seemingly preordained by choices and interests I developed as a youth. What I was brought up to appreciate is now what I do appreciate.

I like old furniture and walks through antique shops. Our little home in the city was as old as I and we couldn't afford the new stuff. I wouldn't want to live in a modern home but I prefer a small cottage nestled in an old world setting with old furniture, dark woods but bright colors ...and maybe a little dirt.

I like flowers, too. I also like to stroll with the wife through flower shops and we enjoy going to Longwood Gardens, west of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Every plant on the planet must be there. Or we stroll through the gardens in Boston when visiting there. I wonder if this all goes back to the endless hours I spent with a favorite uncle working in his garden.

"Start children off on the way they should go, and even when they are old they will not turn from it."<sup>1</sup>

I cannot—nor do I care to—escape those more enjoyable times that occupied my life in years gone by. It is as if the emotional—better yet, spiritual—side of me never grew old.

### Guidance

I see this as an application of guiding children into adulthood.

Sadly, we know, some children are abused in the name of teaching them lessons. But teaching a child right from wrong, helping them to discover that well-being is not based on always and only having their own way, and lovingly encouraging a child's emotional and spiritual development through what we say and do as adults—these—are not abuse. I say this here to note the obvious.

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1. Proverbs 22:6 NEW INT.

Learning never disrupts the fun of childhood. Learning *is* fun and even if it is accompanied by hard lessons or painful lessons—and yes, discipline—it is appreciated when children see the good it brings about. The value of learning is impressed upon not just our minds but our actions and feelings as well. And even with a few incidental lessons learned by touching the proverbial ‘hot stove’ the beneficial side of most learning comes because there is an adult in a child’s life that is conscientious about what that child experiences. Good learning is primarily the result of good guidance for the young and restless, the innocent and naive.

Guidance for a son or daughter is taught more by example than verbal instruction. We sometimes need to verbalize our encouragement or to explain, even underline, what adulthood is all about, what we, as grownups, may have discovered the ‘hard way.’ But none of this robs a child of their individuality, their right to make choices—nor should it. It is a subtle molding of the future for the young with more and more open contributions from them and fewer and fewer from us as we, parents, release them to discover their own adventures ahead, to cut a swath of, hopefully, beneficial choices through their own future.

### Brainwashed

Christian parents have been accused of brainwashing,<sup>2</sup> but I don’t believe it. Parenting is nothing more nor less than a parent sharing their own code of ethics, beliefs, principles for living with a youngster—and even non-believers do it. And mom from time to time would yell her wishes, adding that if she didn’t yell,

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2. Religions exist only because infants receive indoctrination by their parents or guardians, reinforced by the local culture. This brainwashing occurs generation after generation because no one pauses to think and assess what is being passed on. Children are legally protected from sexual abuse but not from the more serious crime of mental abuse. This should not be tolerated.

see <http://atheistfoundation.org.au/article/atheism-and-social-progress/>

we, kids, wouldn't listen. So we obeyed.. Again and again and again. Were we brainwashed into doing something we otherwise would not have done? If so, we were brainwashed by the voice of love .. Just with the volume turned up.

What is brainwashing? Brainwashing is turning life's practices into a cold and detached intellectual exercise, a catechism of disconnected religious or anti-religious ideas, a rote rendition of a dull life void of adventure, a mechanical *do-as-I-say* that turns Pinocchio back into the marionette. Brainwashing provides a parent's mold of themselves and pours the children one by one into it. Brainwashers ask their followers to go through the motions until either the feelings follow or more likely a numbness of a meaningless routine gives only the semblance of being alive. Joe Griffin says:

"...We can see that what a large part of this world mistakes for spirituality is nothing more than brainwashing by ideological organizations – from the extreme activities of fundamentalists like the Taliban in parts of Asia today, so reminiscent of the Christian Inquisition in medieval Europe, to the evangelical cults and happy-clappy new age religions that thrive in Western countries by gathering people together in groups to sing and emote."<sup>3</sup>

Joe Griffin refers to our beliefs as "*mindless repetition of old dogmas*"<sup>4</sup>—"reprogrammed"<sup>5</sup> He sees a "*scientific quest for knowledge*" instead as a "*contemporary spirituality*."<sup>6</sup>

Joe Griffin's observations may have merit but I maintain that good parenting is not an example of this. Our faith lived in front of our children is not an example of this. I trust that believers reading this book find one more source of

3. Joe Griffin Ivan Tyrrell. *Human Givens: The new approach to emotional health and clear thinking* (East Sussex, United Kingdom: Human Givens Publishing, Chalvington, East Sussex: Human Givens Publishing Ltd,, 2013), (Kindle Locations 355-360).

4. *ibid.*

5. *ibid.* (Kindle Location 913).

6. *ibid.* (Kindle Location 355-360).

See also Winn, D. (1983, 2000) *The Manipulated Mind: brainwashing, conditioning and indoctrination.* Octagon Press, London; Malor Books, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

encouragement in knowing that true spirituality entails a genuine relationship with God and with other believers. It is not a mere doctrine, It is not a catechism of our personality and choices rotely imposed on the formative minds of the young but a living example of what God is capable of doing for them, too, if they are faithful to Him.

There is a dogma, however, and it *is* old. It is the dogma of *Calvary*, what Dorothy Sayers called “*miraculous and unfathomable*” ...and she added *offensive*.<sup>7</sup> It is the mystery that envelopes this singular doctrine—and the fact that we trust God to provide a clearer understanding of it when we will be eternally with Him—that leaves non-believers with no word, no explanation, no understanding, no language to describe what is a very real work of God in the heart and life of a believer. Slapping on the label “brainwash” is inaccurate and irrelevant but I understand their frustration.

### Patterns

Most of us live in intellectual ignorance as to how to raise a child. Most of us are not motivated by social or psychological research—we don’t know how to program our kids, else many of us just might in the name of personal sanity. We are motivated by a simple but strong natural affection that is more heart than brain. Parenting shares the lessons of life that have changed us for the better—or worse—often as an unintentional

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7. 1. Dorothy Sayers. *Creed or Chaos* (Manchester,NH: Sophia Institute Press, 1974), 8ff “It [is] a grave mistake to present Christianity as something charming and popular with no offense in it. Seeing that Christ went about the world giving the most violent offense to all kinds of people, it would seem absurd to expect that the doctrine of His Person can be so presented as to offend nobody... Nobody need be too much surprised or disconcerted at finding that a determined preaching of Christian dogma may sometimes result in a few angry letters of protest or a difference of opinion on the parish council... At the risk of appearing quite insolently obvious, I shall say that if the Church is to make any impression on the modern mind She will have to preach Christ and the Cross.”

process of just being in a child's life. Even grownups who are bad at it cannot disallow the influence of their lives from being embossed on the life of any children that are living under their influence.

Patterns are learned by observing and simulating. Children are natural followers. So, for better or worse, the children who dwell even in the peripheral vision of our love or dysfunction are finding out our definition of life. The youth are in the orbit of the gravitational pull of our influence: every high-five, every peak experience, every responsible moment as well as every move recklessly made, every promise denied, every lie told. And even when they don't know details, they pick up on the vibes that resonate louder than our reassuring words.

Children know if they are loved and they know if they are not. And the impact of this revelation upon them exceeds that of all others.

### Blamed

Should I blame myself as a parent if any of my children decided that my beliefs are myths and lies? I know we cannot theologically 'grandfather' them into the faith, but what went wrong that somehow the faith I cherish, they disown!

If I understand the new atheism, we are not to blame for their leaving the church. They exercised an independent right to learn through science that our religion doesn't count for anything. If they stayed in the faith, however, we would be to blame as brainwashers!?

Blaming parents for a child's actions when it is philosophically convenient does not bear the mark of a true science. If our influence kept some, did not our influence chase others away? Or if we had nothing to say about some leaving, we should have had no responsibility regarding others whose faith remained intact.

### Destined to be

This leads me to conclude that there are many moons, planets and suns that influence the trajectory of anyone's journey through life. Parents are the ones closest to the launchpad, that's all. And the kids each in turn, with or without God as navigator, pilot their own destiny. They need to weave their way carefully past the pull of this teaching or that one. They must steer a course far away from the black holes of religious fanaticism on the one side or a relativism free of morals on the other side in a universe of possible paths into their future. And they are, in terms of their experiences and how they will interpret those experiences, going where no one has gone before. They are always in our prayers. I only add as a reminder to those anxious parents who fear the unknown that God *is* out there.

"If I go up to the heavens, you are there" — Psalms 139:8

## Sesquipedalian [big] Ideas

*“Callipygian. Having shapely buttocks. Nice one, Bridge.”*

*— Stephanie Perkins, Anna and the French Kiss*

One of the most time consuming, and admittedly one of the most difficult, things to do in an effort to understand what atheism is all about is wading into the muddy waters of academia that atheism attests contains the scientific evidence of its contention that God only exists in the mind and ceremony of the religious. A few big words later and the idea of an eternal God is finally eradicated from the world of learning as non-essential if not false.

It is a difficult task for someone like myself to study these things because I can only hope to obtain a scant overview of some of the many disciplines of education needed to even begin to understand what atheism claims is true. Atheism requires doctoral level presentations for the scientific world to evaluate their list of new hypotheses that conclude that God is dead or dying.

I am merely one humble believer who, like you, woke up one morning to discover that our simple vocabulary of spiritual things and God would no longer suffice to explain anything.

A new generation of atheists is, in fact, gaining the attention of the civilized world and a greater freedom in not only debating their view but doing it in a way that ridicules our faith as medieval mysticism or the childish tales of super heroism.

What isn't clear is how atheists, themselves, can be so sure of things for which they have neither sufficient expertise to know nor a united consensus around a single theory. They admit that science is always an ongoing investigation and they reserve the right to debate, disagree and even change their minds about a number of conclusions.

Where does this leave us?

## Evolution

Let's take *evolution*, for example.<sup>1</sup> The hub of this wheel of debate has been and will continue to be evolution versus creationism. But what is evolution? "*A curious aspect of the theory of evolution*," Jacques Monod tells us, "*is that everybody thinks he understands it.*"<sup>2</sup>

The modern subject of evolution is a study of genetics, new-darwinism. But in Jerry Coyne's work, "*Why Evolution is True*" we read:

"For some terms, like 'gene,' scientists have several definitions, often technical and sometimes at odds with one another."<sup>3</sup>

Dr. Montgomery, a geologist, says it this way:

"The modern view of inherent conflict is championed most vociferously by those who keep the conflict going—creationists and militant atheists who share little else than the belief that faith in God and science are incompatible. Most people, however, hold beliefs somewhere between these two extremes.... And just because science can neither prove nor disprove the existence of God does not mean that it says religious faith is an illusion."<sup>4</sup>

Frank Schaeffer suggests that:

"Evolutionary psychologists, biologists, philosophers, atheists, religious fundamentalists, liberals and conservatives, writers, hotel maids and preachers, we all act as if our pet paradigm can be stretched to fit every case."<sup>5</sup>

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1. On the academic battlefield of ideas, not only is there a great deal of debate over the meaning of the term 'cultural evolution' there is also considerable disagreement over the meaning of the word 'culture'. see <http://www.evolutionary-philosophy.net/culture.html>

2. Jerry Coyne. *Why Evolution Is True* p. 1.

3. *ibid.* p. 247.

4. David Montgomery. *The Rocks Don't Lie: A Geologist Investigates Noah's Flood* (New York:W. W. Norton & Company, 2012.), 254-255.

5. Frank Schaeffer. *Why I am an Atheist Who Believes in God: How to give love, create beauty and find peace.* (North Charleston,

### Tchotchkes

What's a *tchotchke*? One meaning of a *tchotchke* is a small object that is decorative rather than strictly functional; a trinket. And that is what atheism thinks of our faith?

My son, even before, what he refers to as, his deconversion, would discuss technical issues with me. He remains an avid reader of philosophy and other subjects that relate to his new found commitment to atheism. One of the latest discussions we had was about something called *evolutionary psychology*—<sup>6</sup>these two words to me don't fit together but my son sees value in such a possible up and coming discipline. Did you and I *evolve* spiritually and we just put the 'God' label on it in ignorance? Is everything about us: mental, emotional, and spiritual to be explained in evolutionary terms and no part of us has anything to do with a real creation?

Most christian parents are simple folk with a humble faith in God and a secular college curriculum is mind blowing. How does one relate to a son or daughter who lives in this academic world millions of lightyears away from any church experience?

Jim, the rector of a thriving suburban Episcopal church, was particularly bothered by the New Atheists who, in his opinion, talk about Christians as if they are all evolution deniers.

"I picked up *The God Delusion* [by Richard Dawkins] at the used-book store the other day, and it was the most insufferable reading I've ever had to endure. It's incredibly disingenuous, if not equally as bigoted as the right-wingers.

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South Carolina:CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2014), 26.

6. Evolutionary Psychology was first known as sociobiology introduced as a possible science by biologist Edward O. Wilson in 1975. It was and is an evolutionary approach to ethics which Wilson called "self-evident" but which was disputed vociferously until the late 1980's when it began to find acceptance among biologists.

See. Nicholas Wade's "The Faith Instinct" (New York:Penguin Press, 2009), 33ff.

The arguments are laughable to me, and yet he's earnest and sincere and he really believes he's pursuing this ethical agenda. But I think he's willfully obtuse, and it bothers me, because both sides in this debate are yelling past each other. Meanwhile, a way of life that is life-giving to me and to millions of others is completely misunderstood, mischaracterized, and ignored."<sup>7</sup>

### Deep Feelings

Make no mistake about it, when it comes to bio-genetics, paleontology, psychology, biogeography, embryology, and a thousand other big words, I am dumb. Admitting this gets the debate out of the way; so, I can talk to believers about things that still matter to us. There is still somewhere in the lower recesses of our gut the "*deep calling unto deep*,"<sup>8</sup> to use the Psalmist's metaphor.

The entire 42<sup>nd</sup> Psalm is a recording of the cries, the tears, the thirst, the shouts, the song, the agony, and the hope that bubbles up from places within the soul of one who trusts in God and whose life remains an unexplored mystery to others who have not yet known what it means to be so overwhelmed by a longing after the love and mercy of God. Thoughts of God possess the psalmist, consume his day, and cause his heart to explain life in terms of a hope in God's promises that drives his passions and defines the future.

Not to get emotional about it but this is more than a feeling. That this is not genetic or a cultural phenomenon should be obvious to the 'civilized' world. This is not associated with a religious service or any particular church group. This is an individual calling of one soul unto God like the deer panting for water. (Psalms 42:1) Not every heart thirsts for God but those who do can take comfort in knowing that in spite of the language (the big words) offered to explain away their

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7. Daniel Dennett; Linda LaScola. *Caught in The Pulpit: Leaving Belief Behind* (Durham, NC:Pitchstone Publishing,2013), 151-152.

8. Psalms 42:7 NEW INT.

experience, they should remain sure that it is God.<sup>9</sup> ( I am addressing the choir. I know.)

### Compartmentalizing

They say believers separate their Sunday life from their work week experiences, that believers talk about beliefs that have no relevance to the way they live or see things in the real world. They say christians are *compartmentalizing* their faith.

This is possible. What happens on a Sunday morning (or Saturday night which is now the new Sunday morning) might be an isolated experience from the rest of the week. So, Monday morning some may curse the God they praised the day before? Say it isn't so!

And we sing songs that hold to theological views foreign to our church's doctrinal position, but no one cares. We like singing them. Recently, in a church that doesn't hold to a reformed but more a Wesleyan view of sanctification, the congregation was invited to sing the Newsboys song: *Your Love Never Fails*. They swayed and clapped and worshipped to these words:

Nothing can separate us even if I run away... Your love never fails.<sup>10</sup>

If I recall correctly, that's a reformed view but worshippers don't analyze words, they just sing and worship.

This is nothing new. We used to sing hymns in a christian college chapel and the words clearly did not always reflect the theology this same school taught. And yet we fought wars over some of these 'truths.'

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9. John 4:14 but whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life. NEW INT.

Matthew 5:6 Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. NEW INT.

10. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zrc1xHEwtLY>

Christians do pigeonhole some ideas that they will bring out later only to debate. These are ideas that do not seem to serve any other purpose. But when we are talking about a believer's hunger to know God, this is real, this is life, this is who they, we, are.

### Back and Forth

Are scientists who are also believers living with a contradiction when they claim faith but use test tubes and meters to determine their reality? Is there a disconnect between heart and brain? Are scientists who are also men and women of faith being ambivalent about how they see their reality? Or are they self-deceived, living in both worlds depending on the day of the week? Dr. David Montgomery admits:

"THE PUSH-AND-PULL, the back-and-forth through history between science and religion is more of a dance than a war. I now think of it as an awkward egalitarian waltz, with the partners trading off the lead, sometimes moving one step ahead, other times following behind, and occasionally stomping on each other's toes.<sup>11</sup>"

Dr. Montgomery then asks, "*Is seeing believing, or is believing seeing?*"<sup>12</sup> How should believing persons of science understand the scriptures? He is one scientist that understands that not every Bible story needs to be taken literally. As a geologist, he primarily concerned himself with the age of the earth and Noah's flood and his science was not finding a literal understanding of scripture here to be adequate. But his faith in God never came into question.

" I believe faith and science can peacefully coexist, so long as we don't founder on or cling to the rocky shore of either.... While science has much to offer us, from vaccines to space travel, religion can help humanity frame essential social, moral, and ethical decisions, such as those arising from the development and uses of science and technology.... Yet no honest search for truth can deny geological discoveries— not

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11. David Montgomery. *The Rocks Don't Lie: A Geologist Investigates Noah's Flood* (New York:W. W. Norton & Company, 2012.), 247.

12. *ibid.*, p. 248.

when Earth's marvelous story is laid out for all to see in the very fabric of our world. We may argue endlessly about how to interpret the Bible, but the rocks don't lie.<sup>13</sup>

We may need to go back to the beginning and by that I mean the first few words of our Bible. We need to at least try to realize that in these first verses the vast mystery of the beginnings of our universe and all life is couched in the non-technical expressions of a language designed—I believe by God—for other more important purposes. The language of the TANACH, our Old Testament, was invested in the day to day experiences of an ancient civilization that faced the many challenges of finding the land of promise and then figuring out what to do with it once they did.

Classical Hebrew may not be the geologist's first choice of a language in which to talk about rocks but God's story, nonetheless begins here.

### In the Beginning

Not long ago, I had asked my son to inquire of a rabbi—he knows a few—to comment on the first word in the Hebrew Bible which in English translates: *In the beginning*.<sup>14</sup> There is nothing mysterious about the phrase. It is straight forward and everyone knows what 'in the beginning' means.<sup>15</sup> But as the first word of our Bible it seems a bit out of place: in the beginning of *what*?

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13. *ibid.* p. 254ff.

14. In the LXX we read ἐν ἀρχῇ "the place in a temporal sequence at which something new, which is also finite, commences." Kitten vol I. p. 479.

15. The Hebrew תַּשְׁאֵל according to Keil is "used absolutely" [Keil & Delitzsch. *Commentary of the Old Testament*. vol I. p. 46.]

see Isaiah 46:10: I make known the end from the beginning, from ancient times, what is still to come. I say, 'My purpose will stand, and I will do all that I please.' NEW INT.

We know it doesn't mean: *In the beginning of God*. Believers know God to be eternal and infinite. He had no beginning.

*In the beginning of creation?* Sounds good but what would it actually mean: "*In the beginning of creation, God created.*"<sup>16</sup> Maybe this would mean: "*In the beginning when God created*"<sup>17</sup> or *The first thing God created was 'the heavens and the earth'* but it isn't good Hebrew.<sup>18</sup> None of these are what the Hebrew says.

So, "*in the beginning*" indicates, what the commentary calls: "*the commencement of a series of ...events.*"<sup>19</sup> This leads me to translate it: "*In the beginning of time.*" This was the beginning of all things created.<sup>20</sup>

In the beginning of time God created. Does this mean: "*On day one God made the heavens*"? No. His first day was taken up in bringing together the defused light of a Big Bang singularity.<sup>21</sup> (Okay, Big words but you were warned.) But the Big bang theory was based on Einstein's calculations and since these calculations can only address the expansion of the universe *after* the bang, they do not mathematically explain *the moment of* that bang.

16. The verb אָרַץ in the Kal verb stem always means 'to create' and always refers to God's creative work.

17. This is "opposed to the grammar of the language." Keil & Delitzsch. Commentary of the Old Testament. vol I. p. 46.

18. "So involved a sentence would be intolerable." *ibid*.

19. *ibid*.

20. John 1:1, 3 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.... Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. NEW INT.

21. "The universe may have existed forever, according to a new model that applies quantum correction terms to complement Einstein's theory of general relativity"

see <http://phys.org>.

God is not eternal, the universe is!?

### A Cliff Hanger

We used to puzzle over this little mind-teaser: Where was the man when he jumped off the cliff? Do you know? If you say “in the air” I would say, “No, that was *after* he jumped.” If you say “on the cliff” I would say, “No, that was *before* he jumped.” The word ‘*when*’ becomes—I might call it—an anti-moment in suspended time.

The newest theory about the universe’s beginnings discards the big bang and claims the universe always existed. ...and no one thinks this strange? Since our logic was confounded with the devotee’s belief that God has always been from eternity past, how can a universe that has always been be more reasonable?

### A Day in the Life of God

The simplicity of the Hebrew in Genesis brings also into question the actual meaning behind the word ‘*day*.’<sup>22</sup>

Anyone who is not insensitive to Hebrew usage realizes at once that the expression ‘In the day that the Lord God made’ means simply ‘At the time that He made’, and does not refer to a ‘day’ of twelve or twenty-four hours. It is written, for example, IN THE DAY when the Lord spoke with Moses on Mount Sinai (Num. iii 1), although the colloquy lasted forty days and forty nights. We also find: ON THE DAY when the Lord delivered him from the hand of all his enemies, and from

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22. Martin Rees in “Just Six Numbers” Spartan Press, 2000. p. 130 quotes St Augustine:

“...the world was not made in time but ...with time. ...in time is ... both after and before some time—after that which is past before that which is future. There was no creation by whose movement its duration could be measured.”

Rees points out that “...many crucial features of our universe could have been imprinted when the cosmic clock was reading  $1 \times 10^{-35}$  seconds.”

I view the word ‘day’ as a logical divider, not a chronological one, since measurements of time can only begin after the earth has form and is revolving in the heavens. Where was the man when he jumped off the cliff!

the hand of Saul (Psalms xviii 1; the wording in ii Sam. xxii 1 is almost identical), although, needless to say, David was not delivered from the hand of all his enemies in one day. So, too, we are accustomed in modern Hebrew to say 'in the hour that', which does not mean an hour of sixty minutes but merely 'when'.<sup>23</sup>

### Elementary, My Dear Believer

Why did I take you down this dark alley? I thought it was necessary to point out that the simplicity of my faith in our Creator has a right to endorse the unadorned biblical account. Non-believers weave their way mentally, intellectually, through a labyrinth of new ideas upon which they rest their hope that there is a science that will finally prove that God does not exist, that He is not the creator of anything.

The Hebrew is far too elementary to be useful to explain complex theories but this does not make the text a myth or make-believe.<sup>24</sup>

No christian has any reason to be embarrassed or threatened by anything that science substantiates within a reasonable assurance as part of our present reality. Christians go to doctors. Some doctors are christians. We've been here many time before; so, nothing more need be said. Besides, science gave us electronic tablets, for which many church goers are grateful.

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23. Rabbi Umberto Moshe David Cassuto. *The Documentary Hypothesis* (Jerusalem:Central Press, 2011.), 73.

"What we have before us here then is simply a detailed description of the creation of man, which had been alluded to in general terms in the preceding section, in accordance with the literary method that requires first a general statement and thereafter a detailed account—an expedient that, as we stated earlier, is very frequently employed in the Torah." *ibid.*

24. Chrys Caragounis says of the Greek language, both literary and demotic, as late as the early nineteenth century "lack[ed] the opportunity to adapt ...to the demands of contemporary civilization, i.e. scientific, cultural and political..." *The Development of Greek and the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI.:BakerAcademic, 2006.å), 50

### A Critique of Scholarship

The threat—if ‘threat’ is the word to use—to the faith comes from within. It originates with a biblical scholarship that has studied our Bible—not so much in terms of its content, but—in terms of its right to be called the inspired Word of God. Today’s biblical scholar uses, what is known as, the *historical-critical* method as a tool to determine how authentic and genuine the various books of our Bible are and on that basis whether or not to consider the accounts of Scripture as sacred or just good literature. Not every scholar of the Bible who has used this method as a tool has come away without faith, but some have—Professor Bart Ehrman, for one.

Dr. Bart D. Ehrman is a Distinguished Professor of Religious Studies at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. He is a prolific writer, over twenty books, some of them best sellers, and a proponent of the historical-critical method. Dr. Ehrman was a graduate of Moody Bible Institute and had found C. S. Lewis’ argument for the Divinity of Christ<sup>25</sup> “*completely convincing*”<sup>26</sup> (C.S. Lewis argued that Jesus claiming Himself to be God had to be either a liar, a lunatic, or actually, our Lord.)

Today, Ehrman is a professed agnostic claiming that Jesus never did call Himself divine—making Lewis’ argument mute. (Ehrman considered a fourth possibility: Liar, Lunatic, Lord... or legend.<sup>27</sup>)

Bible school and seminary students, which includes future pastors and teachers, are under a heavy influence of a scholarship that proposes to investigate the legitimacy of the biblical claims to Christ’s divinity, His vicarious death and

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25. If Jesus was wrong in His claim to be God, he was either a liar or a lunatic. If he knew he was wrong, he would have been a liar. If he didn’t know that he was wrong, he would be a lunatic. And since He was shown to be neither a liar nor a lunatic, His claim to deity is genuine.

26. Bart Ehrman, *Jesus Interrupted* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 2009), 141.

27. *ibid.* p. 142.

resurrection in a spirit of open scholarship but the professor's bias bleeds through his or her comments. Atheism has found a friend who occupies a place of prominence within the church—something those of us who believe a simple Gospel message should know.

### A Critique of Biblical Historical

What is the historical-critical method of interpreting the Bible? Erhman points out that this approach uses "*a different set of concerns.. a different set of questions*" with an interest in learning *about* the Bible rather than what's *in* the Bible.<sup>28</sup> This is contrasted with the "devotional" approach<sup>29</sup> offered in church as a study of Scriptures. Erhman proceeds to delineate the problems with the text (and therefore with the Bible) which he titles an *Historical Assault on Faith*.

Although, Erhman does not believe that this method necessarily leads to agnosticism or atheism<sup>30</sup>, his personal view of Jesus was as an "*apocalyptic prophet*"<sup>31</sup>. On the resurrection of Christ, he adds, "*This is a miracle, and by the very nature of their craft, historians are unable to discuss miracles.*"<sup>32</sup>

Erhman, like Daniel Dennett,<sup>33</sup> one of the Four Horsemen of the New Atheism, sees Christianity as a "*human creation.*"<sup>34</sup>

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28. *ibid.* p. 4.

29. *ibid.* p. 269.

30. *ibid.* p. 272.

31. *ibid.* p. 171.

32. *ibid.*

33. Dennett in "Breaking The Spell" calls all religion a 'natural phenomenon.' He calls for a setting aside "our traditional reluctance to investigate religious phenomena scientifically. (New York:Viking Penguin. 2006), 28.

34. Bart Ehrman. *Jesus Interrupted* (New York:Harper Collins Publishers, 2009), 275.

Professor Ehrman, at semester's end would pose a question to his students: *Is faith possible?*<sup>35</sup> The final was offered as an essay: "*Here are my questions,*" the professor began,

"You're talking to someone about religion and, as sometimes happens she turns on the steam. 'Look,' she says, 'the New Testament is full of contradictions; we can't know what the man Jesus actually did; the apostle Paul turned Jesus' simple preaching of the Kingdom into a complicated theological system of sin, judgment and redemption; and most of the NT [New Testament] writers actually believed that the end was coming in their lifetime. This book is misogynist and anti-Semitic and homophobic and has been used to justify all sorts of horrendous acts of suppression over the ages: just listen to some of the tele-evangelists! This is a dangerous book!' How do you respond?"

Dr. Ehrman informs us that "*The goal of my class is not to attack the Bible or to destroy the students' faith. One of my goals is to get them to think about issues that many of them care deeply about and that ultimately matter.*"<sup>36</sup>

No one is questioning Dr. Ehrman's sincerity nor his passion for teaching the Bible, but for him the bible is just ancient literature.

"As soon as I came fully to grips with the reality that we don't have the actual inspired words of God in the Bible... it opened the door to the possibility that the Bible is a very human book. This allowed me to study it from a historical-critical perspective."<sup>37</sup>

Finally, Ehrman left:

"...I did not leave the christian faith because of the inherent problems of faith, per se, or because I came to realize that the Bible was a human book, or that christianity was a human religion. All that is true—but it was not what dismantled my acceptance of the Christian myth. I left the faith for what I took to be (and still take to be) an unrelated reason: the problem of suffering in the world."<sup>38</sup>

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35. *ibid.* p. 269.

36. *ibid.* p. 271.

37. *ibid.* p. 273.

38. *ibid.* p. 277.

### My Introduction

My introduction to the historical-critical method of studying God's Word has been more drawn out giving me opportunity to research many of the points of contention raised by this brand of scholarship and I found no reason to disown my prayer life from where my faith derives its strength. I was also privileged to know Dr. Eshbaugh, a PhD in Textual Criticism from Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, and to spend time discussing the language of the New Testament and his dissertation on the manuscripts of the New Testament. I hungered more for God and His Word as I became familiar more and more with scholarly interests in the language of Scripture that I had by then been spending over a decade learning.

But many of our sons and daughters and other family members are open to Dr. Erhman's conclusions. Is their faith in crisis? For them it is not a crisis of faith because Ehrman seems to make sense. His reasoning supported by proofs and some common theories leads to disowning the Bible as God's Word. And since history will not even take a look at the miracles of Scripture, including the resurrection of Jesus, open minds are left to imagine what is beyond their imagination and therefore for many to reject the record as myth and nonsense.

This is an academic tidal wave that will capsize many a small faith. We, as believers in God's Word—it still is for us the "*power of God unto our salvation,*"—must ride it out in prayer.

### What's Yours is Meme

What's a *meme*? Not mime with an 'i' but meme with an 'e'. I never heard the word before my son started to use it in conversation. The term was first used by Richard Dawkins in 1976.<sup>39</sup> If I understand correctly: a meme is an element of culture

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39. "What we have not previously considered is that the cultural trait may have evolved in the way that it has, simply because it is advantageous to itself." — Dawkins. p. 200 of rev.ed. For further details see Daniel Dennett. *Breaking the Spell*. p. 350

or system of behavior that is culturally transmitted to subsequent generations. It speaks of a culturally evolved change that is identifiable from its beginning to its disappearance in the practices of a particular culture.

Memes are to cultural change what DNA is to biological change. It was Daniel Dennett's contention that religious practices and rituals should be researched and eventually understood in such terms. He referred to this as a *new science of memetics*.<sup>40</sup> David P. Barash, author of "*Madame Bovary's Ovaries: A Darwinian Look at Literature*" credits Daniel Dennett on the back cover of Dennett's book "*Breaking the Spell*" with what Barash called the '*biologizing*' of religion.<sup>41</sup>

On the surface this all sounds a reasonable possibility. Our religious rituals today are variations on an approach to worship previous generations used. Change in ritual, like the Mass going to English, adjusts to cultural change.

What makes the word '*evolved*' better than '*developed*'? If I am understanding Dawkins and the new atheists correctly: Changing rituals as a form of cultural change follows a similar evolutionary process as biological evolutionary change. Worship, therefore, has nothing to do with a real God. Daniel Dennett refers to it as an "author-less" process. If we go back far enough, christianity derives from a pre-historic cave-dwelling culture.<sup>42</sup> All religion does.

Darwin identified three selection processes: *methodical*, where the change is deliberate as today with cross-pollination and 'creating' hybrid species; *unconscious*, unwittingly contributing to the survival of a species like domesticating apple

40. *ibid.* p. 355.

41. Nicholas Wade in *The Faith Instinct*, (New York:Penguin Press, 2009), 19 tells us, the biologist Edward Wilson wrote, "The time has come for ethics to be removed from the hands of the philosophers and biologized... Science for its part with test relentlessly every assumption about the human condition and in time uncover the bedrock of the moral and religious sentiments."

42. Dennett asks, "Is cultural evolution Darwinian?" *ibid.* p. 354.

trees; and *natural*, what we have come to understand as evolution in which human intention played no role.

Religion, including christianity, according to this theory is a cultural *selection* process that originated from an author-less folklore.<sup>43</sup> According, then, to Dennett, God had nothing to do with the 'evolution' of the christian religion. *Methodical* selection would be intentional changes as in Vatican 2 which addressed the church's relation to the world. *Unconscious* selection might describe the "move of the Spirit" in the 70's that brought about a number of changes church leadership did not plan for. *Natural* selection could be changes that occurred through a long period of time and that happened unanticipated, unregulated and observed only after it had come about—change that was never introduced into committee and never planned for but change, nonetheless, that slowly surfaced to redefine worship, like the inflow of new choruses now sung across Christendom.

### What 's God's is Yours

I have a few concerns. The first difficulty I see is what Stephen Meyer, a philosopher of science from the University of Cambridge, calls a "*long-standing mystery in biology—the question of the origin of life.*"<sup>44</sup> Darwin theorized about the evolution of life but not its beginning. And the same must be said about the christian faith. Conceding that much of our ritual and ceremony is 'borrowed' from other earlier religious sources (perhaps, the Orthodox church is indebted to the Ceremonial laws and practices outlined in our Old Testament), we may still ask, "*From where did the devotion and piety originate if not from God?*" There is that spark of spiritual life so visibly aglow within the soul of one

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43. "The idea of meme promises similarly to unify under a single perspective such diverse cultural phenomena as deliberate, foresighted scientific and cultural inventions (memetic engineering), such author-less productions as folklore...." *ibid.* p. 355.

44. Stephen Meyer, *Signature in the Cell* (New York:Harper Collins Publishers. 2009), 12ff.

whose trust is in God. The sacrament and liturgy are not meaningless symbols of evolved ritual. For the believer, worship is alive with faith.<sup>45</sup>

It is important, in the second place, to remember that Daniel Dennett is proposing a 'new' science of 'memetics.' I understand his interest in trying to observe our dedication to God in totally natural and human terms. And for a lot of church goers, his observations just might be adequate. But there is a faith in God that offers no other explanation as to its origin other than God gave it.<sup>46</sup> For Dennett, all this is theory but for we who believe in God's salvation, it is our reality. Dennett cannot explain it as genetic, you recall, because a meme is by definition not transmitted genetically from one generation to the next; so, he proposes further study.

I find it interesting in the third place that Richard Dawkins coined the word, *meme*, at the same time in the history of the church when a revival of dedication to the message of the cross—evangelism—was re-introducing many church goers to a new life in Christ. Dare I think that this was simply a strategic countermeasure on the part of atheism to minimize the influence of such a far reaching spiritual enlightenment?

Atheists see form but not heart; they observe ritual but not holiness; they see beliefs but not genuine faith or trust in God.

Please, none of this is said to equip you with the ordnance (play on words, intentional) to argue with family over their unbelief. My effort is traceable to a desire to encourage your faith, to reinforce the truth that if it is genuine in Christ, it will be vindicated in God's time.

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45. Romans 14:23 But whoever has doubts is condemned if they eat, because their eating is not from faith; and everything that does not come from faith is sin. NEW INT.

46. 2 Peter 1:1 To those who through the righteousness of our God and Savior Jesus Christ have received a faith as precious as ours: NEW INT.

Before getting down to the task at hand writing this section, this morning I watched a movie which was a true story. I don't want to promote the particulars of the film but while a soldier lay wounded in a field hospital he had a fellow comrade in arms read the Bible to him. He read from John 14 and lighting the sky of my longings, bursting with glowing promise was the opening salvo of this divinely empowered message to God's true church, those whose trust is in Him :

"Let not your heart be troubled; you believe in God, believe also in Me. In My Father's house are many mansions; if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself; that where I am, there you may be also."<sup>47</sup>

I wept.

### An Inspired Residual

We are told that "*Even atheists can love the concept of God without contradicting themselves.*"<sup>48</sup> Deity for them is conceptualized. Is God part of a lively discussion about impossibilities, is 'he' the vague impression of a mysterious higher power of reason that helps some to overcome human weakness? Or for some, is a god-consciousness the residual effect of years of a godly influence?

Frank Schaeffer, who, you recall, wrote the book: *Why I am an Atheist who Believes in God*, confessed: "*Myth or not, I*

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47. John 14:1-3 New King James Version

48. Daniel Dennett.; Linda LaScola,. *Caught in The Pulpit: Leaving Belief Behind* (Durham, NC:Pitchstone Publishing,2013), 203.

Dennett adds: Dan [Dan Baker, co-president of the Freedom from Religion Foundation, who volunteered to be part of Dennett's study] is quite fond of the concept of the Largest Prime Number, knowing full well that nothing is, or could be, the Largest Prime Number. In fact, that's why he likes the concept so much; it makes a fine example in philosophical discussions.

*sometimes like the result of my parents' delusions.*"<sup>49</sup> I appreciate Frank's openness and I apologize if I am about to suggest some home-made analysis of his thoughts, but is it possible that we can find ourselves trying to fit the round ideas of a parent's history into the square opening of our own? Do we find ourselves reshaping, redefining, or rethinking much of our upbringing, because the baby in the bathwater was us? Frank Schaeffer might be doing what most, if not all, of us do in salvaging a past or a childhood that can't be tossed as so much wasted time and effort ...and love! There is still within him a sense of the eternal:

"Five months after Holly died, one of her woodcuts was left at our back door. .... The print is of two lovers clinging to each other while flying over a village. The work is reminiscent of Chagall's flying brides and grooms. The title, "I Am My Beloved's and My Beloved Is Mine," is from the Song of Solomon. It was written below the print in Holly's handwriting. ... "Hi Holly," I said, tears filling my eyes. I had never seen this print. Had Holly made it for me? Had she visited me?.... The print is propped up in front of me as I write this. It will stay there forever or until my body betrays me as Holly's betrayed her. Then— who knows— maybe Genie, my daughter Jessica, my sons Francis and John, my son-in-law Dani, my daughter-in-law Becky or my grandchildren Amanda, Ben, Lucy, Jack and Nora Rose— born to Becky and John the day I was doing the final copy edit of this book— will find the picture and believe that it's a message of eternal love from me. And whatever the mundane circumstance of their finding it, they'll be right."<sup>50</sup>

Frank did not totally disown a belief in God as the title of His book suggests.

I'm glad I haven't entirely escaped the emotional alternative religious reality in which I was raised.<sup>51</sup>

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49. Frank Schaeffer. *Why I am an Atheist Who Believes in God: How to give love, create beauty and find peace.* (North Charleston, South Carolina:CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2014), 11.

50. *ibid.* p. 141.

51. *ibid.* p. 12.

Doug Tozier's<sup>52</sup> parents, whom I knew back in the mid 90's, are dedicated believers. Doug adds:

"I learned many wonderful things from watching my parents' daily lives. They truly cared for each other and fulfilled complementary roles within the home."<sup>53</sup>

Doug is a deist not an atheist. When he left the ministry, although a belief in a personal God made no sense to him—as it made no sense to Frank Schaeffer—God was still up there somewhere.

Neither man might admit that they had no interest in, to use Dennett's phrase, breaking completely free of the 'spell'. But I am impressed with their line of reasoning that continues to allow for, at least, some of God.

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52. Doug has made available on lulu.com in pdf format his unpublished work: "The Journey That is Faith."

53. *ibid.* p. 52.

## Evangelicalism

*"I see the time coming when all the holy men whose eyes have been opened by the Spirit will desert worldly Evangelicalism, one by one."*

— A.W. Tozer

In the middle 1970's our religious world began to change. A new charismatic wave of enthusiasm centering on a renewed interest in the message of the Cross and the work of the Holy Spirit swept through the Panhandle of West Virginia and Western Pennsylvania where we were pastoring. The local catholic church was in its path. We were observing a new ecumenicity, an unexpected unity among the local ministries.

I, a pentecostal preacher, found myself involved with the local Presbyterian congregation during their two year gap between pastors. I visited their sick, buried their dead, and married their youth. I was also privileged to speak at the Charismatic Conference at Duquesne University later that decade, holding seminars for a room full of Catholic believers.

When mom came to visit she attended the local Catholic church even though through the years she was outspokenly anti-catholic. Now I drove her to the local catholic church and picked her up after Mass when she and Aunt Vi visited us from Buffalo. I recall waiting in the parking lot and listening to the choruses being sung—the same choruses we sang in the pentecostal church down the street.

The church as a whole was experiencing a renewal of its interest in spiritual things.

Before this, evangelism was an occasional gleaning of souls, but now mass harvests were envisioned. Churches began to explode with multiple services. Building projects kicked into high gear while churches entered a new age of religious zeal using demographic studies to determine the best fields of christian service. Christian colleges began emphasizing church growth

technics in their curricula—in a technical age that made every use eventually of social networking and multimedia. Seminars on the latest proven ways to successful ministry were well-attended.

Pentecostal churches began to grow exponentially in catholic communities because the move of God was a common experience and the pentecostals were better prepared to deal with it. Catholic leadership was concerned. Mid-week pentecostal prayer meetings became common in a number of parishes after this. It seemed a return to Acts 2:44:

“All the believers were together and had everything in common.”<sup>1</sup>

Dr. Leonard Evans wrote that his little church in Niles, Ohio went from a little more than one hundred people to thousands requiring them to undertake two building projects during his tenure there to enlarge the sanctuary. His message was a theology of christian love and they flocked to hear it. The fruit was ripe for harvest. The time was right for his message and the religious world knew it.

Dr. Evans testified: “*This strange, new message was in fact causing people to come to Christ in ways that were unprecedented in the past history of the church.*”<sup>2</sup>

I didn’t realize at the time the scope of what was happening. I was standing in the forest but saw only the few trees that crossed my line of sight. But it was bigger than that, much bigger. We had entered a new era of religious zeal; so, they gave it a name: *evangelicalism*.

It became a train with the throttle wide open racing into the 21st Century and there was no stopping it.

But were we heading toward a wreck? Rev. Jared Wilson of *The Gospel Coalition* describes evangelicalism:

“We want to go to a place with ample parking that hands us a latte for free as we enter the doors. We want to sit in a comfortable chair that vibrates. We want a poppin’ band. We

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1. Acts 2:44.

2. Leonard Evans, *Love, Love, Love* (Plainfield, NJ:Logos International, 1978.), 124ff.

want to see fog. And a laser light that draws the shape of a cross in the fog. We want a good singer to sing comforting things to us as we listen admiringly. Then we want an energetic speaker to alleviate our fear of the bad economy and inspire us in no more than 20 to 22 minutes. Then we want to leave without being bothered, have our retinas scanned to pick up our kids, and watch them slide down the slide out of the Kidz Playz having heard a lesson from no less than SpongeBob SquarePants himself on obeying parents and not lying. And if we feel like it, we want all that all over again in a week. That's evangelicalism."<sup>3</sup>

Is this a train wreck? If you ask atheism, "Yes." But let's ask ourselves as believers: "Are we heading in the direction we thought we would, a direction we wanted to go in?" The ending 'ism,' I am told means "a system." So evangelicalism is a system or an organized way of evangelizing, sharing the good news of the Gospel message of salvation through Christ. "How's that working' for us?" is the question.

The message is ours; the message *must* be ours because it is exactly what we believe—why we are called *believers*. But are we going about it the right way—to share the love of Christ as an outreach for others to find salvation through His name?

If Dorothy Sayers is correct that the Gospel message offends—and I think so—have we tried to mitigate that offense with in-church breakfast shops, and a flashy well choreographed "worship" service? Have we emphasized common interests with visitors to our churches rather than sharing the Gospel ... just because it does offend?

Is the church reacting to cultural change rather than being a creator of it? Is societal pressure, such as gay-marriage, toppling our traditions. While we preach an absolute morality, we practice a relative one? And maybe our ideas are out-of-date but we are changing reactively rather than proactively. Has the church spent the past few decades playing at religion and now is unprepared for real confrontation over issues that should matter to her?

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3. see Jared Wilson  
<http://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/gospeldrivenchurch/>  
 see also Rev Chad Gray's comments: <http://biblicalmen.com/whats-wrong-with-american-evangelicalism/>

For our purposes here, it's important to be honest with the persons we love even if that means confessing that part of what we were all about was wrong. And if we are not sure, be unsure. But we need to be transparent about our personal involvement or contribution in something that we went along with leaving the persons who mattered the most to us in the dust of a misguided and mistaken devotion.

## Traditions

*... ritual is permissible only to the extent that it is as genuine as a kiss."*

— Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*

"Because of our traditions, we've kept our balance for many, many years. ....For instance, we always keep our heads covered and always wear a little prayer shawl... This shows our constant devotion to God. You may ask, how did this tradition start? I'll tell you - I don't know. But it's a tradition... Because of our traditions, everyone knows who he is and what God expects him to do." - Tevye in *Fiddler on The Roof*.

After my son left the faith, I thought it proper for me in the interest of our relationship and my deep love for him to re-evaluate my worship service experience. How important is it to me? What keeps me going back? Why go at all? Are the non-believers right when they say I do this to get the sense that I am now on God's good side and I don't need to fear hell anymore? Am I self-deceived thinking my reason is altruistically a love for God when it is more a fear of Him?

For christians the Mass or worship service seems to be a way of recharging our devotion to God. Is that it? But why be devoted? Is this a quid pro quo?

"Take delight in the LORD, and he will give you the desires of your heart."<sup>1</sup>

One hour on a weekend—is this my way of expressing my love for God?<sup>2</sup>

Better is one day in your courts than a thousand elsewhere; I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than dwell in the tents of the wicked.<sup>3</sup>

Is that what my heart is saying!?

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1. Psalms 37:4 NEW INT.

2. I John 4:19 We love because he first loved us. NEW INT.

3. Psalms 84:10 NEW INT.

Does the church help me in any way to keep my christian head about me during the week? Does it offer a perspective of life that helps me find a harbor of peace in a storm of postmodernism, an enduring love in an angry sea of those who hate me, a hope for the joyous dawn in a night of endless sorrow? Or is this just poor poetry!?

Nothing is automatic—obviously—because my son *used* to attend.

The odd thing, also, is that I cannot walk into any church and feel the same way. Is there something about *this* church—this pastor? this fellowship? this place?—that I can call it my church 'home.' How is this true or am I rationalizing nonsense? There is more to it than just a song, a prayer, and a litany. What makes my worship experience so important to me? Why do I need to be—well—*here* to sense that importance? Or don't I? Maybe I can worship God anywhere in any church with anyone else? All believers are members of the same spiritual family, we are told.

I feel like Tevye: "You may ask, how did this tradition start? I'll tell you - I don't know.."

I shall return next week with mental pen and paper in heart and I will figure this out. Like Tevye, church is traditional for me like praying or listening to christian music or studying the Bible. These are real parts of what makes life alive for me. I am curious as to why... that's all.

I owe it to my sons—all three of them—and my wife to be honest with them and myself... and as real as I can be. This reminds me of Dr. Leonard Evans who became disillusioned with church as usual. He needed to have something real happening when the people of God came together, something biblical, something Christ-centric, something that announced to the community that God was indeed here.

"I realized I could not go on as I was. I throw myself on the floor of my study and cried in utter despair to the Savior I loved—who had times seemed so distant from my need

—'Lord, either give me reality or give me death!' Little did I know this cry would become a watershed experience for me."<sup>4</sup>

### Migrations

What if we were to disallow in a census of church attendance all adult newcomers (over the age of 17) who have come from another church, how many congregants would be left in the count? I wonder what percentage of christians continue to worship in the church in which they 'found Christ.' (Of course, moving one's place of residence must be allowed.)

We can also leave out of the census those who have left the faith, not just the church.

For the people whose christian experience is stable and consistent week after week the question I ask them is *Why did you stay?* What is it about this ministry that keeps you coming back? And this question is important. We owe our families answers to such questions not that it will make sense to them, but they need to know that it makes sense to us. Genuine commitment to serve and love others and God does not go unnoticed by unbelieving family that observe us on a regular basis.

We should never rationalize our commitment to attending church with half-hearted statements of service or some preacher-made response for our being there. We should never view our continued support of a ministry only as a biblical command either, because none of these ideas in and of themselves speak to a personal conviction or our 'need' to be there. We should own our reasons for going to church as much as we need to own our faith. It has to make complete sense to us on a personal level even if no one else attended—as illogical as this sounds on the surface. We have often said that if I were the only person left on earth, Christ would still have died for me... just me. That attitude has to describe our own call to worship: *even if no one else ever attended worship service, I am here!*

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4. Leonard Evans Love, *Love, Love, Love* (Plainfield, NJ:Logos International, 1978.), 8ff.

But we move about. Many of us are still asking such questions and not finding the answer that gives us that sigh of peace the settles us in for the long-term. To those of us who migrate from church to church, I ask: *What are we looking for?*

### Fair Play

When someone loses faith and decides to leave the church we, who still believe, require a reason. There follows grief and tension over their decision and when children are in the picture life becomes a confusing selection of choices and *do-as-I-say-not-as-I-do* scenarios. When Ken Daniels left he admitted:

"I am well aware of the risks of undertaking this project. It might lead to alienation from friends, family, and coworkers."<sup>5</sup>

He went on in his book written to those he loved to say:

"My desire is to present the seldom-heard perspective of one whose life was formerly defined for decades by his commitment to Jesus and who continues to live successfully with family and friends who retain that commitment."<sup>6</sup>

If we seek to understand them, it is fair if they need real answers from us—even if the questions are never asked. But this information is never communicated in a disconnected argument in which we speak past one another. Our passion for worship needs to be visible not verbal and that can only be observed in terms of a living message of God's love toward them.

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5. Ken Daniels. *Why I Believed: Reflections of a Former Missionary*. (Austin TX: Kenneth W. Daniels, 2010.), (Kindle location 108).

6. *ibid.* pg 4.

## A Personal Quest

*“Say it, reader. Say the word ‘quest’ out loud. It is an extraordinary word, isn’t it? So small and yet so full of wonder, so full of hope.”*

— Kate DiCamillo, *The Tale of Despereaux*

When I left the pastorate two decades ago as of this writing, I have since attended three churches. My wife and I are on our fourth. This doesn’t include countless visits here and there or the time I went nowhere. While it was part of my job description to be in attendance at the church that paid me, I didn’t have to give any thought to this. And to be honest, I never gave much thought to the migrations going on around me unless something tragic happened like a church closing or a pastor taken in a crime. The general attrition followed by a few new faces was common place; so, I would grieve the loss and thank God for the new people. We affectionately called them “church hoppers” but I never guessed that I would become one.

But now I found myself along with my wife being the spiritual nomads that couldn’t settle down. Was I following the herd—like nomads do—going after the best preaching or the best music? I owe it to those good ministries that we had left not to be specific as if complaining about alleged shortcomings.

Some believers—and my wife and I were joining the wagon train—appear to be roaming rather than going somewhere.

Have I all along been looking for the church I grew up in—their kind of singing and preaching, their kind of atmosphere. If that’s the case, I will never find it; I might continue to move around because ‘church’ has changed in ways the crotchety side of my old nature doesn’t find comfortable. Some churches have ‘evolved’[?] to assimilate cultural interests that are new to this generation. In any case, I am not going to find East Delavan Assembly in Buffalo, New York. It doesn’t exist as such any more. In fact, that congregation—or most of it—moved into the

suburbs and into (at the time) a brand new modern building. The old church had dark wooden pews; the new pews were a light wood—cushioned. The old building was smaller, with more of a homey, old fashion smell and vibe about it.

Churches have a kind of spiritual energy that is felt by parishioners. Stained glass, candles, incense, colored lights, dark or light furnishings, the acoustics, the color of the carpet all seem to make a difference when one goes there to pray, worship or hear a sermon.

I bought three dozen chairs, most of them as of this moment still in our basement but spoken for, that I wanted to give to a Baptist church<sup>1</sup> because the upholstery according to my description is “Baptist” blue. A few years ago I thought I observed red carpet in the pentecostal churches (red or orange) and blue in the Baptist ones. I might be mistaken but I do wonder if carpet color or no carpet at all, cushioned chairs, folding chairs or pews, adds to a sense of ‘God’s presence’ in the sanctuary for some of us.

Churches also come with doctrines and every once in a while the preacher will remind us of that fact. And maybe believers move round looking for agreement. But there is also a variety of worship styles and rituals to choose from. Admit it or not, this is a vital part of religious comfort in a worship setting. I know from observation as well as personally that the wrong song at the wrong time can interrupt a sense of worship just as easily as the right one encourages it. And how we define ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ may have to do with the words which might mean the language it’s in, the tune, the arrangement, the timing, the key sung in, how many stanzas or how long we go on singing it, to mention a few possibilities. (We seldom care much about the theology we sing.)

Orthodox churches maintain a keen sense of a respect for the House of God, but I have visited some more unconventional church services where children ran free up and down the isles. I think it makes a difference.

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1. Before going to print, this Baptist church did received the chairs.

And speaking of the children, adults will often pick a church for the kids. They like an hour off while the children are 'sat' by responsible adults or they are being taught the elements of the faith by trusted teachers. Some adults pick a church with a good youth group that helps stimulate an interest in their teens for the 'things of God.'

And then there's the people we get close to. Perhaps someone moved on and church wasn't the same anymore. Now we go searching for what we probably will not find unless we 'stay put' long enough to make new friends. But new friendships seldom replace old ones.

Since I cannot find the congregation of yesteryear, where will my wife and I find a place to settle in? Which church—not too far away distance-wise—passes the tests of a spiritually enriching atmosphere, good preaching, expressive ritual, worshipful music, sound doctrine, rich fellowship, and sensitive pastoral care that, as I see it, will make the perfect setting for us to keep coming back? Okay, which church is closest? And even if we were to find the perfect church, I still need to know why go. If I am honestly driven by a passionate interest in worshipping and serving the God I love and no other reason comes close, I can look forward to going with a clear answer to this nagging question.

Personally, my wife and I love good teaching. We don't want to be indoctrinated but rather taught the scriptures in a clear and practical way.

We can learn new choruses, but, I long to hear the message of Calvary in song. One of my new favorites is *Cornerstone* written by Tim Neufield because he starts with the words of an old hymn: "*My hope is built on nothing less Than Jesus' blood and righteousness.*" (I became interested in how many new choruses song in one church we attended actually mention the Cross in some context or in some way. The number was disappointing—about one in six or so.)

I love the fellowship but finding that spiritual support proved no small task. Sometimes I think we get together to boast rather

than share<sup>2</sup>—at least I know I did. I always felt important knowing some New Testament Greek. But when we sensed a wave of honest humility encouraging our give and take on a truly inspiring level of sharing the love of Christ through conversation, song, and prayer, it was always just what we came for.

### A Dream Come True

I tended, through my entire life, to be ‘laid back’ and easily influenced by others’ decisions in both fun and work. For me it was easier perhaps than for some because of my personality, my inability to decide things for myself—my almost natural inclination to allow others to persuade me of their counsel, whether it be a mother, a pastor, a friend, or a church board member. To be sure, I made a lot of decisions and not a few of them were ill-advised, but my underlining hope had always been an expectation that God would somehow prove Himself in charge of my life. I sought for His wisdom in those people in my life who, indeed, commanded my respect.

It is this openness to the flow of circumstances that in 1965 led me to Northeast Bible Institute to eventually become a pastor. I had been warned and advised, encouraged and directed by a small company of adults who were looking out for my best interest.

I took to heart the counsel of a Sunday School teacher who did not want me to do what he did, becoming a chemist instead of a full-time minister of God’s Word. The pastor, brought into confidence, pointed my thoughts toward North East Bible Institute of the Assemblies of God in Pennsylvania. The next thing I knew I was being dropped off at the end of, what to this city boy seemed, a deserted road, nestled on the crest of a hill in the woods of Eastern Pennsylvania. I found

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2. I Corinthians 11:20-21 So then, when you come together, it is not the Lord’s Supper you eat, for when you are eating, some of you go ahead with your own private suppers. As a result, one person remains hungry and another gets drunk. NEW INT.

myself alone following a long driveway winding between rows of trees, in the middle of nowhere. I had arrived on campus, on the doorstep of my future and all I wanted was some assurance that this was, indeed, God.

Mine was the story of a young man whose entire future seemed to be in the hands of others. It was the Vietnam era and I guess in another sense I had been drafted into someone else's hopes. My future appeared to have been put in the hands of older adults who claimed to know better than I what God wanted to do with my life.

After graduation, I consulted with the mission's director in the Assemblies of God New Jersey District who suggested I candidate a small home missions work at the Jersey shore. Why not! A new life had begun.

This is not a complaint, but during quiet times of personal reflection I learned about myself that I am easily convinced, easily led, easily persuaded. This would need to be rethought, reevaluated, if I wanted to 'own' my faith walk with God. But I did want to work for God. I wanted to become a missionary to somewhere and I seemed, at least at this point in time, to have a good start.

The evening I arrived at NBI the air was different—a precursor of exciting things to come—fresh and refreshing, unlike the diurnal metallic tasting smog of the city. The night sky was new. The city sky was a canopy of darkness denying the stars their admiring audience. The sky on campus, here in the country, was a universe of lights that always spoke to this Sunday school graduate of divine covenants. But, then, all this was frightening to me for I had only read about such things in books.

As I walked unto campus a soft breeze caressed my shoulders like an ordained comfort. I sauntered along making my way first to "The Tabernacle," an open air sanctuary, a wooden, sideless, tent with rows of old unpainted benches—space enough to seat a thousand worshippers. Silent tears watered my cheeks as I walked toward the platform. No one

was there except God and me. I longed for God to make sense of all of this.

I found my way to the main administration building and came upon a man—in his early thirties—putting luggage in the trunk of a car. Now there were three of us. As he and I loitered a moment I became impressed by his single focus, his undeniable love, his sense of urgency for a people he had yet to meet, for a foreign field he would call home for the remainder of time. He was a missionary.

I always wanted to be a missionary and, like my mother, that calling seemed to die leaving me with an unbearable grief that I could only hope to placate by pastoring churches. I passed time reading about the adventures of missionaries who became to me the heroes of a spiritual war. I romanticized away the nights while I lived during my day in the humdrum of a different far less exciting world. I, no doubt, was the young man who wanted to save the world, but had no idea what hardships and burdens that vision carried.

What I hadn't realized was that the polarity in our world of mission field/home church was slowly turning. The country of my birth would soon be the new harvest into which God needed to send African and Asian laborers. We of the more, so-called, civilized world were the indigenous peoples God would need to reach with His love. The third world christian commissioned with a martyr's mantle became the new voice of a Gospel that had been here all but silenced by a culture that had no further use for it.

### A Traditional Belief

I was a missionary already where I lived but I continued to dream of distant lands and great deeds of courage elsewhere. It was then I came to realize what was happening. We did not have to die for Him; we had to resolve to live for Him—perhaps, a higher calling?

The message of Calvary never did earn kudos from secularism and it was a mistake for the church to attempt a

reconciliation between the two. The very idea that “Jesus is the only way to God” is an affront to the religions of the world and an unreasonable posture for a christianity that has over the years shown, by the atheist’s reckoning, no practical definition of love and holiness—of the value of a trust in God.

But Jesus *is* the way. So says the missionary. The World Missionary Conference of Edinburgh held in 1910 said it this way:

“Whatever... can be done to make the...Church conform in spirit and in practice to the New Testament teachings and ideals will contribute in the most powerful manner to the realization of the great aim of...evangelization. A new and resolute awakening of the Church to the richness of its heritage in the Gospel and to the duty of an ardent, universal, and untiring effort to make disciples of all nations, is the clear message of God to the Church of today.”<sup>3</sup>

The missionary council meeting in Jerusalem in 1928 went further:

Our message is Jesus Christ. He is the revelation of what God is and of what man through Him may become. In Him we come face to face with the Ultimate Reality of the universe; He makes known to us God as our Father, perfect and infinite in love and in righteousness; for in Him we find God incarnate, the final, yet ever-unfolding, revelation of the God in whom we live and move and have our being... ..Jesus Christ...through His death and resurrection...has disclosed to us the Father, the Supreme Reality, as almighty Love, reconciling the world to Himself by the Cross...<sup>4</sup>

If such is our message, the motive for its delivery should be plain. The Gospel is the answer to the world’s greatest need. It is not our discovery or achievement; it rests on what we recognize as an act of God... We believe that men are made for Christ and cannot really live apart from Him... Herein lies the Christian motive; it is simple. We cannot live without Christ and we cannot bear to think of men living without Him... Christ is our motive and Christ is our end. We must give nothing less and we can give nothing more.”<sup>5</sup>

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3. Francis M. DuBose ed. *Classics of Christian Missions* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1979 ), 337.

4. *ibid.* p. 339.

5. *ibid.* p. 343ff.

Believers need to live the dream. We must let that missionary side of our love realize more its potential when it is in the hand of God. Jesus—yes—offends a world that does not know who He is nor understand what He is all about. They don't understand because we, who believe, have not clarified that message through our actions, our behavior, our lives.

Christian apologist J. F. Baldwin recognizes the importance of heroic, Spirit-filled living as the most powerful argument beckoning nonbelievers to the faith: We may certainly teach people about God's grace by telling them the story of Pilgrim's Progress; we teach it better when we tell them the true story of John Newton [former slave trader who authored the song Amazing Grace]; and we teach it best when we demonstrate it with our lives. Our actions matter more than any words<sup>6</sup>

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6. Ken Daniels. *Why I Believed: Reflections of a Former Missionary* (Austin TX:Kenneth W. Daniels, 2010.), 101.

## **A Sign of The Times**

The History

“If you don't know history, then you don't know anything.  
You are a leaf that doesn't know it is part of a tree.”

— Michael Crichton

## The Times

*"You can see it in people's faces; you can feel it in the air," the old farmer chortled, 'Everybody and everything's goin' places.'"*

*- Eric Goldman*

In the 2014 movie *"The Calling"* Hazel, played by Susan Sarandon, asks Father Price, played by Donald Sutherland, about old church beliefs, *"And do you really believe this stuff?"*

He summarized the thought of the current age, *"I did, yes, once. But times are different now. Unwavering belief in the church is difficult to sustain. Perhaps, I think, quite possibly with good reason."*

Unwavering belief in the church has become more and more difficult for many to sustain. We are living in an age of exciting scientific discoveries that began for the purposes of my story when my grandmother was a little girl. Not too many generations past our world came alive to a different vision that saw the church receding into the background. As we zoom out to take in a larger universe of ideas, the Bible and its message, in cultural terms, became smaller and smaller until now it is on the verge of disappearing altogether.

Christian countries are not christian any longer. The true church of Christ—that is the whole community of believers committed to following Christ—are socially becoming a splinter group, not withstanding all the political noise. Somehow through the course of a mere century, science not only has finally received top billing but it appears the church might eventually be dropped from the marquee. An increasing interest in science that denies Christian faith, in other words, comes with the times.

As civilized societies go, christianity is no longer a living social force. The church as an institution has not transcended culture with her message. She has been losing that ability. She has been held, culturally speaking, at gun point to comply with social change once impossible to accept. She has seen the light and the

benefits of an evolving culture—or she is beginning to. In another sense, she has become a mere fossilized reminder of a spiritual life that once animated her passion for the Bible as God’s timeless, written Word.

The third world is alive with a vision of divine possibilities but we who are more scientifically savvy have toned down the excitement. Science, per se, is not at fault but something is wrong. In the name of common sense and social acceptance, we have quieted any passionate outcry to be God’s instrument for change. The ‘Cross’ seems positioned to become only a relic and its message only a muffled hope that once was the life of the church. “*We are scientists!*” one of my sons alerted me.

### Worldview

Civilization now comes with a new perspective, a new worldview,<sup>1</sup> a different kind of reasoning, an evolutionary approach deemed more scientific, more appropriate for educated minds, than what christians surmised from reading their Bible. Carter Phipps referred to it as “*transformative insights of an evolutionary perspective.*” It is a new way of imagining the past and the future. It comes with a new consciousness. It is known as the new truth, “*the broader view.*”<sup>2</sup> It is a brand new way of thinking. We no longer grow or develop. We *evolve*: socially, culturally and psychologically as well as physically. Every aspect of being is in the genes. It is the new consciousness and whether or not it is the right approach to the meaning of life is a question never asked any more —so it appears—in academia.

The hard part in all of this is realizing that behind our reasoning is a worldview, a frame of reference, a set of

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1. I found this interesting in the Norwegian TV series “Okkupert” (“Occupied”) Season 1, Episode 1. 2015. Prime Minister Jesper Berg (played by Henrik Mestad) explains: “the world as we created it is a process of our thinking. It cannot be changed without changing the way we think.”

2. Carter Phipps. *Evolutionaries: Unlocking the Spiritual and Cultural Potential of Science’s Greatest Idea.* (New York:Harper Perennial, 2012), 11.

principles, that must be assumed before we can begin to discover the how and why of our own existence. (Our Bible never argues for the existence of God. In the mind of prophet and priest and apostle, He just is.) Atheism claiming no god must rely on evolution—some definition of the idea—to begin to unravel the mysteries of human behavior. And it is here that our faith abrasively rubs up against their conclusions. Understanding the difference between reasoning and the worldview held behind that reasoning goes to the heart of the matter. God is a ‘reasonable’ idea to believers (by definition). The logic of non-believers seeks other answers to life’s questions. We must start by confessing that our logic, our way of seeing things, is pre-determined by the set of assumptions we start with. Logic is not simply logic. The machinations of our thought processes must depend on some ‘in the beginning,’ some starting point, which we tend to forget about while we are attempting to figure out the dynamics of who we are and why we are here. We need to appreciate the significance, the contribution, of our worldview to our definition of ‘truth.’

A worldview is what the Free University of Brussels’ “Center Leo Apostel” defined as “a system of representation that allows us to integrate everything we know about the world and ourselves into a global picture.”<sup>3</sup> The christian scholar, N.T. Wright, explains a worldview as the foundation of a house [the thought process]: *vital yet invisible*. Our worldview ultimately gives meaning and reason to everything we do in the name of right from wrong: what church we worship in, what movies we watch, what social events we frequent.

A worldview is like a Christmas tree that gives form to lights and ornaments while defining the tree as a holiday icon. We don’t look at the tree. We gaze only upon the glow of what decorates it. Yet, take away the tree and we are left with a tangled heap of bulbs and ornaments that represent no Christmas.

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3. *ibid.*

Our christian worldview like the tree gives definition and form to eternal truths and treasured traditions. We look past our worldview—not even giving it any thought—and gaze always upon the glow of our most cherished beliefs. Discard the christian’s worldview and those truths lie in a twisted heap of unrecognized, meaningless ideals.

Said another way: our worldview is the template which organizes our thoughts giving them continuity with emphasis—and yet simplicity. It is the invisible, the unrecognized, thought process behind all our conclusions which we find reasonable. Ultimately it provides the logic that shapes our principles, values, and moral code—that shapes our lives and our futures.

See it this way: at the center of anyone’s worldview are the core convictions *“about the nature of what is real, true and important.”*<sup>4</sup>

### A Cultural Mindset

A worldview defines the way a society sees itself. It is not thought up in executive meetings or dreamed up in a night of silent meditation. To alter a society’s worldview takes time. Henri Bergson in his 1907 classic, *“Creative Evolution”* assured his readers, that *“this..will not be made in a day...it will only be built by the collective...effort of many thinkers.”*<sup>5</sup> The societal worldview represents the frame of reference by which a group explains the meaning to life (in a sense: their religious mindset), defines or trains a collective conscience, decides what morality should call right from wrong, and gives the culture its identity.

A worldview, for good or bad, creeps slowly undetected or slips silently unnoticed into the cultural mind. Nazism as a worldview that saw the extermination of millions as a reasonable exercise in cultural development would never have been accepted by the German people if the ugliness of this ideology had been put to an open and honest vote instead of fed

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4. Ibid,, 24.

5. Ibid, 12.

piece meal, idea by idea, to a nation starving for self-identity and meaning. (The economist Keynes was right that the Treaty of Versailles in 1919 was far too punishing and vindictive to a peoples whose humanity was being humiliated out of existence by its provisions.)

Another example: it is a creeping materialistic worldview that unchecked can choke the Word of God, Jesus warned.<sup>6</sup>

And for the sake of social acceptance and cultural support, some will accept a society's 'way of thinking,' as their own. It happens often unnoticed in the darkness of some tragedy or in the heat of some spiritual or psychological battle. For good or bad: with furtive step a strange thought strolls down the memories of our minds and walks us into the the light of a new idea that once we would never have accepted.

We may wish to be more scientific in our approach to understanding life, but a scientific perspective can itself be a worldview: a faith in man's ability to ultimately discover all that is there to be discovered and to create his own heaven. It is the tower of Babel all over again but we don't see that because it is a worldview, hidden behind years of conclusions ever alluring us into the false hope of an imagined utopian world. The erroneous thought is: man is getting smarter and smarter and wiser and wiser and better and better at eradicating evil, disease, poverty, etc. Who needs a god, anyway.

Christians endorse science but find a belief in the Creator, the Intelligent Designer, behind it all as a more reasonable explanation. Christians recognize an attribute of holiness in that Creator that defines moral truth. Believers find the message of atoning grace reasonable even if the full explanation of such love awaits Christ's return to be revealed.

For the believer, it is spiritual enlightenment, the miracle by which the love of God shares with us *His* worldview. It is a worldview in which salvation in Christ is a real experience. It is

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6. Mark 4:7 Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants, so that they did not bear grain. NEW INT.

coming into a worldview that is mind transforming and reshapes our very perspective on the Bible and life itself.<sup>7</sup>

For a Christian, it is the moment that God's grace suddenly becomes real even if we cannot fully comprehend it. It is a Damascus Road experience but preceded by years of observations and experiences that unseen prepare us for that 'knocked from our horse' moment. It is a light going on in the soul—a soul God has been working on—and we find the faith to believe what was once unbelievable.

Believers must accept the fact that they have a worldview the society around them does not share.<sup>8</sup>

### Touchstone

Every worldview, also, has what philosopher William Halverson called a "*touchstone proposition*."<sup>9</sup> For the christian this is the belief in the involvement of an immanent God of Love whose purposefulness and plan makes life a *process* not an evolution, progressing toward the fulfillment of His promises to us. God sounds reasonable to us. Miracles make sense. Most of the Bible stories can be viewed literally because these were things God could pull off. Our worldview, because it includes God as an author of history as well as a director of it, can comfortably wait on science to "catch up."

A scientific touchstone proposition, however, needs to believe in the stability of the universe and the rules by which it is governed. It needs to reason that such knowledge is comprehensible using rational inquiry. It needs to rely on the discovery of unchanging principles of natural law.

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7. Romans 12:2 Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.

8. Colossians 3:3 your life is now hidden with Christ in God.

9. *ibid.* p. 26.

Evolution represents a touchstone proposition that sees all things in flux, becoming, adapting. An evolutionary worldview reasons that what is today was not here in the past and will be changed, gone, in the future. We are ever evolving into a better world—in the words of Teilhard de Chardin,<sup>10</sup> “*We are moving; we are going forward.*”<sup>11</sup>

### Puzzled

I see this as a kind-of ‘puzzle.’ What if we were given a multi-thousand piece puzzle that was completely there and had no pieces added from any other puzzle. What if the puzzle was a picture of the work of a well-known expressionist, but unknown to us, with colors flowing into one another and forms distorted. And what if the picture was not on the box. Putting it together would be difficult but not impossible. We would still have the

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10. Pierre Teilhard de Chardin SJ was a French philosopher and Jesuit priest who trained as a paleontologist and geologist and took part in the discovery of Peking Man

11. Carter Phipps. *Evolutionaries: Unlocking the Spiritual and Cultural Potential of Science’s Greatest Idea*. (New York:Harper Perennial, 2012), 27.

In grammatical terms, the ‘actionsart’ of the present tense could be repetitive or continuous state (as science might see life), nascent or the beginning of a state (as an evolutionist might see the evolutionary process always in flux), inchoative, the beginning of or having just now come into being (which doesn’t suit either evolution or science but might describe the ‘origin of life’) and progressive for the christian in which God’s plan is being worked by Him. ..

Ephesians 4:13 “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.” NEW INT.

Sleeping could mean

‘falling to sleep; about to fall, on the verge of falling, to sleep’ (nascent);

‘being asleep’ (repetitive or continuous state);

‘beginning to fall to sleep’ (inchoative);

‘in rem sleep, in a deep sleep, dreamland’ (progressive, a working hypothesis for dreams).

'edges' to work with first and we could assume that no two puzzle pieces were identical.

Still reason dictates that we have some preconceived idea as to what this picture could be. That image in our minds might be adjusted as we work but it would be there as our worldview for building this picture. The picture we imagine at first is subject to change as we go. Carter Phipps calls this: *"That part of you that sees, listens, interprets, and responds is ...,not static... but rather is..changing, caught up in a developmental process...."*<sup>12</sup>

Now what if some of the puzzle pieces were missing because our four year old discovered our unfinished project and decided to help us but then with a shortened attention span, as four year olds have, he or she takes a few pieces along with them to their next interest only to leave them lost somewhere in the house. And what if our assumption that all the pieces were unique was wrong but we didn't know that yet because it would take the completed picture to even begin to determine that.

Now the idea in our head, our frame-of-reference, the picture we think should be on the box looms bigger and bigger in importance if we are to finish this thing. This picture in our mind is at the very least a *pattern of reasoning* we must use to put this puzzle together. Time is not of the essence. Take as long as you need,

(Can you see where I'm going? Treat the fossil record as an evolutionary puzzle. Piecing it together must require a few assumptions especially about the logical legitimacy of the approach. And it is an honest effort not some contrived philosophy to argue down our belief in God. It is a sincere work in the interest of science and many parts of the puzzle are correctly linked but it would help if the picture had been on the box. Maybe it was in Genesis 1 but I am a believer with a christian worldview.)

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12. Carter Phipps. *Evolutionaries: Unlocking the Spiritual and Cultural Potential of Science's Greatest Idea.* (New York:Harper Perennial, 2012), 28.

### Interpreting Life

There is a sense in which our ability to reason things out is itself based on this *pattern of reasoning*. Our reasoning process is a fluid one just like we had to adjust the mental image of the puzzle as we pieced it together.<sup>13</sup>

As convoluted and confused as this sounds, our ability to comprehend new ideas or understand the significance of new ideas is based on the ideas already fundamental to our way of thinking. That foundation is our worldview. Said simpler: as believers, we are saying that if we maintain that God is and He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him<sup>14</sup> our understanding of how our life unfolds will be viewed in terms of His providential care. An evolutionary line of reasoning, instead, looks for the interplay of cultural and genetic factors to explain the why and what if it all. And science is always looking for a natural law that is consistent, unbending and predictable, in figuring it all out.

Does this make a difference? At the extreme ends christianity and evolutionary thinking are mutually exclusive. For some, a christian worldview has no use for evolution. And evolution on the extreme other end of thought denies the existence of God. Yet most christians live somewhere in the middle where God might employ an evolutionary approach which providentially works out the design He envisioned for His creation. If our worldview, our frame of reference, does not include God as at least a contributor if not author of our well-being, then, every idea from ethics to genetics must be

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13. Even our understanding of the term evolution is in evolutionary terms evolving. "The seed is sown," observes Carter Phipps, "and the momentum for a larger evolutionary embrace of life is growing as new generations of thinkers consider the ..cultural story of evolution as a new meta-narrative." *ibid.* p. 19.

14. Hebrews 11:6 And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him. NEW INT.

interpreted in terms of this evolutionary process. What other choice would we have!?

### His Image

Here is the primary reasoning behind my belief that we are made in God's image—an idea that evolution finds absurd. (This is not to minimize the importance of the Scriptural statement that we are made in His image. Genesis 1:27.) My worldview which puts God in charge of my life and which proposes that I am made for a relationship with Him, has to reason that this is best satisfied by my being made in some sense 'like' Him. It would be intellectually unsatisfying to see myself solely as a divine pet—God's best friend, man—because this does not clear the way, logic wise, to live on a level of communicative sameness that, I maintain, God would require to share an eternity of His grace with us.

Beside, we, people, have something called 'complex language' that the picture I see in my mind's eye cannot limit to writing this book or the conversations I have with my wife. Is not language a tool for God also to use because He has more things to share?

### Dependencies

It boils down to faith. Our worldview and our faith are inseparable—two sides of the same coin.

We, as Christians, may not be aware of how dependent we are on our faith for filling in explanations for life—simply living in the questions until we have the answers. Evolutionary thinkers are even less cognizant of the role their hypotheses play in giving them reasons for what is yet to be shown—and may be eventually disproven.

It goes without saying that we are dependent upon our faculty of reasoning to figure things out, to know the next move in life, to make the right choices. But that line of reasoning is built on a foundation of faith, faith in God or faith in science ..or

both. And if there is a change in worldview, there is a corresponding change in our mental faculty for reasoning. Our changed mental image of the picture effects our choice of the next piece to examine and attempt to fit in place. We have come to accept our own logic and like the dinosaurs in the Jurassic Park movie, the missing sequences, the missing pieces in our understanding of things, will always be supplied by our faith.<sup>15</sup>

### Absurd

Let me footnote this thought with a look at its opposite, what is illogical. If one thing is reasonable, is not its opposite absurd?

I used to ask my Greek students to consider their translation of any given verse in light of its possible absurdity. We want to avoid being—as the dictionary defines the term—*‘wildly unreasonable’* in our understanding of Scripture.

But what might this mean? One man’s science is another man’s nonsense. Sometimes a dream is just a dream. Other times it is packed with meaning. Some things on the surface of the thought may read like poor poetry that fails to make any sense. But on second glance these may start to reveal profound and universal truth.

Jonah was swallowed by a great fish!?! Reasonable to believe or absurd? It depends on our worldview and whether or not a miracle working God is part of it. Could this be parabolic, a story meant to show us that running from the desire of God is a very bad idea? Maybe someday the fossil remains of such a fish will be discovered in the sedentary rock at some lower stratum on the far eastern shore of the Great Sea.

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15. Carter Phipps in ‘Evolutionaries’ does not see the evolutionist as a person of faith or conviction or a believer in the miraculous but a person of an optimism in the future that the evolutionary process is itself will bring about to better the human condition, biologically and sociological. p. 45f.

## A Greater Society

*"Poverty is the parent of revolution and crime."*

— Aristotle

I was born and raised in Buffalo, New York and left in the mid 1960's. The changes made in the city during the late sixties and early seventies to clean up the slum areas and prosecute the '*war on poverty*' during the years of '*The Great Society*' didn't end in victory! Buffalo is undergoing now a renaissance or renewal of the old neighborhood concept I grew up in. The citizens of '*The City of Good Neighbors*' want their neighborhoods back.

The streets of the city were filled with thousands of businesses. .... [These businesses were] not only a strong, locally rooted and owned economy but with it a strong, sustaining, and supportive structure that gave neighborhood life power and meaning. -- Ray Suarez, *The Old Neighborhood, "What We Lost,"* (New York: Free Press, 1999) pp. 1-26.

Frank Lloyd Wright who designed the city did not give it a garden but made it a garden where beautiful elms lined picturesque streets running alongside houses as individual as the persons who owned them. It was storybook quality scenery which I enjoyed walking through as I communed with God.

But the poor were getting poorer and the malls were becoming the favorite haunts of middle class citizens. The churches, as well, were moving into the suburbs and outlining towns where the poor could not follow for lack of means.

In the 60's well-meaning civic leaders raised gobs of money, mobilized and contracted the expertise of professionals and drafted legislation all under a, then, sound reasoning that our city needed this change to deal with an economically crushing poverty. When the 80's arrived, they began to realize their reasoning had flaws. But still it made sense to care—I get that. Something has to be tried to raise a large portion of our citizenry

out of poverty. It makes good economic sense if not simply the right thing to do.

The reasoning that we must care was sound but the approach lacked—what science might call—a history of tried and true methods to make it work. I bring this to our attention because it is this concern for the poor and the reasoning behind it that helped bring about a changed worldview. Here is not the place for a history lesson on the effect an economy had upon a peoples. We might almost guess what inevitably happened, our nation's cities began to bulge at their boundaries with those seeking opportunities offered in an industrial era but economic depression and the greed of the rich burst that dream. (Believers know this as the age of the church of Laodicea.)

There were people who really cared about the masses treading along almost drowning in the waters of a real threatening starvation. These were learned minds rethinking what approach to take to make this for all a better world to live in, not only in Buffalo but around the civilized globe. But they didn't attend church. The church was developing a reputation that favored the wealthy. We must ask: what ever happened to God?

### The Poor

The change, as I see it, over a century of modern thought (since the 1870's), although slow, drifting-iceberg slow, evolutionary slow, has, nonetheless, been undeniable. Brilliant minds taking a furtive stroll through society began to see the deficiencies of church practices and more and more the possibilities if science were in charge.

Petitioning more reasonable and compassionate hearts, modern thinkers, in a publicized spirit of altruistic concern planned to rescue the poor—you heard correctly: the poor, the financially poor, the poor in health, the morally deprived, all forms of a needy humanity—who had been economically and culturally raped by the rich. To help the poor was to help society. There can be no utopia as long as they are neglected and abused by the wealthy. Social evolution, the survival of the fittest socially and economically means dealing with poverty on

a scientific level of concern. “A ...*religion without gods*,” imagines Nicolas Wade, “*could perhaps be made compatible with scientific knowledge about the human condition.*”<sup>1</sup>

And what does all this have to do with atheism? This was the petri dish, the culture, in which it would thrive. A history of poverty is a history of an ineffective God of love that didn’t seem to answer the prayers of the poor fast enough or often enough to make a belief in His goodness a viable option. God seemed resigned to their poverty.<sup>2</sup> The alternative is a social evolution oversaw by a caring science that would mean change for everyone’s betterment. Hopeful; solutions to the poverty question became the medium used to paint a picture of a brighter tomorrow and science would identify a cultural evolution holding the brush.

This was an age of renewed interest in scientific discovery and of inventiveness that brought us more than Henry Ford’s automobile, Oliver Evan’s refrigerator, Edison’s lightbulb, Alexander Graham Bell’s invention of the x-ray machine and the telephone or Dr. Lister’s contribution to antiseptic surgery. “*We in America today*,” Herbert Hoover would eventually boast, “*are nearer to the final triumph over poverty than ever before in the history of any land... we shall soon with the help of God be in the sight of the day when poverty will be banished from this nation.*”<sup>3</sup>

Academia was collecting ideas to construct a theory of change that would catch the public’s eye. In this way, for example, a theory of economics by Henry George in his book “*Progress and Poverty*” (1879) was not just a theory of economics but a discussion of Darwinism<sup>4</sup>, a social reform that would

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1. Nicholas Wade. *The Faith Instinct*. (New York:Penguin Press, 2009), 281.

2. John 12:8 You will always have the poor among you NEW INT.

3. Richard Hofstadter. *The American Political Tradition: and the men who made it* (New York:Random House, 1973), 383.

4. Charles Darwin’s “*On The Origin of Species*” (1859), a biological work, became the property of social change as well.

eventually envision the extinction—not just of a crushing poverty but—of a God and religion ideals that proved useless.

George argued that all Americans, including the poor—especially the poor—could have a comfortable future and achieve the “American dream” with some government regulation of big business. But this also put the church in a bad light. “*George went after conservative religion,*” says Eric Goldman and we need to hear him out on this.

“Ministers...were not expounding the laws of God but were engaged in ‘a gratuitous attribution to the laws of God.’ They were interpreting Christianity in a way that made it possible for the ‘rich christians [to] bend on Sundays in a nicely upholstered pew...without any feeling of responsibility for the squalid misery that is festering but a square away.”<sup>5</sup>

George’s *Progress and Poverty* .. became...

“the most rounded and powerful note in a growing chorus. ... Parts of Reform Darwinism were developed and made important by all kinds of men in every section of the country. Reform Darwinism was the natural approach of Americans who were angry at their America. By the Nineties [1890’s] a large proportion of the ambitious young academics where seeking their PhD’s in [a less christian-minded] Europe.”<sup>6</sup>

All social reform was initially couched in economic terms during this—the progressive—era when it was believed, in the words of Clarence Darrow, that “*If every man, woman and*

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The idea of social Darwinism was created by English philosopher Herbert Spencer and Yale professor William Graham Sumner by applying Darwin’s theory of evolution to society as a whole. Social Darwinism is the theory that the fittest in the social order survive, just as the fittest in nature survive. According to this theory, the only reason that the rich are rich is because they were the most fit to become so, and if the laborers were fit to do the same then they would be rich as well. Reform Darwinism, created by Brown University Professor Lester Frank Ward, follows the idea that because humans are intelligent beings, we can affect natural selection. Contrasting the social Darwinism thought of “survival of the fittest,” reform Darwinism argues that government and society should make as many people as possible “fit to survive.”

5. Eric F. Goldman. *Rendezvous with Destiny: A History of Modern American Reform* (New York:Vintage Books. 1956), 77.

6. *ibid.* p. 79ff.

*child in the world had a chance to make a decent, fair, honest living there would be no jails....*"<sup>7</sup> It was just a literary hop, skip, and a jump (by 1907) to the conclusion that "'Scientific truth' required a change in church attitudes or doctrine"<sup>8</sup> as well.

During the second industrial revolution, between 1873 and the 1920's, the rich<sup>9</sup> got richer while the poor "*competed ... for starvation wages.*"<sup>10</sup> And the church through its embellishments appeared on the side of the wealthy. The writing was on the wall and no magic eraser would expunge the stain of her self-interest. She had—in society's understanding—purchased her kingdom with the widow's mite and this became less and less acceptable for a pauperized nation whose hope of a brighter future was now in the hands of a promising science. Society began to slowly but discernibly free itself from the church's ideals.<sup>11</sup>

It was as if the secular world was waking up from a dream of promises Christianity could not deliver on and now no penance would suffice to grant her societal absolution or forgiveness. Society had, as the world sees it, evolved beyond her stories and that included Calvary<sup>12</sup> and the matter of 'sin'!

7. *ibid.* p. 96.

8. *ibid.* p. 85.

9. Henry Ford might be the sole exception since he gave his workers a livable wage to be able to afford one of his cars.

10. Eric F. Goldman. *Rendezvous with Destiny: A History of Modern American Reform* (New York:Vintage Books. 1956), 77.

11. One could argue that this was a social wrong needing governmental intervention against big monopolies—and that would come—but once a theory of evolution was applied to morals, the church lost its ace up the sleeve. Catastrophic suffering eventually would become the one overarching argument for all dissenting voices that claim there must be no god of love.

12. It's important for believers to realize that society is changing—call it evolution if you want—and that change is opposed to our Christian traditions. But as society separates from basic Christian teaching that has from the beginning of the church held that the vicarious death of Jesus Christ is the way to a reconciliation with a Creator-God, the line of demarcation between church and society should become bolder and clearer. This is a good thing. This is

Reform Darwinism as an explanation of social change meant society was in flux, conservatism's call for the status quo was so yesterday, there were—and are—no divinely prescribed moral absolutes. Did we think that in the 1920's that morals would not be shortened along with women's dresses!?! This has far reaching implications that only now we are beginning to realize. Goldman observed,

"Jesus' teaching should be continually reinterpreted to apply to changing circumstances, and that Christianity meant, not dogma, but Christianizing the environment in which children grow up and men and women worked."<sup>13</sup> ...Absolute truths were melting into a wonderfully fluid world."<sup>14</sup>

Sociologist Edward A. Ross declared in *Sin and Society* that

"...morals had stood still... To achieve... social betterment the public had to realize that 'sin evolved along with society'."<sup>15</sup>

Goldman, then summarized:

"Between the depression of 1873 and the beginning of World War I, and especially during the early 1900's these [free] thinkers developed ideological acids capable of dissolving every link in conservatism's steel chain of ideas."<sup>16</sup>

If you're like me, you must struggle mentally to wrap your brain around a logic that goes from economic change to aid the impoverished to redefining the church's role in society to 'there is no God.' Yet, for me, history hints at a disconnect between the American church and the poor of society that became the clarion call for atheism.

Broken family relationships are not necessarily our fault. They may be a product of the times. This has been generations in the makings. What our non-believing family members are saying are not new ideas but ideas forged in a caldron of discontent going back to great-grandma's day and although

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necessary for the last few chapters of the Revelation of Jesus to John to be fulfilled.

13. Eric F. Goldman. *Rendezvous with Destiny: A History of Modern American Reform* (New York:Vintage Books. 1956), 84.

14. *ibid.* p. 87.

15. *ibid.* p. 91.

16. *ibid.* p. 81.

none of this necessarily is a poor reflection on her, it does reflect what was happening in society<sup>17</sup> and in the church in her day. As Reggie McNeal put it: *"The present makes sense only in light of the past."*<sup>18</sup>

### Modernism

George was an economist who hypothesized a way to end poverty.<sup>19</sup> (I can't take us down an unknown street in the dark, here; so, find a college grad in finances with a flash light.) But whether or not he knew the impact of his thoughts, a vague and subtle change was being promoted in an era of scientific discovery. Society was heading toward, what Richard Hofstadter labeled its *'golden age.'*<sup>20</sup> To those capable of enjoying it all, God was no longer on their minds. We have prayed to science and she has answered us.

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17. "Premodern law," write Professor Vidu, "could never be seen to change society; rather, law changed imperceptibly, as society changed." [Adonis Vidu. *Atonement, Law, and Justice*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Publishing, 2014), p. 137] Morality, in reality, detached from law and freedom of the will exercised a new right to be whatever gave a sense of self-worth and well-being. It was a great experiment in which we danced through the 1920's before shedding our cloths in the 1960's). It is still going on in this postmodern era of 3rd trimester abortions and the redefinition of the family.

18. Reggie McNeal. *The Present Future: Six Tough Questions for the Church* (San Francisco, CA:Wiley, 2009).

Erik Erikson in "Identity: Youth in Crisis" wrote: "The values of any new generation do not spring full blown from their heads; they are already there, internet if not clearly articulated in the older generation."

19. When Henry George's *Progress and Poverty* (New York:Cambridge Univ Press. Digitally printed, 2009) was first published in 1879, it was aimed in part at discrediting Social Darwinism, the idea that "survival of the fittest" should serve as a social philosophy. - Forward to the modernized version of *Progress and Poverty*.

20. Richard Hofstadter. *The American Political Tradition: and the men who made it* (New York:Random House, 1973), 383.

Also known as "The Gilded Age."

*"The new America added exciting possibilities,"* Goldman choreographed the dance,

"The mushrooming cities, with their receptivity to the novel, their easy forgetfulness of people's pasts... seemed ideal for any man in a hurry. Education, always a boulevard to success in the eyes of the Americans, was just entering [in the 1870's] a period of swift expansion. Whirlwind commercial growth... a sign for many of advancing in the world."<sup>21</sup>

And Henry George wrote:

"A vast change in religious ideas is sweeping the world that may have a momentous effect, which only the future can tell. This is not a change in the form of religion—it is the negation and destruction of the ideas from which religion springs. Christianity is not simply shedding superstitions; it is dying at the root. And nothing arises to take its place. The fundamental ideas of an intelligent creator and an afterlife are quickly weakening in the general mind. Whether or not this may be an advance in itself is not the point. The important part religion has played in history shows the significance of the change now going on."<sup>22</sup>

They gave it a name: *modernism*<sup>23</sup>, which Wiki explains:

"...is a mode of thinking.... especially in the West, who see it as a socially progressive trend of thought that affirms the power of human beings to create, improve and reshape their environment with the aid of practical experimentation, scientific knowledge, or technology."<sup>24</sup>

It was, according to Professor Vidu, *"an age utterly averse to consciousness of sin, moral evil, and divine grace."*<sup>25</sup>

And *"As atheists,"* Keith S Cornish added, *"we recognize how much we owe our present state of well-being to scientists."*<sup>26</sup>

21. Eric F. Goldman. *Rendezvous with Destiny: A History of Modern American Reform* (New York:Vintage Books. 1956), 5.

22. Henry George. *Progress and Poverty* (New York:Cambridge Univ Press. Digitally printed, 2009), 294.

23. a movement toward modifying traditional beliefs in accordance with modern ideas

24. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Modernism>

25. Adonis Vidu. *Atonement, Law, and Justice*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Publishing, 2014), p. 152.

26. <http://atheistfoundation.org.au/article/atheism-and-social-progress/>

"In the 1800s, as scientific ideas triumphed over religious ideas, scholars stopped speculating about the existence of a soul and began speculating about the workings of the mind instead. By the end of the century, the formulation of theories about the mind and the search for evidence to support these theories had become the formal science of Psychology.<sup>27</sup>"

"As I look back now to the 1922-29 period," Benjamin Roth mused,

"it seems to me unreal and almost unbelievable. After the war ...[WWI] people wanted to have a good time and to spend money. The flapper appeared upon the scene. Women's dresses became shorter and shorter until they hardly reached the knee and in the latter stages of the delirium they wore their stockings rolled and their bare knees rouged. Morality and religion were pushed into the back-ground and in its place came Negro jazz bands and night clubs and all its attendant evils."<sup>28</sup>

Oh course, there is nothing wrong with Jazz—or even having a good time—but history was still recording a transitional period in American culture—and for that matter, in the civilized world. Jazz became a substitute for all things churched.

### Ah, Truth! We knew her when...

According to Nicolas Wade "*The dethronement of religion has been a necessary consequence of modernity.*"<sup>29</sup>

Modernism saw all life as only physical. Man has no soul and there is no God. We are self-governing and, therefore,

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27. <http://www.evolutionary-philosophy.net/psychology.html>

Richard Dawkins in "The God Delusion" (New York:Houghton Mifflin Co., 2006), 102 points out that the Fellows of the Royal Society, Britain's answer to the US National Academy of Sciences were polled [2006] for their belief in God. 23 %, a good sampling, responded. "Only 3.3% ... agreed strongly ...that a personal god exists." Only 12 out of 213 were strongly religious. These numbers hold up also in the USA—7% believers.

28. Benjamin Roth. *The Great Depression: A Diary*. (New York:PublicAffairs, 2009), 4.

29. Nicholas Wade. *The Faith Instinct* (New York:Penguin Press, 2009), 277.

dependent on science and reason for all progress. But science, like God a century earlier, began to prove ineffective in solving society's problems and bringing us to a sense of well-being. A global economic depression in the 1930's followed by WWII plunged the bewildered philosopher into a depressing re-evaluation of what was real.<sup>30</sup> Black Tuesday, October 29, 1929 would bring the party to an end and philosophers would return to a thinking position. They were apparently wrong about something but what was it?

How free are we as humans and can we use science and reason as tools to progress or is 'progress' just what McCallum called, 'a *code-word*' for European cultural domination of other cultures. We had entered the postmodern era.<sup>31</sup>

In 1959 at the centennial of Charles Darwin's publication of '*On the Origen of Species*,' Julian Huxley, grandson of the famous Thomas Henry Huxley, Darwin's Bulldog, gave a lecture at The University of Chicago on "*The Evolutionary Vision*" in which he predicted,

"Supernaturally centered faiths' were destined to decline, to deselect themselves out of existence like nonadaptive species in a hostile environment."<sup>32</sup>

Huxley envisioned a "*new religion*" and a "*new understanding of who we are and where we came from*" calling our God a "*divinized father figure*" that religious minds created and our faith a "*belief system*" from which the human spirit must be freed.

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30. Carter Phipps wrote "...two world wars had considerably dampened enthusiasm for any kind of teleological (purposeful) view of history." *Evolutionaries* (New York:Harper Perennial, 2012), 74.

31. Dennis McCallum. *The Death of Truth: What's Wrong With Multiculturalism, the Rejection of Reason and the New Postmodern Diversity*. (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Bethany House Publishers, 1996), (Kindle Location 146).

32. Carter Phipps. *Evolutionaries: Unlocking the Spiritual and Cultural Potential of Science's Greatest Idea*. (New York:Harper Perennial, 2012), Pt. 1. Prologue, p. i.

But did the Scripture predict this happening? You have to decide for yourself.

The Spirit clearly says that in later times some will abandon the faith -1 Timothy 4:1 NEW INT.

### Postmodernism

Civilized society was growing tired of meaningless and unfulfilled promises of the church—not to mention the militancy religious zeal was prone to in the name of God. Science, didn't seem to have answers either—at least not yet—for a society in pain that had been hoping for a reform that would share the well-being of the few rich with the poor masses. Evolution or reform-darwinism, if true, would take too long.

In general, as Carter Phipps wrote,

"The unguarded optimism that once flowed freely from modernity has finally run dry. Enthusiasm for progress in history [after WWII] seemed as dead as the millions laid to waste on the battlefields of Europe and Asia.... Directionality and determinism were rejected, uncertainty embraced.... Belief in modernity's promise was replaced with a mark lack of belief, not just in the traditional gods of myth and magic [Phipps is referring to the christian faith among others] but in the modern deities of technology and progress [science] . We were slowly becoming postmodern."<sup>33</sup>

Postmodernism<sup>34</sup> is a world-weary intellectualism that no longer views life in terms of absolutes or universal principles.<sup>35</sup> Life is relative to the person living it. Postmodern

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33. Carter Phipps, *Evolutionaries*. (New York:Harper Perennial, 201), 75..

34. The exploitation films, grind house movies, of the '1970's, the precode era, was the clear indication that times had changed. We were entering the postmodern age. The previous decade overturned the social values long held as constants paving the way for a new way of viewing life.

35. Griffin & Tyrrell refer to this as a fallacious view of art and life: "But some postmodernists do much more than exploit the gullible. They go so far as to say that all thought is equally relevant (that there are no boundaries, no rules, no hierarchies, no objective reality and all facts are just 'social constructs'); furthermore, all species are of equal

thought was simply admitting its despondency in relying on the church or academia. We must become self-reliant if there is to be improvement. Societies that triumph over the evils that would destroy them are self-contained, self-help societies.

Professor Vidu, who sees 'postmodernism' as 'late modernism,' wrote, "*The undisputed historical turning point between modernity and late-modernity is the two World Wars and in particular the Holocaust.*"<sup>36</sup>

The philosopher has given up on believing in absolute principles, timeless ethics, or a moral law God might sign off on. Postmodernism has given up on God, a god who only shames them for alleged deficiencies; He never lifts me, say they, above these deficiencies. A moral code that is outside the culture I belong to, say they, will only generate feelings of guilt and remorse when I fail to follow. Such a code promotes a sense of duty on those whose spontaneous self-expression would not otherwise represent that code and any sense of guilt from failing would be more than unreasonable; it would be wrong. Postmodernism is that age of self-discovery, finding well-being and happiness in who I am and what expresses my humanity. Postmodernism finds no outer circle of influence beyond the culture we are a part of to warrant any absolute or divine laws. Our culture represents where and how we live.

"For this reason, postmodernism is highly skeptical of explanations which claim to be valid for all groups, cultures, traditions, or races, and instead focuses on the relative truths of each person."<sup>37</sup>

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value, and a human being is no more important than an ant. This 'deconstructionism,' as it is termed, is a pseudo-scientific quest for negation." Joe Griffin; Ivan Tyrrell. *Human Givens: The new approach to emotional health and clear thinking* (East Sussex, United Kingdom: Human Givens Publishing, Chalvington, East Sussex: Human Givens Publishing Ltd., 2013), (Kindle Locations 378-381).

36. Adonis Vidu. *Atonement, Law, and Justice*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Publishing, 2014), p. 178.

37. <http://www.pbs.org/faithandreason/gengloss/postmbody.html>

Look at it from an anthropologist's point of view: Francis Boas, Professor of Anthropology at Columbia University and founder of anthropology in the United States, argued way back in 1908 that "*anthropology is important because 'It ... [makes] the differences between our civilization and another ... appear less as differences in value than as differences in kind.'*" His work "*The Mind of Primitive Man*" became a "*Magna Carta*" of self-respect<sup>38</sup>—especially for minority groups. For him, blacks were a minority group but that idea now has expanded to include what I might call a culture within a culture (a sub-culture: a Jewish ghetto, a Chinatown, a gay community, etc.).

To postmodernism, we are a product of our society. McCallum tells us '*postmodernism*' sees each of us as a "*cog in a social machine, a product of our individual cultures. Objective reason is a myth.*"<sup>39</sup>

Charles Darwin would not have had the dynamo by himself to cause such a drastic shift in thought. It was as if a society, once christian, had been bumped violently into another orbit that was science-centric and then floating free in an intellectual vacuum of nothing definite. This was the intellectual price tag for disallowing a Christ-centric view of life. Social evolution as a concept has gone way beyond Darwin's finches. "*...As early as the seventies [the 1870's, society was ] 'heading toward ... free thought...'*"<sup>40</sup>

They conclude: we still need science, but we are cultural units at most. All the inventions in the world cannot benefit a

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38. Eric F. Goldman. *Rendezvous with Destiny: A History of Modern American Reform* (New York:Vintage Books. 1956), 97.

39. Dennis McCallum. *The Death of Truth: What's Wrong With Multiculturalism, the Rejection of Reason and the New Postmodern Diversity* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Bethany House Publishers, 1996), (Kindle Location 146).

40. Eric F. Goldman. *Rendezvous with Destiny: A History of Modern American Reform* .(New York:Vintage Books. 1956), 92.

group of people that as a group have no cultural identity.<sup>41</sup> Science still plays a role in all of this as a study in cultural evolution—and, of course we still like our electronic tablets. Medicine is still medicine. But existentially speaking, morals and ethics are defined relative to the sub-culture we live in, or live out.

It's hard to accept but by the late 1940's and the depression followed by a global conflict: "...morality and religion have been at a low ebb and the philosophy of Franklin and Lincoln are all ancient history. Even worse than this is the uncertainty of the future."<sup>42</sup>

### Crashing Down

Doris Kearns Goodwin, the historian, wrote about President Johnson's vision of "*The Great Society*" which he introduced in a speech at the University of Michigan in 1964 as his solution to the "*irrational discontent*"<sup>43</sup> that was spreading like wild fire. The conflagrations that blazed literally across the nation only symbolized a society burning. I was in my late teens and early twenties and I knew something wasn't right when I, a white boy, was warned about taking my usual walk to church—3 miles—through the black neighborhood. I did it anyway because in my first year of high school the black lads were my closest friends.<sup>44</sup>

None of what was going on around me made sense but it was happening.<sup>45</sup> Riots were numerous in the nations cities—

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41. Nicholas Wade in *The Faith Instinct* (New York:Penguin Press, 2009), ch. 12 envisions a day possible when a godless religion helps to define such a culture

42. Benjamin Roth. *The Great Depression: A Diary*. (New York:PublicAffairs, 2009), 225.

43. Doris Kearns Goodwin. *Lyndon Johnson and the American Dream* (New York:St. Martin's Press, 1976), Chapter 8. p.210.

44. I have re-connected with a couple of them on Facebook.

45. Injustices against blacks and women—against any group—should be addressed. Politicians, who are a nation's leaders—I agree with Goodwin—are not creative thinkers. They "respond .. to movements." *ibid.* p.212.

including Buffalo, where I lived. “...urban insurrections ... plagued the country in the hellish 1960’s...”<sup>46</sup>

“The May riots,” opined Michel de Certeau in August 1968, following the riots in Paris, “had left in their wake the sense of a cultural trauma and the explicit feeling of powerlessness.”<sup>47</sup>

We were the counterculture generation opposed to more things than just the war in Vietnam. We became the voice of civil rights, freedom of expression—and among others—the poor. Ours was also a sexual revolution, sex outside of monogamy. In protest public nudity carried the visible message of our discontent. How can a president not do something about what Goodwin called “gradually emerging currents in American awareness—the sense that we were losing control of our own society.”<sup>48</sup>

Polls revealed widespread disenchantment among American youth. In 1970–1971, one-third of America’s college-age population felt that marriage had become obsolete and that having children was not very important. The number identifying religion, patriotism, and “living a clean, moral life” as “important values” plummeted. Fifty percent held no living American in high regard, and nearly half felt that America was “a sick society.” In this setting, many young Americans no longer saw any reason to heed established conventions about sex, drugs, authority, clothing, living arrangements, food—the fundamental ways of living their lives.<sup>49</sup>

Our generation was severing the bond with past traditional ways of thinking. In the thoughts of parental alarm, the fear no doubt was that we were tossing away any lingering concept of God. Religious faith was never strong enough to hold us to our social moorings in such a storm. As I see it: society lost faith in the church and soon would lose faith in God, too.

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46. <http://www.detroits-great-rebellion.com/Harlem-riot.html>

47. Graham Ward. *Postmodern Theology* (University of Manchester: Blackwell Publishing Ltd. 2008), xvi.

48. Doris Kearns Goodwin. *Lyndon Johnson and the American Dream*. Chapter 8. p.212.

49. Bruce J. Schulman, *The Seventies: The Great Shift in American culture, Society, and Politics* (New York:Free Press, 2001), (Kindle Locations 625-631).

### The Church Responds

This is relativism at its best where even the church gets to define sin on a 'church-to-church' basis. One congregation's shameful 'junk' behavior is another's treasured expression of what's spiritual. Sin is now a cultural phenomenon. A church goer's behavior is no longer considered a blessing or a curse based on a universal understanding of scripture. What we say or do now waits on a cultural acceptance to affirm it as good or a cultural rejection as bad.

"Many of the parishioners relished the changes and took great comfort in the belief that they could trust their pastors to lead them to heaven in a religion which was not so strict as to upset their carnal desires."<sup>50</sup>

"*Truth*", says Ernest Gellner, "[is now] used as a ... *cultural decoration*."<sup>51</sup> Truth is no longer unique to Christianity. Jesus isn't the only way to God. Your faith is right ... *for you*. And whereas modernism would have called your faith *superstition*, postmodernism accepts your religion as an individual thing. No two 'faiths' are the same because no two churches are the same. Your journey in life is not mine; so, I have no right to pass moral judgment on anything you do—that, obviously, is within the civil law.

Jim Leffel compares modernism and post-modernism this way:

"Twenty years ago when I was an undergraduate philosophy major, Christianity was largely rejected because it was thought to be "unscientific" and consequently untrue. But today Christianity is widely rejected, not because it was carefully examined and found wanting, but merely because it claims to be true."<sup>52</sup>

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50. Standish, Russell; Standish, Colin. Postmodernism And the Decline of Christianity (Kindle Locations 96-97).

51. Ernest Gellner. Postmodernism, Reason and Religion (New York:Taylor and Francis, 1992),(Kindle Locations 15-16).

52. Taken from "Understanding Today's Postmodern University" by Jim Leffel - see <http://www.xenos.org/essays/understanding-todays-postmodern-university>

Sarah Cupp, American conservative political commentator, sums it this way:

"Christianity is disturbing. Christianity is an act of faith in a larger universe and a universal God. Christianity is an act of submission and subordination. Christianity establishes explicit limits to behavior and belief. If you want a self-centered, hedonistic life or you want to change the rules to fit this year's cultural whims, Christianity is profoundly challenging because it limits your ability to choose within a framework defined by God rather than defined by your immediate needs."<sup>53</sup>

David Platt, president of the Southern Baptist Convention's International Mission Board, agreeably adds:

"This line of thought has pervaded American Christianity in two particular ways. On one hand, many professing Christians have embraced the universalistic idea that religion is merely a matter of preference or opinion and that in the end all religions are fundamentally the same. People do not have to trust in Christ in order to know God or go to heaven. Therefore, there is no need to encourage someone else to embrace the truth of Christianity."<sup>54</sup>

### An Open Culture

After a century of change through legislative action, judicial decision, and an increasingly more open attitude by an accepting public, behavior once considered offensive is now part of a modern society. I refer to this as an *open culture*.<sup>55</sup> It is more than free speech or a multibillion dollar sex industry. As a civilized society we have become more receptive to ideas once thought anathema. We were the proverbial frog in the pan of water slowly getting hotter and hotter without our sensing it.

Charles Murray spoke of a paradigm shift regarding the poor which I think works also when talking about christian beliefs: "*There was a reason why,*" Murray offered [he was talking

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53. S.E.Cupp, *S. E. Losing Our Religion* (New York:Simon & Schuster, Inc., 2010.), 251-252.

54. David Platt. *Radical: Taking Back Your Faith from the American Dream* (New York:Random House, Inc, 2010), 142.

55. Freed from what Thomas Jefferson might have called "artificial rules." see Nicholas Wade, "The Faith Instinct" (New York:Penguin Press, 2009), 20ff. on 'Moral Instincts'.

about the ‘The Great Society’ of the LBJ era], ‘*they made sense when only a few years earlier they had not...*’<sup>56</sup> Christian doctrine and the message of the Cross between the Great Enlightenment of the Whitfield and Wesleyan revivals—the Methodist’s mourner’s bench, all this—made sense before the second industrial revolution. By the 1950’s and 60’s the Second World War had ended in victory and the economy was strong. Science continued to advance and the church was slowly pushed aside. Our beliefs didn’t make sense any longer.

Social changes were occurring on a number of levels unnoticed by an unobserving public.<sup>57</sup> The belief was that the old system was flawed—remember: we were the counter-cultural generation—and that system included the church.<sup>58</sup>

“It was not just by the end ... certain types of legislation had more support than formerly, but the premises—the unconscious, “everybody-knows-that” premises—shifted in the minds of the people who were instrumental in making policy.... The rationale ... had to fall back upon a belief that the system as it existed ... was deeply flawed and tended to perpetuate evils.”<sup>59</sup>

Open relationships, prime time T.V. nudity, comedic sexual innuendo, same sex relations, non-traditional or

56. Charles Murray. *Losing Ground: American Social Policy 1950 -1980* (New York:BasicBooks, 1984), 44.

57. “Sometimes the changes just ‘happened,’ Murray alerted us, “more or less invisibly.” *Ibid.* P. 47.

Murray uses disability insurance as an example of the tweaks made to the law that produced a policy that changed unnoticed by the public. My point is that legislative changes and judicial rulings were beginning to add up making the church less a moral force.

58. “Religious belief is waning in many countries,” informs Nicholas Wade in *The Faith Instinct* (p. 277), “especially among the most educated classes. Many modern states are secular and... have confined the sacred to a separate here of ... limited relevance.”

On an overview of the history of the church’s influence in America, see [http://www.countriesquest.com/north\\_america/usa/people/religion\\_in\\_the\\_united\\_states/history\\_of\\_religion\\_in\\_the\\_united\\_states/influence\\_of\\_religion.htm](http://www.countriesquest.com/north_america/usa/people/religion_in_the_united_states/history_of_religion_in_the_united_states/influence_of_religion.htm)

59. *ibid.* p. 44.

alternative family units<sup>60</sup>, and state sponsored gambling—to name a few—once fueled the preacher’s cry for eternal punishment.<sup>61</sup> It is now more and more common to find all these as part of the *parishioner’s* life-style and—not just congregant’s but—the clergy’s as well.

Inevitably the ACLU would become a part of all this change, defending in part a social reform which contradicted traditional christian teaching.<sup>62</sup>

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60. <http://study.com/academy/lesson/what-is-a-non-traditional-family-definition-of-options.html>

**1973** The American Psychiatric Association removes homosexuality from its official list of mental disorders.

Read more: [The American Gay Rights Movement: A Timeline](http://www.infoplease.com/ipa/A0761909.html#ixzz3Zfrr6lZG)  
<http://www.infoplease.com/ipa/A0761909.html#ixzz3Zfrr6lZG>

61. polyamory, for example.

“With a few notable exceptions, most authorities, whether their influence is spiritually based or scientifically based, still maintain that monogamy is superior to polyamory, or, in some cases they express the conviction that polyamory is simply unworkable. Often, there is a refusal to acknowledge polyamory as a viable option, and instead the entire discourse is framed as monogamy and infidelity. This kind of cultural bias has been dubbed

mononormativity and is just beginning to be questioned by academic researchers.”

See Deborah Anapol *Polyamory in the 21st Century: Love and Intimacy with Multiple Partners* (Kindle Locations 47-50). Rowman & Littlefield Publishers. Kindle Edition.

There is now something called ‘ethical polyamory’ - Franklin Veaux, eve Rickert. *Ore Than Two: A practical guide to ethical polyamory*.

62. “The ACLU has a long history of defending the LGBT community. We brought our first LGBT rights case in 1936. The ACLU’s LGBT rights strategy is based on the belief that fighting for the society we want means not just persuading judges and government officials, but ultimately changing the way society thinks about LGBT people.” - <http://www.infoplease.com/ipa/A0761909.html> and <https://www.aclu.org/issues/lgbt-rights>

A couple latest ACLU victories include

1981 vs challenged creationism as a scientific alternative in the schools.

2005 Keeping religion out of the classroom.

And what about the poor—where this all started? Charles Murray admits *“During the 1970’s the poor receded from public attention... We tried to provide more for the poor and produced more poor instead. We tried to remove the barriers to escape from poverty, and inadvertently built a trap.”*<sup>63</sup>

### Wheat and Chaff

It is impossible any more for most church-goers whose commitment to God’s Word is more ritualized than practical to winnow the chaff of such thinking that is part of a postmodern worldview. Consequently, our children will be less informed because sheer catechisms of rote memorization will not suffice to teach them how to live in this new world. For starters, our children have electronic access to the worst of the worst possibilities through the internet from which eventually no password that you set will protect. They will be on their own like sheep among wolves—to use a biblical metaphor.<sup>64</sup> Add to this the fact that the church has little represented the teachings and life of Christ and we can only imagine the challenges that await future generations of those we love.

And what is ‘chaff’? We think we know but we have been too selective about the things others do that we disapprove of and the things we do that we wish to continue—even if the former is good and the later, bad. The clergy has spent centuries honing their skill at promoting teachings that support their interests by artfully leaving out of the sermon scripture that might challenge their stumbling step before God. We have ‘denominationalized’ truth to suit our religious purposes and when atheism called us out on this we became defensive calling it ‘apologetics’.

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63. Charles Murray. *Losing Ground: American Social Policy 1950 - 1980* (New York:BasicBooks, 1984), 9.

64. Matthew 10:16 “I am sending you out like sheep among wolves. Therefore be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves. NEW INT.

### The Church is Still Alive

But there's good news.

Our second son while still a very young lad used his crayons to copy the picture off a record sleeve. It was the picture of a church with the title: *The Church is Still Alive*. His picture did not find its way to the refrigerator door where most paintings and such migrated. It was lost in my desk drawer—a drawer I seldom opened. I can go a lifetime without opening desk drawers. Everything I need is on the floor or some chair nearby.

On this particular day, I was despondent and most likely thinking of quitting the ministry—not that I would. I was thinking how 'dead' the church was. No one wants to work for the kingdom. If you are clergy, you can relate. I needed to hear from God and for no reason I opened that drawer and read what my little boy wrote me: *The Church is Still Alive*.

I smiled to myself and then went back to work. I am just crazy enough to think God answered me.

There might be a winnowing process already at work under the guidance of a divine providence that will separate out the wheat—that group of believers whose love for God and hunger for His Word still find worshipping and serving Him worth living for. Prophetically speaking, this is now inevitable.<sup>65</sup>

In 2009 at the University of Chicago at a meeting of some of "*evolutionary theory's brightest lights*" Carter Phipps informs us<sup>66</sup>, the subject of Huxley's vision was again discussed. Hopes were high that soon religion would be a thing of the past.

But to the church's credit, the "*ongoing resistance of the old-time religion*," Phipps called it, the church refused to sit down and die. She was still as alive.

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65. Luke 3:17 His winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire." NEW INT.

66. *ibid*.

## The Gauntlet

*“But do not take this responsibility lightly, my boy. The Gauntlet casts an ominous shadow.”*

— Casey Caracciolo, *The Shadow of the Gauntlet*

Many scholars whose faith in God is something worth keeping have had to re-evaluate their interpretation of Scripture, their *hermeneutic*. Hermeneutics, or the study of interpreting Scripture, is itself a science for biblical scholars. Hermeneutics attempts to establish the rules by which we can unfold the sense of what is written. As already noted the *historical-critical* approach to interpreting the Scripture is one of the most recent. Like the human body requires many specialists to diagnose illness and maintain health—I currently see three specialists on a rotating basis all under the wise direction of a primary care physician—understanding the meaning of Scripture requires the co-operative effort of textual-critics (not a curse word), linguists, philologists, grammarians trained in the biblical languages, lexicographers, biblical archeologists and anthropologists, and, of course, the pastors, who should be the primary ‘spiritual’ care persons.

Well, whereas the King James and Rheims-Douay Versions of the Bible were once held in high regard with inspired affection along with grandma’s homemade wisdom and baked bread, today, and 52 English translations later available on the Bible Gateway web-site, a devotional read of Scripture isn’t so straight-forward anymore.

Add to this: secular scholarship has thrown down the gauntlet for some of us who would—and some of us who must—debate and give answer to issues raised by scientific research and the evolutionists. If left unaddressed these non-believing voices

could leave those of weaker faith vulnerable to possible deception and spiritual harm.<sup>1</sup>

The active atheists are the 'New Atheists' who would challenge believers to think through what they are accepting as truth. Their approach has had the ring of sarcasm to it even though they claim to simply be passionate about their 'science' and hoping to alert truth thinkers to think.

We can't be sure what their motives are but it matters not. Their ideas are out there and family members who claim no faith in God are beginning to quote them. "[Richard ]*Dawkins* [one of the Four Horsemen of the New Atheism] *seems to be driven less by particular evidence than by the implicit premise that religion is bad....*"<sup>2</sup> says Nicholas Wade, whose own view is that "*The core of religion is not belief, but rather for the most part, commitment for socially constructive behavior.*"<sup>3</sup> God is not in this picture for either man.

### I've Been Thinking

At some point this discourse had to get a bit academic. I think we all sensed that. If we are sincere about wanting to understand the intellectualism, the new line of reasoning, of the people we still love but who have left the faith, we will take the

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1. I Corinthians 6:11 So this weak brother or sister, for whom Christ died, is destroyed by your knowledge. NEW INT.

2. Nicholas Wade. *The Faith Instinct: How Religion Evolved & Why It Endures* (New York:Penguin Press, 2009), 67.

Wade seems to be, at least in part, in disagreement with Dawkins by proposing the evolution of religion as a sociological phenomenon. Dawkins, according to Wade, believes that religion is non-adaptive, has no evolutionary advantage.

"Richard Dawkins advocates for a non-adaptive view of religion. Adaptive means that some behavior confers as evolutionary advantage, i.e. A natural or group selection for survival of the species or the institution, which means it is a matter of progeny." *ibid.* 63.

"Religion is primarily a social behavior... But there is a serious problem in accounting for the evolution of social behaviors. Biologists have not yet resolved the issue." *ibid.* 67.

3. *ibid.* p. 62.

time to converse with them on their level with argument. Let's represent such a conversation on a continuum of biblical interpretation from an absolute literalism to total fantasy. We all think, more or less, of the Bible in one of the following ways:<sup>4</sup>

1. We contend that the Bible text is to be read literally and taken to be true which would mean that external evidence from archeology, geology, astronomy and the other sciences would need to be either ignored or discredited in some way.

2. We contend that the biblical text is probably literally true while believing that science will inevitably confirm the text.

3. We contend that the biblical text can be viewed either literally or symbolically where the context allows it and where the text and science converge. Where, however, the two are *not* congruous,—they don't show signs of converging upon one common fact—we remain unconvinced, having reservation, about what we do not know... yet.

4. We contend that the biblical text is false until proven true by science.

5. We contend that the biblical text is myth and fantasy. None of it is true.

The works of scholarship that I have reviewed, written by christians, generally are between numbers #2 and #3. A few subscribe to number #1 but my sense is that when science conflicts with Scripture, honesty requires a more open review of both sides.

Keep in mind that we can be prone to prejudiced interpretations and—what is known as—*confirmation bias* that

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4. William Dever in his introduction to "Who Were the Early Israelites and Where Did They Come From" (Grand Rapids MI. :Wm Eerdmans Press, 2001. ) provided the most obvious points on a continuum or line of thought that graphically and logically represents the problem of interpreting the historical references in Scripture as well as those parts that allude to some scientific inquiry. I have filtered his thoughts through the sieve of my own.

often prevents us from actually seeing what is written or hearing what is being said. *“Even scientists today,”* admitted Dr. Montgomery, *“are not immune to interpreting evidence, at least initially, through the lens of prevailing ideas and their preconceived notions.”*<sup>5</sup>

I lean toward the center: number #3. Such a leaning also suggests at the very least that I am, without compromising my faith, endeavoring to be more understanding with family members who have discarded their faith.

The radical thinker’s goal is not to reconcile science and Bible but to continue to stir the hornets’ nest of controversy by emphasizing differences with hyperbole and sarcasm. These are the people with views represented in numbers #1 and #5.

Dr. Montgomery advises:

“We need a historically informed understanding of how people read and interpreted sacred texts in the past in order to inform how we read them today.”<sup>6</sup>

In hermeneutical terms, we need a context for whatever the Bible writers wrote. We must be less political and more scholarly by walking in the author’s sandals while we study the text. We need to understand not just the culture, but the worldview that defined that culture, the language, its emphasis for explaining the world they lived in with a clarity and simplicity unmatched by our technical jargon of today. We must understand also that they were exceptional story-tellers and God was a vital part of their story.

How to choose one approach to interpreting scripture over another? Most Christians probably never gave this a moment’s thought. Most pastors probably toe the denominational line because it helps minimize the stress of ministry. Most believers are not individual thinkers when it comes to interpreting the Bible. We depend on the expertise of

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5. David Montgomery. *The Rocks Don't Lie: A Geologist Investigates Noah's Flood* (New York:W. W. Norton & Company, 2012.), Kindle Edition.

6. *ibid.* p. 249.

pulpit ministry to tell us what it means. (Do Christians even bring bibles to church anymore!?)

In this writing I am trying to encourage your faith more than define it. I am hoping to provide the drum beat to your marching. I am not wanting to convince you of anything you are not already persuaded to be true. So, don't let some of what I have to say, in an effort to provide a context for my hand on your shoulder, alarm your sensibilities. Hear me out. Maybe things will make more sense as you read. That said...

### The Compromise

*“Conservative Protestants began to forge a reactionary biblical literalism,”* Dr. Montgomery alerts us, *“based on biblical inerrancy. They believed that admitting even the slightest error in or sign of human influence on the sacred text would undermine the whole notion of Christian salvation.”*<sup>7</sup>

He continued:

“Their zeal to combat biblical criticism lay in the conviction that admitting the Bible had a history colored by human fallibility opened the door to doubting redemption through Christ. A literal reading founded on biblical inerrancy formed the levee fundamentalists built to save the Bible from the flood of modernism.”<sup>8</sup>

Such a zeal is misplaced because the biblical record is replete with redactions and the editorial notes of the theological minds that made the copies. There are over 200 thousand variants in our New Testament alone—when we line up all the copies and copies of copies and compare them. We cannot deny this and we cannot defend it either. Humans are imperfect—a fact that must be admitted if we are to have any clarification regarding the ‘inerrancy’ idea as it relates to the Scriptures.

Moving to the center of this controversial subject suggested compromise, but it isn't. This is no compromise for two reasons that I see: (1) this is not a doctrinal continuum but a

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7. *ibid.* p. 183.

8. *ibid.* p.184.

look at the alleged science and the historical record found in the Bible and (2) this is not a discussion of doctrinal or theological ambiguities. The Plan of salvation as God gave it to us in Scripture is *unaffected* by allowing the account to reflect a few alterations in the text.

### Peaceful Coexistence

And what about the places where the bible seems to outright contradict science? Christian scholars, scientists who love our Lord, have been able to maintain their faith and professionalism without compartmentalizing either. David Montgomery, a geologist, expounded,

“...we cannot simply compartmentalize science and religion into tidy, noncompeting domains because some scientific discoveries are not compatible with particular religious beliefs. Few religious ideas can be tested, but some are refutable.... I believe faith and science can peacefully coexist, so long as we don't founder on or cling to the rocky shore of either. What this requires is open-minded thinking guided by humanity's greatest asset— the gift of reason.”<sup>9</sup>

### A Matter of Words

I believe in the verbal plenary theory of inspiration and its inerrancy but I am, by saying this, referring to the autographs or original texts that I believe more faithfully represent God's wisdom—even if they, too, were imperfect. Imperfection in this context may refer to a number of aspects of the text: Inaccurate historical narrative, the insertion of myth in an, otherwise, historical narrative, incomplete ideas only introduced rather than detailed, the constant human element of imperfection—to name a few.

In other words, we must be able to imagine God wanted to share with us a message of our eternal salvation that had to be written on a kindergarten level and in our language and patterns of story telling because the details of His plan and heart were

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9. *ibid.* p. 254.

beyond our comprehension. This treasured truth is being kept in a flawed container of human fallibility, written in words that share sufficiently with us, what Paul called a *mystery*.<sup>10</sup> Imagine, again, describing how a computer works to a four year old.

For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness, made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of God's glory displayed in the face of Christ....we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us. 2 Corinthians 4:6-7 NEW INT.

We, perhaps, think we do understand what this mystery is but we only know of it—"in part."<sup>11</sup> It is only brazen of us to assume that the complete details of God's plan of salvation could be made intelligible in only one book or in modern scientific or technical terms. And it is equally as presumptuous to imagine that the *context* of that message needs to be written without human error and without imperfect copying. The context of God's story is our humanity with all its flaws, its history of wars and poverty and abuse. God best explains our need of Him by allowing the spots of the spilled ink of all our tragedies to remain on the page. In a metaphor of grace: He writes over it.

Scientists who also are men and women of faith know that learning is an ongoing process and no one should be in a hurry to discredit God while we investigate life.

Add to this: the inability of religious leaders to come to a consensus as to the exact composition of the canon has made this point of fundamental doctrine somewhat inventive and has open the way for other less inspiring theories to catch the public mind. How many books are there in our Bible? Protestant: 66? Catholic: 73? Ethiopian Orthodox: 81? Greek Orthodox: 83? And why were other writings rejected though written during the

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10. I Timothy 3:16 Beyond all question, the mystery from which true godliness springs is great: He appeared in the flesh, was vindicated by the Spirit, was seen by angels, was preached among the nations, was believed on in the world, was taken up in glory. NEW INT.

11. I Corinthians 13:12 For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known. NEW INT.

period when the New Testament was compiled? Shortly in writing about fundamentalism I will return to this question.

As surreal as this sounds, a verbal plenary theory of scripture in which every word has some merit in the course of the biblical narrative allows me to see these same words in their original context as real contributors to the meaning in the text, the story of grace. This provides for a hermeneutic based on the biblical languages and idioms. I am less likely this way to view the scripture as an anthology of disconnected ideas. I must guard against reading into the scripture my personal ideas made in the image of my vernacular which I as a theologian could than form into whatever dogma or doctrine best suited my lifestyle and sense of spirituality. And I am less likely as well to attempt to force an english translation to comply with scientific terminology or be discarded as useless verbiage by a modernized mindset.

Additionally: the Bible doesn't have to be literal throughout when we know it also includes poetry, psalms, parables, and other examples of a literary style in places that explain what otherwise would be absurd literalism. What do we, for example, make of the 'millennium' referred to in the Revelation (chapter 20) which Peter just as easily can interpret as a single day (2 Peter 3:8).

### Rooted in Truth

Is it possible that some explanations that would shed light on our interpretation of the bible are not found yet buried in some archeological site not yet excavated? Could some knowledge that would open the meaning of some of the scripture be still undiscovered, stratified in the sedentary rocks on some ancient hillside? And how do we interpret the story in the meanwhile?

The two bible stories, for starters, most grateful for a more complete knowledge of ancient events would be the creation story and the flood. These are the most controversial because they most directly impact our worldview. Archeology and geology should be able to address them.

Dr. Montgomery, a geologist, though, candidly joins in:

"To me, a literal reading of the Creation in Genesis does not do the story justice. .... I don't think that the Creation story was intended as historical fact. It's more akin to epic poetry written to convey the divine origin of our wondrous world and everything in it, however they came about. Genesis 1 remains powerful and relevant today if read as a symbolic polemic intended for early monotheists rather than as a Bronze Age scientific treatise.... Like most geologists, I had come to see Noah's Flood as a fairy tale— an ancient attempt to explain the mystery of how marine fossils ended up in rocks high in the mountains. Now I've come to see the story of Noah's Flood like so many other flood stories— as rooted in truth."<sup>12</sup>

Like Dr. William Dever, the archeologist of record in this work, Dr. Montgomery's research simply failed to support a literal interpretation of Scripture throughout where conservative christianity maintains it is. Dr. Montgomery as a geologist had to admit, "*It was becoming apparent that the stories in Genesis were too short and mysterious to either confirm or challenge geological theories.*"<sup>13</sup>

And there are clearly miracles recorded to which science does not—for it cannot—have an answer.

"By design, science excludes miracles because there is no way to test them through rational analysis. Science cannot address supernatural or divine action any more than Seattle residents can will away gray skies."<sup>14</sup>

### The Convergence

If the science and the text seem to disagree, is it perhaps because they are not describing the same thing or representing the same emphasis or designed for the same purpose? It is far better to look for what Dr. Dever calls '*convergence*' than absolute agreement. The Bible is not a scientific treatise no more than science text books are intended to be theological. Conservative christians think bible and science have to be in agreement because God wrote the Bible and God can't make mistakes. But

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12. *ibid.* 251, 253.

13. *ibid.* p. 139

14. *ibid.* pp. 253-254.

this could only be true in an ideal heaven where the men and women who actually held the quills or compiled their sources did not live at the same time in a very real humanity.

Scholarship should be comfortable accepting Peter's explanation, "*For prophecy never had its origin in the human will, but prophets, though human, spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.*"<sup>15</sup> Mere human writers were the conduit of divine truth and it has been—painfully at times—obvious that God allowed for the human element and some imperfection in style, grammar, and even an attempt at describing what, for them was, the indescribable. (Take Daniel's vision as an example of this last point.<sup>16</sup> ..or John's description of the Revelation while he was imprisoned on the isle of Patmos.)

Non-believers must find this explanation amusing because, according to Occam's Razor and his understanding of the '*law of parsimony*' the simplest view would be that the people who wrote the Bible also authored it. Non-believers have no perception of a divine providence or a divine Editor-in-chief Who would let pass some imperfections and allow imperfect copies to be distributed providing the underlining message of His grace could be publicized.

What if we could remove from our understanding of the biblical text the stigma of a pseudo-science and instead see the universal and timeless beauty that is the backdrop of a narrative that declares man's need for God. What might it take to imagine the classical Hebrew language expressing the awesome wonder that overwhelmed the ancients—a language—that had no modern science, no technical jargon and no words to define in cold, heartless, technical terms the beauties of their world? I think we should recognize their scientific ignorance at the same time consider God's purpose behind what they penned. This is convergence at its best.

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15. 2 Peter 1:21 NEW INT.

16. Daniel 12:8 I heard, but I did not understand. So I asked, "My lord, what will the outcome of all this be?" NEW INT.

Convergence does not mean the science and the Bible are in total agreement but, in the words of William Dever, *“when pursued independently and as objectively as possible, appear to point in the same direction and can be projected eventually to meet.”*<sup>17</sup>

*“The discoveries of science,”* Dr. Montgomery tells us,

“have revealed the world and our universe to be far more spectacular than could have been imagined by Mesopotamian minds. To still see the world through their eyes is to minimize the wonder of creation. ... We will only look for evidence that confirms our beliefs if we have already decided how and what to think about something. But if we keep our minds open, we may be surprised at what we discover.”<sup>18</sup>

We are reviewing some very technical stuff here but in the language of a humble belief in the wonders of our world as God’s creation. But there needs to be balance, balance between all this scientific inquiry on the one side and the story of our own lives as believers on the other. I want to take a break and look at some pictures—pictures that tell a story of a simpler time. Now and then it is wise to look back and connect the dots of our personal history—for believers, to see God visible in many of our yesterdays which helps us keep perspective while investigating the wider circle of His providence.

## Pictures

My wife and I have three sons. We dedicated twenty-four years of our lives to pastoring churches in the hopes others would discover how a relationship with God is the way to discovering the meaning to life, finding a peaceful acceptance of the unknowable things that have to be endured and bring to light that living hope in an eternal future with God through Christ. But little did we know then that two of three sons would

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17. William Dever. *Who Were the Early Israelites and Where Did They Come From?* (Grand Rapids MI. :Wm Eerdmans Press, 2001. ), 227.

18. David Montgomery. *The Rocks Don't Lie: A Geologist Investigates Noah's Flood* (New York:W. W. Norton & Company, 2012.), 253. Kindle Edition.

somehow decide that for now this was not the way for them. One is agnostic and one is an atheist, by their own admittance. For people like my wife and I this was tearfully unexpected but at the same time our sons were brought up to investigate and prove, learn and discover what life is all about. Neither my wife nor I ever wanted them to mirror our lives unless they saw something in us they wanted to emulate and it was their choice. Meanwhile our love and acceptance of each of them is unwavering.

Our sons have always been our long term investment—even if the financial and political pressures associated with church work made it appear otherwise. It wasn't until I left the ministry and began working in industry as a programmer/analyst for an investment firm that I had the resources to finally follow my heart and center my focus completely and solely on family.

By calling them our investment, I have not been seeing them as my retirement fund, the people who will take care of me in my old age, with whom my wife and I will live when we can no longer be trusted to live alone because of senility or poor health. It will never be our intention to impose ourselves on them or require of them a payback for anything. Our love has been absolutely and explicitly unconditional. There has never been a string attached to anything we did or hoped to do for any of them.

They are our investment simply because our lives have revolved about them. Perhaps, this is why, for parents like us, in our hearts, our children are eternally young. Even after they become adults we are always out-of-the-gate ready to support their happiness. All witticism aside, I cannot imagine what life would have been without them.

So you can see how my relationship with them is not in danger of ending just because they don't attend the church I attend or believe as I do. You can appreciate my unwavering commitment to their individual futures regardless of how much we have—or don't have—in common. Their individual right to

live their lives has been cherished by my wife and me from the beginning.

As far as the gospel message is concerned, I think it is true that God has no grandchildren, so each one of our sons needs to discover for himself what my wife and I have grown to appreciate about our faith. The book is not closed on any of us, yet.

One son recently emailed me wondering if we had a picture of his first car, a 2000 Saturn, red with a spoiler added because his car needed to look the part—this was his transportation through the first few years of college. Well, the search for this picture (taken before everything went digital) brought out boxes of memories—as you can imagine. As I flipped through hundreds of photos I relived the moments as they grew and we shared experiences—many which I had forgotten.

Parents who defend doctrine over those snapshots of a more innocent time have lost their frame of reference as a parent. And thinking that God somehow requires a hard and dogmatic line, as if our soul's salvation depended on it, is assuming God's love for our children is less than ours!

But watchman, what of the night!? (A reference to Isaiah 21:11 and Ezekiel 3:17.) Are we not responsible for telling them they're heading the wrong way when indeed they are? Definitely as toddlers, maybe as teens, but not as adults; for you see, if we have been visibly christian through the years, the message is out. They already know. There is nothing more to tell them. Yes, one of my sons for now is an atheist and one claims to be agnostic but from a father's perspective, philosophical or theological issues, changing beliefs, and speculative theories must never impinge on my right to be their father.

I love talking to them. I enjoy conversations over anything of interest around a good meal with each or all of them, but arguing is off the menu. Preaching, which is second nature to me, is something I must keep in check.

Speaking of atheism: the new atheists are no serious challenge to God's interests in our lives. Prayer is still a powerful ally. Parental love still has a voice. I am not one to quote Richard Dawkins, but he said something I agree with: "*Faith can be very very dangerous...*" (He's talking beliefs or doctrine; I'm talking about trust in God.) A trust in God—prayerfully waiting on God to respond where you and I cannot or should not—is a formidable opponent to the efforts of an active atheism.

We have always allowed our sons the freedom of self-expression. We allowed them to define their own hopes and imagine their own future. We would dream *with* them not for them. We endeavored to equip them with the light of our love to find their way through an academic darkness.

At times this is emotionally risky for a parent—to be sure. A parent's heart is in pain whenever a son or daughter must, on their own, stumble their way through a debris field of broken dreams or discarded friendships, dying romances—shards of what once held the thoughts of wonderful tomorrows. And when a son or daughter disowns a faith for which a parent gave their own life, the hurt is the ultimate price of love.

But someday—and I am approaching the time—when life is reduced to self-reflections and recollections, the joys will always outnumber the sorrows. Having three sons in our lives has been for their mother and I the most cherished gift, next to our salvation, God would ever give us.

How do I know this?

It's in the pictures!

Pictures may be the best therapy for any apprehensions or concerns we may be experiencing over our children's futures. Enjoy the photographs and as you relive happier times of children at play let God know what you're thinking and feeling and then stand by camera-ready for more cherished memories to come.

### Therapy

Teaching at a seminary south of Pittsburgh, PA. back in the early 70's I enjoyed the endless theological discussions I had with one group of students who took pleasure in arguing down one of their own classmates whose route to get there was through different religious teachings. It was all in fun, then, but a decade later when I was the *'odd-man-out,'* it ceased to be something to do for a laugh. I regret now that so much time was wasted on doctrinal interpretations that—although we didn't know it—would eventually cease to be important.

But I miss those days because they pre-date confabulating about atheism, gay rights, and abortion. Our most pressing concern, back then, was how to interpret some fascinating prophecy about the end of the world and how God was planning to protect us from pestilence, famine, and sword.

We are no longer idealistic, proud keepers of our doctrinal opinions. We have become humbled realists who have been given a glimpse of that prophesied future that once fed our imaginations. And it isn't what we thought—or if it is for some, it is no longer inspiring. Thrown forward in time by the sheer fact that we have outlived a lot of our theology, we have become anachronisms in another generation. We are believers living in a postmodern age who perceive themselves out of place, aliens from another world, citizens of another kingdom. Even our interpretation of scripture fails the litmus test of cultural acceptance.

They are not of the world, even as I am not of it. John 17:16  
NEW INT.

There is so little about us—with the possible except of our iPads and laptops—that is part of this new evolving culture. The Word of God, the Bible, is said to be *'written,'* unchangingly written. It doesn't evolve, can't evolve. It is timeless and eternal. It transcends culture. It is that part of our antiquity that defined our traditions, formed our conscience, wrote the principles by which we live, and breathed life and passion

into our worship. Little wonder that we are in our reasoning, dreaming, and living so totally different.

No wonder we prefer the company of ourselves because we get to sit and reminisce on and on about things that are no longer an interest to anyone else. This is therapeutic. This is our support group. This is a necessary part of keeping our balance while the world turns faster and faster. This is the reason for going to church, not as a sign of our christianity or a way to guarantee that christianity will endure—God doesn't need us to keep His church alive—but as our support network.<sup>19</sup>

### I Don't Dig It

Believers need each other and we need our quiet times before God to keep our orientation and focus. If life reduces down to a constant argument or an unforgiving anxiety we will find ourselves—christian or no christian—in a very reckless frame of mind. It is best to accept the fact the we are living in what William Dever calls the *“Age of Skepticism, ... a modern literary-critical ... scholarship which emerged mid-to-late 19<sup>th</sup> century.”*<sup>20</sup> And our best defense against the furious winds of academia that blow is a haven of prayer and meditation. That's why we took out the photos.

Skepticism concerning the validity of biblical history has produced an avalanche of postmodern works in books and professional journals and magazines. All this has *“trickled down”* to an accepting public. Archeological finds between 1930 and 1950—stay with me here—failed to confirm major events in the biblical record that are critical to the identity of not just Judaism as a state and a chosen people, but christianity itself. If there had

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19. Hebrews 10:25 not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching. NEW INT.

20. William G. Dever. *Who Were the Early Israelites and Where Did They Come From?* (Grand Rapids MI. :Wm Eerdmans Press, 2001. ), 1.

been no Exodus from Egypt, for one, the Jewish claims to the land would be called into question.<sup>21</sup>

Dever regrettably informed<sup>22</sup> us, *“To everyone’s frustration, new [archeological] data brought more questions than answers. In fact, no one has ever found any archeological evidence for the Exodus...”* Additionally, no Egyptian text ever found contains any reference to the “Hebrews” much less the Exodus.<sup>23</sup>

One might argue that “you can’t prove a negative” or as Dr. Dever pointed out, if Israel “wandered” forty years in the desert,

“There never was any archeological evidence ... of peaceful migrations [ancient encampments of desert nomads because ] ...movements of people leave far less physical evidence than catastrophic destructions—usually none at all.”<sup>24</sup>

As for Egypt regaling us in cuneiform of Israel’s victory<sup>25</sup> over their own army? Not likely.

21. “Patterns of Evidence,” a 2014 documentary film about new archaeological findings and theories believed to be relevant to the biblical story of the Exodus directed by Tim Mahoney tells a different story by dating the Exodus during the middle Egyptian Kingdom instead of the Late Egyptian Kingdom. But we want to follow the skeptical train of thought for explanation’s sake.

22. William Dever. *Who Were the Early Israelites and Where Did They Come From?* (Grand Rapids MI. :Wm Eerdmans Press, 2001. ), 5.

23. *ibid.* p. 13.

Dever’s work is an excellent source of current archeological efforts to unearth clues that might support the Exodus story. He points out early in his book the many problems associated with such an effort.

24. Joshua 14:10 “Now then, just as the LORD promised, he has kept me alive for forty-five years since the time he said this to Moses, while Israel moved about in the wilderness. So here I am today, eighty-five years old!” NEW INT.

The Hebrew *לָלַךְ* mean simply ‘to walk’ or ‘traverse’ How nomadic were the Israelites in the wilderness? If they stayed any length of time in any one place during the forty years, one might expect to see the remains of their habitation.

25. Exodus 12:46 The LORD had made the Egyptians favorably disposed toward the people, and they gave them what they asked for; so they plundered the Egyptians. NEW INT.

But this is an age of skepticism. It seems, for example, a bit ironic that the work of the father of biblical Archeology, William Foxwell Albright, was so completely discredited just a few generations later by his protégés. Using Dever's own word, the 'assault' on the skepticism surrounding the historicity of the biblical text—the use of archeology to document the biblical record—was itself assaulted.<sup>26</sup> The point being that even biblical scholarship criticized "The Book" and added their voice to those of a modern and then postmodern academia whose ridicule sounded more and more like science. Who is to blame for this generalized attack on the Christian's faith?

...*"The Times."*

And since the biblical record is primarily couched in an historical narrative, we rightfully ask: to what degree can that story be taken as historical?

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(Egyptian historians didn't want to talk about it.)

26. *ibid.* p. 44. "Moreover," Dever points out, "Kenyon [an archeologist in Palestine, 1955-58] showed beyond doubt that in the mid-late 13th century B.C.—the time period ... required for any Israelite 'conquest'—Jericho lay completely abandon. There is not so much as a ... potsherd.. on the entire site. This seems a blow to the biblical account indeed." [p. 46.]

A footnote to this footnote should reinstate the believer's hope in the story of conquest by Joshua. An archeological theory in 1979 proposed by Berkrlay's Norman Gottwald which viewed the conquest as a peasant revolt—a religious revolution—was referred to by Dever as "brilliantly correct" [p. 54.] and for which there is 'some' archeological evidence.[p. 56.] Under this theory 31 sites referenced in the Book of Joshua have been identified.

## You're History

*"The most effective way to destroy people is to deny and obliterate their own understanding of their history."*

— George Orwell

How 'historical' is the biblical record?

The Journalist Nicholas Wade sees the "*central problem*" facing monotheism to be its "*claim to historicity*."

'The price began to be paid when the textual analysis ... uncovered ..the sacred text and ..Darwin's theory undermined ..what religion had to say about the nature of life. Modern archeology provided ...evidence that there was no exodus from Egypt and no conquest of the promised land.'<sup>1</sup>

Wade didn't quite get that right. "Evidence of no exodus"? Actually he should have written: "no evidence of an exodus." These are not the same statement.

Yet Dr. Dever '*reassures*' (his word) us that

"newer archeological evidence does not mean that there were no military conflicts that accompanied Israel's emergence in Canaan. And the fact that we now know that the biblical conquests are partly later literary inventions certainly does not mean that the entire story of ancient Israel was "invented" by the biblical writers, as many of the revisionists maintain."<sup>2</sup>

We live in a time when the revisionists make our christian faith look ignorant. A modern understanding of historical research discredits the biblical record.<sup>3</sup> But let's consider the historical record of the Bible since most of scripture *is* history. For me, it is to be read as a '*Heilgeschichte*', "*an interpretation of history*

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1. Nicholas Wade. *The Faith Instinct* (New York:Penguin Press, 2009), 278-279.

2. William Dever. *Who Were the Early Israelites and Where Did They Come From?* (Grand Rapids MI. :Wm Eerdmans Press, 2001. ), 72.

3. This is known as historical revisionism.

*emphasizing God's saving acts and viewing Jesus Christ as central in redemption."*<sup>4</sup>

That history has been somewhat obscured, however, by

- the errors in recording it (scholarship possesses only copies of copies with known scribal errors and marginal notations. Our New Testament has more variations than the Old, yet, none of these brings the message of God's grace and our salvation into question),<sup>5</sup>
- sections that carry the same storyline as the mythologies of Egypt, Persia, and Rome only written with one God in mind (yet the differences between the myths of ancient cultures and the Bible account are evidence that the writers of the Scriptures were not employing mythological explanations) and
- parts that suggest that the story teller was telling a more recent story making it sound ancient, like the Tabernacle in the Wilderness which resembled Solomon's Temple.<sup>6</sup> (This is part of the so-called *Documentary Hypothesis* which is admirably refuted by Jewish scholarship)<sup>7</sup>

In places the Bible record seems more a fanciful tradition. But is this not reflective of the human element which transcribed or narrated it? When I wrote my memoirs, I learned that my wife's recollections differed from mine. It is not unusual for two people to see the same event from different perspectives. This should not suggest that one of us was lying or intentionally telling stories. And when I attempted to recall my childhood, I

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4. <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/heilsgeschichte>

5. Philippians 1:16 & 17 in the Received text (our KJV ) are written in reverse order from the MGNT (Our NEW INT.). This is a simple example of a variation that does not impact the Gospel message.

6. "The tabernacle, as a central sanctuary and dwelling for the ark, can nowhere be found in the historical tradition"

Julius Wellhausen. *Prolegomena to the History of Ancient Israel* (Santa Cruz, CA: Evinity Publishing Inc., 2009), Introduction

7. see Rabbi Umberto Moshe David Cassuto's *The Documentary Hypothesis*. (Jerusalem: Central Press, 2011.),

conferred with my sister for times and names because it was harder to piece a story together that was more distant in the past. Is it possible that memory might put some event at the wrong time or place? And if this happens—if the details in the narrative get out of order—it is not because the author is intentionally wanting to deceive or make up a story.

Dr. Dever calls the historical record a ‘*memory*’ referring to the biblical account as having originated in a recollection. He reassures us that “..the historical memory of the Bible is accurate, by and large.”<sup>8</sup> Even if Moses did not write the entire first five books of our Bible (he probably didn’t record his own death in Deuteronomy 34:5-7), there is no solid historical reason to disown an oral tradition that began with him.

### I Mythed What You Said.

And what about the verdict that the Bible stories are myth? The difference between history and myth, according to Baruch Halpern is “*intentionality*”

“They were in possession of adequate sources, oral and written, earlier and contemporary. And they told the story as it really happened, as best they could, with only the expected literary flair and editorial biases. They did not intend to deceive and indeed they thought they were telling the truth.”<sup>9</sup>

But can’t history be intentionally manipulated or—using a modern term—dramatized, as well as express the transparent bias<sup>10</sup> of the historian? Yes, but it still contains the seed of truth if the author is not intentionally telling a fairy tale. “*The challenge,*” Dr. Dever states the obvious, “*is to sort out fact from fiction.*”<sup>11</sup>

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8. William Dever. Who Were the Early Israelites and Where Did They Come From? (Grand Rapids MI. :Wm Eerdmans Press, 2001), 168.

9. *ibid.* p. 225.

10. “History is written by winners...the losers have no voice.” p. 186.

11. *ibid.* p. 226.

"Some would dismiss the biblical tradition as fiction: late, unhistorical, and romantic—the product of nostalgia for a past that never was. I suggest simply that the biblical notion [or story] ... [the time of the judges and the kings] is deeply rooted in historical memory."<sup>12</sup>

William. Dever calls this "*authentic folk memory*"<sup>13</sup>

### Mythological Explanations

The atheist's definition of a myth is a fabled story of the activity of the gods,<sup>14</sup> initially to explain the origin of things. If you think of it, this definition automatically assigns the entire Old Testament record to the status of myth because it is a record of God's involvement first with man and then with Israel. This definition, of a myth, is a modern one designed to explain life's mysteries in a purely naturalistic way. There are a few problems with this view.

- It precludes a faith in God as realistic. There can be no such thing as a miracle. Divine providence is the wishful thinking of the religious.
- It fails to appreciate the value of story-telling as a vehicle for learning. The non-technical language of the Old Testament, the anthropomorphic expressions and the picturesque names of God which are, what Thorlief Bowman called, "*the description of His essence [and ] spiritual personality*"<sup>15</sup> are redacted from the history.
- Worst of all, a naturalistic explanation which excludes God as myth—such reasoning is self-defining and circular: it is excluded because we define it as an exclusion—has failed to understand the mind of the

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12. *ibid.* p. 187.

13. *ibid.* p. 187.

14. One online dictionary reads: a traditional story, especially one concerning the early history of a people or explaining some natural or social phenomenon, and typically involving supernatural beings or events.

15. Thorlief Bowman, *Hebrew Thought Compared with Greek* (New York: W. W. Norton. Co., 1960), 106.

ancients. I am obligated to document and footnote this work *up-the-wazoo* because it is the way we write technical data. The ancients told stories and passed them down through oral traditions. Passing these stories off as falsehood, myth, fantasy and fairy tale discredits the truth they passed along as *our* legacy—a history that is the foundation, in a cultural sense, of the world we have built. Logical thinking as a form of reason was the gift of Greek philosophical thought—something a Moses or Abraham did not engage in. They passed traditions down from father to son because the older generation was respected as an *authority* figure. They reasoned from authority not logic. We have a modern mindset from Greek philosophy that could blind us to the meanings intrinsic to the stories of the ancients.

### Redefining Myth

Dr. Joan Connelly, an archeologist working in the area of Athens, Greece, defines a myth as “a ‘saying’ or ‘story’ without rational claim to truth”

“...In the Greek view,” she explains, “mythos [a myth] ... and history (the empirical search for truth about the past) were often indistinguishable; both were inscribed in epic and genealogical narratives set in a landscape thought to have existed since the world was created out of chaos.”<sup>16</sup>

Myths are glorified parables because they have religious contend and are in part a story about God or the gods. But just because the story includes a reference to God does not make it mythological. It is a myth because it is a made-up story.

A myth might be the vehicle for sharing some truth, like an Aesop fable. It provides an explanation on a child’s level of a truth that otherwise is too “*over-the-head*” complex to describe..

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16. Joan Brittin Connelly. The Parthenon Enigma (New York:Random House, 201), 6.

Even evolutionists have to relate their ideas in story form for us to begin to understand what they are talking about.<sup>17</sup>

### Unknown not Unknowable

A myth in this sense is not something to be discarded especially if it is an opening for the Gospel. Paul took his cue from here when sharing the Gospel with the Athenians.

While Paul was waiting ... in Athens, he was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols. Paul then stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus and said: "People of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious. For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: to an unknown god. So you are ignorant of the very thing you worship—and this is what I am going to proclaim to you."<sup>18</sup>

Athens was a "spirit-saturated, anxious world. Life was fragile, uncertain, never consistently happy, and full of surprises, except for the looming certainty of death."<sup>19</sup> The Athenians had an "overwhelming urgency to keep things right with the gods." Connelly calls them "the most deisidaimoniacal [frightened to dishonor or disobey any god, even one they had not yet learned existed] ..in all of Greece."<sup>20</sup> When Paul spoke to the Athenians about Jesus he didn't outline Jewish ceremony or philosophize away their beliefs as so much superstition. Instead he began there. He

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17. Modern stories are written without a deity but are constructed as a realistic hypothesis but a story nonetheless. Jerry Coyne in *Why Evolution is True*, p. 209 (Kindle edition): "The classic adaptive story is that once our hands were freed by the evolution of two-legged walking, hominins were able to fashion tools, leading to selection for bigger brains that allowed us to envision and fashion more complex tools."

18. Acts 17:17,22-23 NEW INT.

19. Joan Brittin Connelly. *The Parthenon Enigma*. Prologue (New York:Random House, 201), ix..

20. *ibid.*

started where they were at in their understanding of God and elevated the God of the gospel above Athena<sup>21</sup>

It might surprise some of us to find out that the Bible does contain stories borrowed from the ancient myths but useful in making a spiritual point. It may also interest us to know that even Jesus did this—in parable.

### May I Borrow Your Story.

In Jesus' parlance, stories were often parables to keep the religious leadership of His day in ignorance and deny them a chance to use His words against Him. The rich man and Lazarus, for example, was a myth borrowed from the Egyptians.

"There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and lived in luxury every day. At his gate was laid a beggar named Lazarus, covered with sores<sup>22</sup>

The rich man and Lazarus is such a story taken straight from Egyptian mythology, complements of its Jewish caretakers during the Roman occupation of Palestine. The Egyptians gave the rich man a name, 'Nineveh,' changed to Phineas after the Phineas in scripture.<sup>23</sup>

In a mid 3rd century pseudo-Cyprianic treatise we read: *"Fire has been prepared by God for all sinners, in the flames of which, as was indicated by the Son of God Himself, that rich man, Phineas, is burned."*<sup>24</sup> (More later about 'eternal flames.')

21. A good read is *Peace Child* by Don Richardson. It is a true account of a missionary whose message was able to find the way to relate to Gospel to a culture with no words to describe what happened on Calvary.

22. Luke 16:19-20 NEW INT.

23. Numbers 25:7 When Phineas son of Eleazar, the son of Aaron, the priest, saw this, he left the assembly, took a spear in his hand NEW INT.

24. On Lk 16:19 Bruce M. Metzger in "A Textual Commentary" writes

"In Egypt that his name was Nineveh is incorporated in the Sahidic version." The western tradition in the 2nd and 3rd centuries was Phineas.

The point here is to highlight the fact that there is no biblical prohibition from borrowing secular thought or mythological narrative to carry a truth to our ears and hopefully our hearts.... *as some of your own poets have said.*" [Acts 17:28]

*"The love of money,"* Diogenes Laertius warned, *"is the mother of all evil."* Sound familiar? Paul all but repeated this timely piece of wisdom to Timothy.<sup>25</sup>

### The Parthenon

Consider the story told in the design of the Parthenon. The history of the Parthenon told in icon and frieze was, Dr. Connelly clarifies, a *"myth-history."*<sup>26</sup> Myth and history both carry a different nuance in the ancient world from our modern understanding of them.<sup>27</sup>

The ancient world did not see life in naturalistic terms. Their stories were tales of divine activity. The stories were not technical manuscripts—as we might write today—devoid of any religious or spiritual content. They were *all* spiritual in content and they said just what needed to be said. History and myth were married in the ancient world. The myth was the vehicle that carried the voice of truth as they understood it to be.

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"Omnibus peccatoribus a deo ignis est prae paratus, in cuius flamma uri ille Finaeus [Phineas] dives ab ipso dei filio est demonstratus" 242A.D. from the pseudo-Cyprianic treatise "De pascha computus."

25. I Timothy 6:10.

26. *ibid.* p. 154.

27. If Santa Claus were an ancient story he would be the god, Claus, who represents the spirit of giving. The actual gift giving at Christmas time by a zillion parents to a few zillion children contains this truth. It is not a separate account. When the story goes viral as an oral tradition, it becomes self-documenting. If you think about it, it is the best way to bring an idea within mental reach—the explanation of which otherwise might be hard too grasp. This is an exceptionally important tool especially when complex thoughts must be introduced to children. And we are just children to God.

The Mayan calendar, to illustrate the point, “*exemplifies*,” according Edward M. Reingold and Nachum Dershowitz in *Calendrical Calculations*, “*the kind of reasoning often needed for calendrical-historical research.*” Yet it was the deity *Itzamna* who is credited with bringing the knowledge of the calendar system to the ancestral Maya. The Mayan calendrical system was based on a *mythological tradition* but was, at the same time, scientifically accurate within 45 seconds per year.<sup>28</sup>

Dr. Joan Connelly wrote at length about the impact of religious and mythical thought in the ancient Greek world. She pointed out that our modern approach is to study ancient cultures in terms of our own. We tend *not* to see their world through their eyes, but our own. Having done major excavations in the area in and around Athens, she, decided to correct our misunderstanding. Her work “*The Parthenon Enigma*” takes a closer look at The Parthenon in terms of its architectural and historical significance in the mind of the Athenians before and during the golden age of Greek thought. “*Our contemporary understanding of the Parthenon and ..[its] symbolism,*” she alerts us to our mistake, “*has [had] everything to do with ... self-image....*”

She explains that “*There is a natural tendency to see likeness to oneself....*”<sup>29</sup> It represented to us the beginnings of our own democracy. In the USA and Great Britain we even copied the architectural forms, in many buildings “*to communicate a set of values aligning [our societal aspirations and ambitions with]...the flowering of democratic Athens.*”<sup>30</sup> Dr. Connelly added, “*Without an ancient source to confirm what ancient viewers saw in the Parthenon frieze, post antique interpreters have been free to reconstruct meanings on their own.*”<sup>31</sup>

And then she drops the hammer:

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28. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maya\\_calendar](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maya_calendar)

29. Joan Brittin Connelly. *The Parthenon Enigma*. Prologue (New York:Random House, 201), ix.

30. *ibid.* p.x.

31. *ibid.* p. 154-155.

"Ironically [these] structures [were] ...fundamentally, a religious architectural form.<sup>32</sup> .... The embeddedness of religion in virtually every aspect of Ancient Greek life is now fully recognized."<sup>33</sup>

### Aktionsart

What I get out of this is that we tend to describe ancient cultures in *our* language and perceive ancient societies in terms of *our* own worldview—not theirs. This is a shortcoming that students of the ancient civilizations can innocently make but the active atheists are intentionally promoting an image of our bible that misrepresents its spirit as well as its content. Reader beware.

When I taught Koine Greek and Classical Hebrew I took great pains to clarify to my students what a verb's aktionsart was: whether the action was nascent or iterative or inchoative, etc; whether the verb described a state of being or the activity inherent in that state. The emphasis and meaning behind a verb used in scripture might differ greatly from what it appears to be saying in the english. The example that comes to mind is Jesus' encouraging words in Luke 21:28 for the generation that will witness the end times:

When these things begin to take place, stand up and lift up your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.

We are to remain in a state of vivid anticipation of our Lord's return. Atheists in error claim that the apostles promoted an immediate return of Christ which to them has proven false. But that's not the emphasis. The point of the instruction is to remain vigilant.

(And even though 2,000 years have come and gone, in evolutionary time, that is a few seconds.)

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32. *ibid.*

33. *ibid.* p. xix.

## Old-Time Religion

When the naturalistic definition of a myth became popular, it was only a short step to claiming that all the major bible stories were borrowed from more ancient cultures. The most popular idea says that Christianity is a borrowed religion<sup>1</sup> from Mithraism.<sup>2</sup> I have a son who read about this, too, and he has been swayed to believe it all true.

I can believe that December 25 for Christ's birth is not an original date for us—this—according to Payam Nabarz, a revivalist of the Temple of Mithras.<sup>3</sup>

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1. Even Bart Ehrman says: "The alleged parallels between Jesus and the 'pagan' savior-gods in most instances reside in the modern imagination: We do not have accounts of others who were born to virgin mothers and who died as an atonement for sin and then were raised from the dead (despite what the sensationalists claim ad nauseum in their propagandized versions)." cp. [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/bart-d-ehрман/did-jesus-exist\\_b\\_1349544.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/bart-d-ehрман/did-jesus-exist_b_1349544.html)

2. "The Mithraic influence on Christianity is the subject of much good historical research" — Payam Nabarz. *The Mysteries of Mithras: The Pagan Belief That Shaped the Christian World* (Rochester, VT: Inner Traditions/Bear & Company. 2005), (Kindle Locations 921-922).

3. Later on we see that the Christians adopted the twenty-fifth of December as Christ's birthday, in the fourth century of the Common Era, according to Sir James G. Frazer. In *The Golden Bough*, he writes of . . . the festival of Christmas, which the church seems to have borrowed directly from its heathen rival. — *Ibid.* (Kindle Locations 947-950).

The rites which they practiced offered numerous analogies. The sectaries of the Persian god, like the Christians:

- purified themselves by baptism;
- received, by a species of confirmation, the power necessary to combat the spirits of evil; and
- expected from a Lord's Supper salvation of body and soul. Like the latter,

The resemblances between the two hostile churches were so striking as to impress even the minds of antiquity. From the third century, the Greek philosophers were wont to draw parallels between the Persian Mysteries and Christianity which were evidently entirely in favor of the former. The Apologists also dwelt on the analogies between the two religions, and explained them as a Satanic travesty of the holiest rites of their religion.<sup>4</sup>

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- they also held Sunday sacred, and
  - celebrated the birth of the Sun on the 25th of December, the same day on which Christmas has been celebrated, since the fourth century at least.
  - They both preached a categorical system of ethics,
  - regarded asceticism as meritorious, and
  - counted among their principal virtues abstinence and continence, renunciation and self-control.
  - Their conceptions of the world and of the destiny of man were similar.
  - They both admitted the existence of a Heaven inhabited by beatified ones, situate in the upper regions, and
  - of a Hell peopled by demons, situate in the bowels of the earth.
  - They both placed a Flood at the beginning of history;
  - they both assigned as the source of their traditions a primitive revelation;
  - they both, finally, believed in the immortality of the soul, in a last judgment, and in a resurrection of the dead, consequent upon a final conflagration of the universe.

We have seen that the theology of the Mysteries made of Mithra a "mediator" equivalent to the Alexandrian Logos. Like him, Christ also was a *μεσίτης*, an intermediary between his celestial father and men — Franz Cumont (2011-07-12). *THE MYSTERIES OF MITHRA*. Pp. 191ff.

4. *ibid.* Pg. 194.

Dumont admits "Many correspondences between the Mithraic doctrine and the Catholic faith are explicable by their common Oriental origin. Nevertheless, certain ideas and certain ceremonies must necessarily have passed from the one cult to the other;" *ibid.*

A closer look at—what Dr. Franz Cumont, a Belgian archaeologist, historian and philologist, called “*a strained parallelism*.”<sup>5</sup> reveals the limitation of that comparison.

That unending wellspring of religious emotion supplied by the teachings and the passion of the God sacrificed on the cross, never flowed for the disciples of Mithra.<sup>6</sup>

What all of this boils down to is that the Message of Calvary is NOT pagan! Other similarities are an innocent but understandable union of thought, such as both Christianity and Mithraism maintain a system of ethics. Or some things were borrowed but we could do nicely without. We should celebrate Christmas on December 24. The children would love to open their presents sooner.

I didn’t want to—and I won’t—debate beliefs. What enriched my understanding was to be able to study pagan mythology—though, in general, admittedly—and come away with a clearer understanding of the importance of Calvary.<sup>7</sup>

### Mithraism

Our middle son, who doesn’t know what to think about God or christianity, was the first in a private discussion to bring Mithraism to my attention. My son apparently had studied, or at least read about, aspects of this ancient Persian (Iranian) mythology and he concluded that christianity was a descendant of its practices and rituals. This, in part, is undeniable and it would be futile for well-meaning believers to deny it or try to logically dance around coincidental—and maybe, obvious—

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5. But this strained parallelism could result in nothing but a caricature. It was a strong source of inferiority for Mazdaism that it believed in only a mythical redeemer. *ibid.* pg. 195.

6. *ibid.*

7. My belief in God as Creator-Judge-Saviour hinges on the falsifiability of 2 pieces of historical evidence which are solid:

- The uniqueness of the doctrine of the vicarious atonement provided by Christ as a divine plan introduced in Scripture. [Isaiah 63:5]

- The historicity of the resurrection of Christ [1 Corinthians 15:14]

commonalities and similarities.<sup>8</sup> So, I obtained a copy of Payam Nabarz's *The Mysteries of Mithras: The Pagan Belief That Shaped the Christian World* and settled in for a pleasant read.

"Mithra is an ancient Indo-Iranian god who was worshipped in polytheistic Persia at least as early as the second millennium B.C.E., and who was almost certainly related to the Vedic Mitra worshipped in India. The myths of this ancient god contain elements that link him with the mythologies of all the Indo-European peoples. A hymn is dedicated to him in the Rig Veda (3.59); in Hinduism, he is also praised as the binomial Mitra-Varuna. .... Mithra was the protector god of many tribal societies for centuries, before Zarathushtra (commonly known in the West by his Greek name of Zoroaster) brought about the reformation of Persian polytheism. Zoroaster formed a new religion out of the old Persian form of worship. Over many more centuries, this religion, Zoroastrianism, slowly gained in popularity and finally became the state religion of the Persian Empire until the rise of Islam."<sup>9</sup>

Zoroaster was said to have had a miraculous birth. His mother, Dughdova, was .... a virgin.<sup>10</sup> In Zoroastrianism,

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8. see footnote #76: Disguised Blessings, A Stronger Faith

9. Payam Nabarz. *The Mysteries of Mithras: The Pagan Belief That Shaped the Christian World* (Rochester,VT: Inner Traditions/Bear & Company. 2005), (Kindle Locations 185-193).

"...the Vedic Mitra (Indian) and the Iranian Mithra (Perisan) have preserved so many traits of resemblance that it is impossible to entertain any doubt concerning their common origin. Both religions saw in him a god of light, invoked together with Heaven, bearing in the one case the name of Varuna (Hinduism) and in the other that of Ahura (Perisan Mithraism); in ethics he was recognized as the protector of truth, the antagonist of falsehood and error." - Franz Cumont . THE MYSTERIES OF MITHRA p 2. Kindle Edition.

10. "The Persian Mithra was born of the immaculate virgin Mother Goddess Anahita (see chapter 7). Anahita (Anahid) was said to have conceived the Savior from the seed of Zoroaster, which, legend says, is preserved in the waters of Lake Hamun in Sistan, Iran. This birth took place in a cave or grotto, where shepherds attended him and presented him with gifts at the winter solstice. Mithra lived for sixty-four years and then ascended to heaven in 208 B.C.E." - Payam Nabarz, *The Mysteries of Mithras: The Pagan Belief That Shaped the Christian World* (Rochester,VT: Inner Traditions/Bear & Company. 2005), (Kindle Locations 494-498).

Mithra's sovereignty and powers along with the powers of the entire Persian pantheon were invested in one god, Ahura Mazda, the "Wise Lord" of the sky and ultimate creator. It is not surprising that some scholarship sees this as the birth of monotheism and does not attribute the belief in one God to have originated with the biblical Moses on Sinai.<sup>11</sup>

Zoroastrianism referenced the evil one, Ahriman—whose symbol is the snake and—who is called the Great Lie (Farsi *durug*). Nabarz concludes, *"The Zoroastrian dualistic idea of Good versus Evil was inherited by Judaism and then Christianity; indeed, it is possible to trace the axis of evil-versus-good theology and mentality from Zoroaster to all the current monotheistic world religions."*<sup>12</sup>

Mithra also had a function similar to the ministry of Christ. Franz Cumont adds that he became a *"'mediator' between the unapproachable and unknowable god that reigned in the ethereal spheres and the human race that struggled and suffered here below."*<sup>13</sup>

Zoroastrianism was the religion of the Magi whose influence on Judaism was considerable. Several of its cardinal doctrines eventually *"forced themselves on orthodox Catholicism."*<sup>14</sup> It was inevitable that these two belief systems would come into conflict for supremacy over the minds of worshippers. And Christianity, as we know, was victorious in all but eradicating Persian Mithraism. As Cumont puts it:

"The defeat which it [Mithraism] suffered was not due entirely to the superiority of the evangelical ethics, nor to that of the apostolic doctrine regarding the teaching of the Mysteries; it perished, not only because it was encumbered with the

11. William Foxwell Albright in his thesis work, *From the Stone Age to Christianity* shows that monotheism or the belief in one god originated with Moses on Mt. Sinai. For a profile of Professor Albright, see <http://www.bibleinterp.com/articles/albright5.shtml>

12. Payam Nabarz. *The Mysteries of Mithras: The Pagan Belief That Shaped the Christian World* (Rochester, VT: Inner Traditions/Bear & Company. 2005), (Kindle Locations 214-216).

13. Franz Cumont. *THE MYSTERIES OF MITHRA* p. 129, Kindle Edition.

14. *ibid.* p. v.

onerous heritage of a superannuated past, but also because its liturgy and its theology had retained too much of its Asiatic coloring to be accepted by the Latin spirit without repugnance."<sup>15</sup>

### Tauroctony

The central icon for Mithraism during the Roman Empire was the *tauroctony*, the bull-slayer.<sup>16</sup> The bull appears throughout their literature and art and has drawn much attention in a scholarly effort to understand the Mithra religion.

In a well-known sculpture Mithra is seen "*facing away from the bull, has one leg on the back of the bull, one hand holding the bull's head, and the other hand stabbing the bull in the neck.*"<sup>17</sup> The story goes that the bull was grazing when Mithra seized it by the horns. The bull in a mad rush breaking into a full gallop dragged our hero god, who never released his hold on the beast. He conquered it by eventually seizing it by the hind hoofs. "*This painful journey (Transitus) of Mithra became the symbol of human*

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15. *ibid.* p. vi.

16. "...the Mazdean heaven was inhabited by the same denizens as Olympus: Ahura-Mazda as Supreme Being was confounded with Zeus; Verethraghna, the victorious hero, with Heracles; Anâhita, to whom the bull was consecrated, became Artemis Tauropolos, and the identification went so far as to localize in her temples the fable of Orestes. Mithra, already regarded in Babylon as the peer of Shamash, was naturally" - Franz Cumont. *THE MYSTERIES OF MITHRA* p. 22. Kindle Edition.

"IT MAY be said, in a general way, that Mithra remained forever excluded from the Hellenic world. The ancient authors of Greece speak of him only as a foreign god worshipped by the kings of Persia. Even during the Alexandrian epoch he had not descended from the plateau of Asia Minor to the shores of Ionia." p. 34.

17. Payam Nabarz. *The Mysteries of Mithras: The Pagan Belief That Shaped the Christian World* (Rochester, VT: Inner Traditions/Bear & Company. 2005), (Kindle Locations 517-519).

The Bull as the constellation Taurus was significant in many ancient mythologies representing early Spring and possibly renewed life. see <http://www.crystalinks.com/taurus.html>

*sufferings.”<sup>18</sup> Upon slaying the bull (Taurus), from its body “sprang all the useful herbs and plants that cover the earth with their verdure. From the spinal cord of the animal sprang the wheat that gives us our bread, and from its blood the vine that produces the sacred drink of the Mysteries.”<sup>19</sup>*

What might interest us is their ritual of baptism which at first glance seems to suggest an idea borrowed by John the Baptist.<sup>20</sup> Yet, just a cursory glimpse at the ceremony shows that there is here nothing in common with christian water baptism.

Baptism in the Mithraic world was a baptism in the blood of the bull<sup>21</sup> which in Persian mythology spoke of renewed physical strength but to the Romans

“this hideous sacrifice [was] for their salvation, though their motives for this special favor are not clearly apparent. The efficacy which was attributed to this bloody purification, the eternal new birth that was expected of it, resembled the hopes

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18. Franz Cumont (2011-07-12). THE MYSTERIES OF MITHRA p. 137. Kindle Edition.

19. *ibid.*

20. Archaeological and inscription evidence suggests that the rite was little more than a bull sacrifice, perhaps with the sprinkling of bull’s blood as part of a rite of purification. In imperial times, the term taurobolium became synonymous with the entire festival of Attis and Cybele, which included initiation rites. The exact nature of these rites is unknown. See <http://www.jasoncolavito.com/blog/did-mithras-cultists-bathe-in-bulls-blood>

21. “According to a wide-spread notion among primitive peoples, the blood is the vehicle of the vital energy, and the person who poured it upon his body and moistened his tongue with it, believed that he was thereby endowed with the courage and strength of the slaughtered animal. This sacred bath appears to have been administered in Cappadocia in a great number of sanctuaries, and especially in those of Mâ, the great indigenous divinity, and in those of Anâhita. These goddesses, to whom the bull was consecrated, had been generally likened by the Greeks to their Artemis Tauropolos, and the ritualistic baptism practised in their cult received the name of tauropolium (ταυροπόλιον), which was transformed by the popular etymology into taurobolium (ταυροβόλιον).” *ibid.* p. 181.

which the mystics of Mithra attached to the immolation of the mythical bull."<sup>22</sup>

(Of special note is that the Cross<sup>23</sup> is the christian symbol of salvation, not the bull.)

### The End of the Age

It is interesting to note that all Jewry is waiting for their messiah; we, as christians, are looking for the return of Christ; the muslims are expecting Allah to appear and the Hindus anticipate the 11th avatar of Vishnu, their redeemer god... all on a white horse. "Who borrowed the idea from whom?" is a question not worth investigating because ideas that are this common have a universal quality to them suggesting a common source somewhere in the distant past. That source in today's study of antiquities has to be evolution.. Or God!

There are a few ideas that we can assume were borrowed by the church from Mithraism.<sup>24</sup>

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22. *ibid.* p. 182.

23. The cross was a sacred symbol, and cruciform object worn around the neck, long before the Christian era. according to D.M. Murdock [see <http://www.stellarhousepublishing.com/washoruscrucified.html>]

In Egyptian mythology, Osiris's son, Horus, bore this as his symbol but he was not crucified.

24. Cumont noted [THE MYSTERIES OF MITHRA p. 195f.],

"We cannot presume to unravel today a question which divided contemporaries and which shall doubtless forever remain insoluble. We are too imperfectly acquainted with the dogmas and liturgies of Roman Mazdaism, as well as with the development of primitive Christianity, to say definitely what mutual influences were operative in their simultaneous evolution. But be this as it may, resemblances do not necessarily suppose an imitation. Many correspondences between the Mithraic doctrine and the Catholic faith are explicable by their common Oriental origin. Nevertheless, certain ideas and certain ceremonies must necessarily have passed from the one cult to the other; but in the majority of cases we rather suspect this transference than clearly perceive it..... Perhaps the custom of invoking the Sun three times each day,--at dawn, at noon, and at dusk,--was

The following quote reminds me of the *Parousia* or what some christians know as “*the Second Coming*” and the end of the age but it is a Mithraic belief:

“When the age assigned for its duration shall have rolled away, the scourges sent by Ahriman [the spirit of evil] will compass the destruction of the world. A marvellous bull, analogous to the primitive bull, will then again appear on earth, and Mithra will redescend and reawaken men to life. All will sally forth from the tombs, will assume their former appearance, and recognize one another. Humanity entire will unite in one grand assembly, and the god of truth will separate the good from the bad. Then in a supreme sacrifice, he will immolate the divine bull; will mingle its fat with the consecrated wine, and will offer to the just this miraculous beverage which will endow them all with immortality. Then Jupiter-Ormazd [Mazda Ahura or the god of Mithraism], yielding to the prayers of the beatified ones, will cause to fall from the heavens a devouring fire which will annihilate all the wicked. The defeat of the Spirit of Darkness will be achieved, and in the general conflagration Ahriman and his impure demons will perish and the rejuvenated universe enjoy unto all eternity happiness without end.”<sup>25</sup>

### Setting Boundaries

In rehearsing the important aspects of their history, the ancients would, Joan Connelly tells us, set the outline of the history of

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reproduced in the daily prayers of the Church, and it appears certain that the commemoration of the Nativity was set for the 25th of December, because it was at the winter solstice that the rebirth of the invincible god was celebrated. In adopting this date, which was universally distinguished by sacred festivities, the ecclesiastical authority purified in some measure the profane usages which it could not suppress.”

25. Franz Cumont. THE MYSTERIES OF MITHRA p. 147. Kindle Edition.

“The Mysteries exerted another powerful influence, also, in fostering some of the most exalted aspirations of the human soul: the desire for immortality and the expectation of final justice. The hopes of life beyond the tomb which this religion instilled in its votaries were one of the secrets of its power in these troublous times, when solicitude for the life to come disturbed all minds.” p. 149.

their distant past “according to certain fixed ‘boundary catastrophes’ that punctuated and divided time into distinct eras.”<sup>26</sup>

The scriptural milestones of the history of man and Israel’s early history are: Creation, the Tower of Babel [I know: Babel], the Flood, the Exodus, and the Exile because these were catastrophic boundaries where we might have used a less memorable outline with *dates*. Those events that predate Abraham are ubiquitous across ancient cultures because this was a common way of narrating their own pre-history. There is nothing here to be said of ‘borrowing’ stories.

The indictment against the biblical account is an alleged similarity with ancient mythology. As Frank Schaeffer saw it:

“Universal floods, falls from grace, demons, devils, people going down into the underworld after death, sinners suffering torment, saviors, resurrections and heavenly battles swirl through Greek mythology and biblical stories alike.”<sup>27</sup>

Yet the Bible record of catastrophic events marking the boundaries of memory, is clearly not fanciful stories of mother earth being raped by the sun god<sup>28</sup> or good god verses evil god

26. Joan Brittin Connelly. *The Parthenon Enigma*. Prologue (New York:Random House, 201), 6.

27. Frank Schaeffer. *Why I am an Atheist Who Believes in God: How to give love, create beauty and find peace* (North Charleston, South Carolina:CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2014), 96. Kindle Edition.

28. According to one Egyptian creation myth, “Geb and Nut angered the sun god Ra, their grandfather. On the orders of Ra, they were separated by Shu who stood on Geb and lifted Nut high up above him - creating our atmosphere by separating the sky from the earth. However, Nut was found to be pregnant and gave birth to Osiris, Horus the Elder, Set, Isis and Nephthys. Geb still longed for his sister. He wept when he was separated from her, and so created the oceans of the world.” - <http://www.ancientegyptonline.co.uk/geb.html>

In Iranian religion “Both the Avesta and the Achaemenian inscriptions have little to say about creation in the sense that they contain nothing comparable to the traditions of the first three chapters of the book of Genesis.” -<http://www.britannica.com/topic/ancient-Iranian-religion/Creation-of-the-cosmos>

In Greek mythology: “In the beginning there was only chaos. Then out of the void appeared Erebus, the unknowable place where

—as it would be if it were passed down from earlier myths. It is a simple story—for instance—of creation or flood shared from an oral tradition.<sup>29</sup> The ‘myth’ accusation is, again, based on a naturalistic definition of ‘myth’ that excludes the supernatural.

The Epic of Gilgamesh, the semi-mythic King of Uruk—one case in point—includes a well-known Babylonian story of the creation and flood which leads some scholars to treat these accounts as the sources for the biblical record. Alexander Heidel in *The Gilgamesh Epic and Old Testament Parallels* has done a good job pointing out the lack of such evidence.<sup>30</sup> The

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death dwells, and Night. All else was empty, silent, endless, darkness. Then somehow Love was born bringing a start of order. From Love came Light and Day. Once there was Light and Day, Gaea, the earth appeared. Gaea [earth]and Cronus [time] set up an ambush of Uranus as he lay with Gaea at night. Cronus grabbed his father and castrated him, with the stone sickle, throwing the severed genitals into the ocean. The fate of Uranus is not clear. He either died, withdrew from the earth, or exiled himself to Italy. As he departed he promised that Cronus and the Titans would be punished. From his spilt blood came the Giants, the Ash Tree Nymphs, and the Erinnyes [3 netherworld goddesses]. From the sea foam where his genitals fell came Aphrodite.” - [http://www.desy.de/gna/interpedia/greek\\_myth/creation.html](http://www.desy.de/gna/interpedia/greek_myth/creation.html)

29. Whether or not the ancients got their story straight is a matter for science but I would caution us that the absence of evidence might not be the evidence of absence. It is difficult at best to prove a negative.

30. Alexander Heidel. *The Gilgamesh Epic and Old Testament Parallels* (Chicago IL: The University of Chicago press Internet Publication. 1963)

cp [https://oi.uchicago.edu/sites/oi.uchicago.edu/files/uploads/shared/docs/misc\\_gilgamesh.pdf](https://oi.uchicago.edu/sites/oi.uchicago.edu/files/uploads/shared/docs/misc_gilgamesh.pdf)

Looking at the Babylonian creation and the great flood stories in the Epic of Gilgamesh compared to the Biblical account, Alexander Heidel informs us [p. 268]: “As in the case of the creation stories, we still do not know how the Biblical and Babylonian narratives of the deluge are related historically. The available evidence proves nothing beyond the point that there is a genetic relationship between Genesis and the Babylonian versions. The skeleton is the same in both cases, but the flesh and blood and, above all, the animating spirit are different. It is here that we meet the most far-reaching divergencies between the Hebrew and the Mesopotamian stories.”

main Babylonian flood legend, in particular, is "*steeped in the silliest polytheism.*"<sup>31</sup> Then again, the mixing of myth and history was an ancient form of writing which they would understand far better than had they attempted to write purely in a naturalistic language—which they did not speak. Their stories included their concept of 'god' in narrative form which was a time-honored writing style.

### Summarizing

As Payam Nabarz correctly noted, there are "*echoes of Mithraism around the world.*"<sup>32</sup> He adds, "*The Mithraic influence on Christianity is the subject of much good historical research....*"<sup>33</sup> I, too, wish we had not borrowed anything from mythologies.<sup>34</sup> Discussions of this nature would have been less intellectually demanding on simple folk like myself if the church had intentionally avoided borrowing holidays from ancient mythologies.

But Cumont argued:

"The Mazdean Mysteries sought to conciliate paganism by a succession of adaptations and compromises; they endeavored to establish monotheism while not combating polytheism, whereas the Church was, in point of principle, if not always in practice, the unrelenting antagonist of idolatry in any form. ... If Romanized Mazdaism had triumphed, it would not only have preserved from oblivion all the aberrations of pagan mysticism, but would also have perpetuated the erroneous doctrine of physics [astrology] on which its dogmatism reposed. The Christian doctrine, which broke with the cults of nature, remained exempt from these impure associations, and

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31. *ibid.* p. 268.

32. Payam Nabarz, *The Mysteries of Mithra.* (Rochester,VT: Inner Traditions/Bear & Company. 2005), chapter 4.

33. *ibid.* (Kindle Locations 921-922).

34. Cumont clarifies, "Certain of its sacred practices continued to exist also in the ritual of Christian festivals and in popular usage. Its fundamental dogmas, however, were irreconcilable with orthodox Christianity ...." *THE MYSTERIES OF MITHRA* p. 207. Kindle Edition.

its liberation from every compromising attachment assured it an immense superiority."<sup>35</sup>

Calvary is the sole doctrine, the sole historical event, the sole act of God, that rescues all the Scripture from the ambiguities of religion's antiquities and reaffirms the eternal relevance of the biblical message of grace. Mithraism was the grandfather, the patriarch, of all subsequent mythologies which in its death throes gasped that final breath—but just—when the fullness of time had come, to reveal Jesus, the one true God, to the world.

"If Christianity and Mithraism offered profound resemblances, ... differences no less essential separated them."<sup>36</sup>

Paul's word to the Corinthians were not just advisory but central to his calling and a source of profound wisdom when dealing with religious thought that challenges our faith.

"For Christ ... send me ... to preach the gospel—not with wisdom and eloquence, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power.... we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God."<sup>37</sup>

## I Understand

My purpose in being what some might see as the 'devil's advocate,' when I could probably just as easily have used those scholars who absolutely support the biblical story, is to prepare us for what one of my sons referred to as, and I write about it in the final chapter of this work, the '*New Normal*.' Unless you are living in the Bible belt or you simply don't care anymore what non-believing family members are all about, you—and I—need to make an attempt at understanding them.

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35. Franz Cumont (2011-07-12). THE MYSTERIES OF MITHRA p. 197.. Kindle Edition.

36. *ibid.* p. 198f.

37. I Corinthians 1:17, 23-24 NEW INT.

If John Morris, who wrote "*The Young Earth*"<sup>38</sup> is your sole source of documentation—and maybe your faith needs to hear from him—you will, granted, have a scientific look at these issues raised by the gauntlet throwers, but it may not be adequate to return the hugs and the family unity that, I have to believe, you miss and want back.

Yet, it is just as sound to see some of the historical record metaphorically without assuming the modern definition of myth.

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38. John Morris,. *The Young Earth: The Real History of the Earth - Past, Present, and Future*. Green Forest,AR:Master Books. Fifth printing July 2013.

## **A Study of God?**

The Theology

“God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in Him”

— John Piper

## Fundamental Ideas

*“...One would have thought a saint would have been the first soul purchased over the counter of Calvary by the red coins of Redemption, but in the Divine plan it was a thief who was the escort of the King of kings into Paradise.”*

*'This day thou shalt be with Me in Paradise' (Luke 23:43)*

*— Fulton J. Sheen, Life of Christ*

Not only has science and history challenged our faith. Theology itself has been at times a poor friend. The very word means using logic to explain God and in all honesty I think this, if I might respectfully submit, is oxymoronic—explaining God!

Our theology should be the simple message Paul heralded—Christ and Him crucified and raised from the dead. Paul met the theologian of his day only to pound home his sole interest in his missionary endeavor to proclaim the good news that Christ died for our sins.

“But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let them be under God’s curse!” Galatians 1:8;

For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, I Corinthians 15:3 NEW INT.

But what exactly did this mean in theological terms!? Well, christianity is defined by five points of dogma which were thought out logically by the 5<sup>th</sup> century even though these had to be, in part, stated in Latin<sup>1</sup> and even though they were not actually spelled out clearly in the Bible. The Greek of our New

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1. We believe Jesus to be two natures in one person. As a tenet of faith at the Council of Chalcedon the word “person” in this context is better expressed in Latin! Two natures but one persona.

Testament text was not always sufficient to explain things—a point that has not escaped the attention of not a few atheistic scholars. If you are a believer, you maintain Jesus died on the cross for our sins. The five point theology goes this way: We believe in...

1. The verbal-plenary theory of Inspiration, every word of scripture is inspired (or as I see it: every word needs to be taken into account in our interpretation) . This was already mentioned.
2. The virgin birth of Christ. Mary was a virgin when she conceived the Savior. Our Catholic brethren say Mary was never intimate with Joseph, her husband. The reference to a 'virgin' in Isaiah 7:14 is really the word "young maiden." In Ancient Israel, would not these be the same? Well, some think not.
3. The Trinity<sup>2</sup> or three persons in the Godhead but one God. This is logically (3=1) incongruent—at least according to our way of doing math. But the trinity is part of the Biblical record.<sup>3</sup>
4. The Deity of Christ. Bart Erhman disagrees with C.S. Lewis when Lewis claims Jesus did call Himself the 'Son of God.'<sup>4</sup> Yet, here is the fulcrum of our faith. "The Word *was* God...." John 1:1 The problem for Erhman is that the doctrine of

2. Although the word 'trinity' is not found in scripture, in Ephesians 4:4-6 Paul spoke of "one Spirit..one Lord.. one God and Father of all." Also see I Corinthians 12:4-6 "same Spirit..same Lord..same God." It is difficult not to see a trinity here.

3. 2 Corinthians 13:14 May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.

4. Granville Sharp's rule governing the 'copulative kai' often translatable as 'even' supports the Christian theological position that Jesus is Himself God. [Titus 2:13: προσδεχόμενοι τὴν μακαρίαν ἐλπίδα καὶ ἐπιφάνειαν τῆς δόξης τοῦ μεγάλου θεοῦ **καὶ** σωτῆρος ἡμῶν Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ.] This is one of many Scriptures that are employed Christian theology to establish the need for Jesus to be God in His death to provide forgiveness (a propitiation) for all mankind.

the deity of Christ seems to have been introduced by Paul—not Jesus. We obviously disagree.<sup>5</sup>

All in support of one:

5. The vicarious atonement. Christ—God incarnate—died on Calvary for us —the message of Scripture!

The logical progression here is simple. If Jesus died for my sins, He had to be God else his effort would have been a mere human effort insufficient to stand in place for all mankind. If He is God and His Father is God, and the Comforter, the Holy Spirit Whom He sent is God, then, we have 3=1—the trinity. And, of course, to confirm that Jesus is God, Mary could not have been with child from a man. Finally, since the Bible gives us this account—the Bible is the story of God’s grace and His plan to save us by Jesus’ death on Calvary—we have to say that every word of Scripture is, in some way, God breathed.

The only further logical dilemma is: How could Jesus be human if He were God? This question above all questions divided Christendom in its beginnings. But the problem here has always been one in logic.<sup>6</sup> (When will we finally admit that God’s plan, though clearly an historical event and clearly executed for our eternal salvation and clearly biblical, and clearly a provision accepted by faith alone, that it exceeds in complexity and wisdom our ability to figure out!?)

- Arius believed that Jesus had to be created as the Son of God. He couldn’t just ‘be’ God.
- Nestorius thought Jesus couldn’t be God because He was obviously human. Nestorius never recognized Mary as the ‘Mother of God.’ That was illogical to him.
- Apollinaris believed the Jesus was God’s mind in a human body. Jesus had one nature not two.
- Eutyches maintained that Christ had a human nature but it was unlike the rest of humanity.

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5. John 20:31 But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

6. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_Christian\\_heresies](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_Christian_heresies)

- Serapion who probably was the one who introduced docetism believed that Jesus' body was an illusion. (Docetism comes from the Greek word, *dokein* meaning 'to seem to be')
- Sabellius couldn't buy into the idea of a trinity. He believed that God was not three persons in one but three characteristics in one.
- Marion didn't believe that Moses' God was Jesus' God. The God of the Old Testament was, according to him, vengeful; Jesus was love. Marion was a docetist.
- The Ebionites were Jewish Christians who believed that the laws of Moses were still applicable in following Christ.
- The Patripassians<sup>7</sup> and Theopaschism<sup>8</sup> [God suffered] claimed that Christ's divine nature suffered as well as His human nature during the Passion.<sup>9</sup>

Well, you get the point that logic has from the beginning been our tool of explaining our realities and our theological bend. All books written by persons who did not endorse the fundamental five doctrines (and books that were too 'jewish' in ritual) were dropped from the list of canonical works by the Councils of Nicea and Chalcedon.<sup>10</sup> Thus, our New Testament came

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7. Monarchianism is a set of beliefs that emphasize God as being one person, in direct contrast to Trinitarianism which defines God as three persons coexisting con-substantially as one in being.

8. a 6th-century heretical doctrine maintaining that Christ had only one nature, the divine, and that this nature suffered at the Crucifixion

9. This becomes a question of passibility or capable of feeling suffering.

10. Deem Michael J. A Christological Renaissance: The Chalcedonian Turn of St. Anselm of Canterbury wrote: "The Council of Chalcedon was summoned by Emperor Marcian during the autumn of 451 to respond to an extreme model of monophysite Christology that threatened to eclipse the moderate teaching of Ephesus. The Fathers of Chalcedon sought to establish a normative teaching on the Incarnation, confessing "one and the same Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, the same perfect in human nature, truly God and the same with a rational soul and a body truly man . . . acknowledged in two natures . . . combining in

together partly as a product of the early church fathers to reason it out and partly by all political means to push what Professor Bart Ehrman called a '*proto-orthodox*' interpretation to the fore of history.

Ehrman believes then that fundamentalism was nothing more than one set of doctrines winning out over the others—an ingenious piece of political maneuvering to convince the christian world that their canon was the right (orthodox) one. All others were heresy. If this be true it still doesn't muffle the message; it still doesn't disable divine providence. Even Ehrman believes in the possibility of the message, as we have it, being clear enough and ringing true enough to encourage faith.

Isn't there enough information in the Bible to resolve these issues? I am afraid not because the answer being sought is not '*What*' Christ did or provided on Calvary but '*How*.' We seem to be content knowing how to use our modern electronic gizmos, the miracle of engineering and science, without needing at all to know why it works that way.

I recall a phone conversation I had once with my son who is a software engineer when I was seeking a coding solution to a program I was writing for a local motel to automate some of their record keeping. He spelled out to me exactly how I needed to write the code including: parenthesis, semi colons, letters,

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one Person (prosopon) [The Greek word which doesn't say what the tenets of faith should say] and substance (hypostasis), not divided or separated into two persons, but one and the same Son only begotten God Word, Lord Jesus Christ." While the Council was profoundly influenced by the Christologies of Cyril of Alexandria and John of Antioch, it was under the sway of Pope Leo the Great's Tome to Flavian that the majority of conflicting parties at Chalcedon were reconciled. The bishop of Rome provided the decisive polemic against the false Christological doctrines threatening the orthodox faith, marking the first instance of a Latin solution to a peculiarly Eastern controversy. [My bold italics] But Leonine Christology was not exhausted through its service to the Chalcedonian formula. Rather, as a system it goes much further than the Council with regard to the prerogatives Christ's natures, exemplifying a refined Latin tradition of the twofold consubstantiality of Christ.' (<http://www.anselm.edu/library/saj/pdf/21deem.pdf>)

numbers, spaces and all. The computer responded magically to his instruction but I wasn't satisfied. I kept asking my son, "*How does it work?*" In his frustration with me and his interest in getting back to his own life, he answered with a gentle sternness, "*Dad, you don't need to know that. We don't look under the hood. Just trust it to work.*" We seem to be theologically discontent with the idea that God might do something for which His explanation or our "look under the hood" must await another day in the forevermore when He has opportunity to explain. We struggle to admit that God might require us to learn something more heavenly, more divine and that would require experiences we have not yet had in Him.

(Can I share a secret here? This is how I see Ephesians 2:8. God will take His eternity to clarify the message of grace and love that so completely consumed Him on the Cross. There is so much to learn about His heart!!! I don't think God will distribute 'things' in the forever. I think this will be an ongoing conversation and relationship with Him.)

I enjoy studying the biblical languages. This leads me to wonder, as well, if we must be taught another language before a true understanding is possible of how Christ's death provided for our salvation. For now, we are not required to understand it fully. We are only asked to accept it fully... by faith.

### Bart, not Simpson

Bart Ehrman, an atheistic textual critic, who wrote "*Interrupting Jesus*" discrediting the Bible as the Word of God, is convinced that "*some parishioners are eager to learn .. and others simply don't want to hear about it, perhaps, because it is too complicated or, even more likely, too threatening to their faith.*"<sup>11</sup>

I am encouraging us, however, to let the Bible speak even if we cannot yet figure out completely what it is saying or if our initial understanding is being challenged or even contradicted by the text in hand. The church has attempted,

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11. Bart Ehrman. *Interrupting Jesus*. p. 272.

perhaps, to ward off the dangerous suppositions that some agnostic or atheistic scholars promote. The average christian does not have the resources to study all this on their own and must depend on pastoral guidance to get it right.<sup>12</sup> But there is a 'right' to get and in my years of studying the text I have not lost faith.

Erhman then says something surprising:

"My personal view is that a historical-critical approach to the Bible does not necessarily lead to agnosticism or atheism. It can in fact lead to a more intelligent and thoughtful faith."<sup>13</sup>

There are in fact many scholars of the Bible whose knowledge has deepened their faith in God and the message of His grace.

### Pre-School

So, I get it. We might not have the right collection of manuscripts, but, if this is God's idea to share a message with us—and I do believe that it is—then what we have will do just that even if only on some elementary level of understanding. The research that has gone into the Bible as we have it has already proven to me that it is the inspired Word of God. Some things I have yet to share in this book will support this.

We should see the Bible less as a science book or a history in modern terms or a theology and more as a primer for us. We are the Children of God, being introduced to something very basic about God's love in Christ, His grace and our adoption into relationship with Him.

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12. Bart Ehrman coming from an atheist's point of view complained that (Interrupting Jesus, p. 1f.) "...those of us who spend our professional lives studying the Bible have not done a good job communicating the knowledge to the general public.... most Americans ... are... completely in the dark about what scholars have been saying about the Bible for the past two centuries."

13. *ibid.* p. 272.

There is much to glean about prayer, about living the promises of God (2 Peter 1:4)<sup>14</sup>, about Christian character and how to exemplify Christ's love and live it out in following Him. And yet we have invested our labors into—to use Dever's analogy—using a magnifying glass on the Mona Lisa instead of stepping back and taking in the entire picture. We haven't magnified truth, we have magnified debate and denominational positions. We have not shown ourselves loving but militant. We have sacrificed unity for the separatism inherent in our distinct doctrines. And the non-believers—maybe I should call them disbelievers—stand aside in disbelief. They see what we do not see, the disconnect between what we say and what we do, who we call ourselves and who we display ourselves to be.

Our rituals are not at issue here. They can be—and I think should be—different across denominations because we do not all express our worship the same way. But our message should be able to be preached from any pulpit.

Where faith is private and we interpret a scripture slightly differently because the meaning impacts that faith and our ability to embrace hope in our individual experiences, we need to be accepting of one another. We may need to learn to walk our faith more passionately, not argue it!

### Branham

In the spirit of full disclosure: when I was 16 years old I took a renewed and very serious interest in the Bible and together with a friend, who, last I knew was a pastor—maybe retired—sat up all night, night after night, that summer listening to sermons by William Branham. American historian, David Edwin Harrell Jr. described him as: *“an unlikely leader....his preaching was halting and simple beyond belief.”*<sup>15</sup> Our ears were transfixed on my friend's 7

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14. Through these he has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature, having escaped the corruption in the world caused by evil desires. NEW INT.

15. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William\\_M.\\_Branham](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William_M._Branham)

inch reel to reel player. We dined on Branham's messages, filled our curiosity and interest in God's truth on what Branham served up in recorded healing service after service. I lost track of how many times I finally returned home with the morning sun.

Branham was a 'Jesus-only' believer. He didn't believe in a trinity and the Baptist church labeled him, understandably, a heretic. But something about Branham was very real to us then and remains so in my memories now.

### Summary Judgment

Our family members who are non-believing thinkers are not ignorant. They only reason from a different worldview. But I lovingly reserve the right to think them wrong in tossing away their faith for postmodern ideas about our beginnings and our destinies. Their inquiry, to be sure, is not a rebellion against traditional doctrine or a reaction to religious fanaticism. Their inquiry is an honest one and should be asked by believers as well. A large percentage of what is documented in the name of science encompasses a realistic look at life and the church does herself no favors by using her pulpits and seminary studies to blindly argue against what by all standards of reason are observably sound conclusions. She stands to show a foolish side of a disagreeable spirit trying to defend ideas God never intended to be defended, denominational distinctiveness and theological positions that do not represent the spirit nor emphasis of God's Word.

Denominations may need to hold to a hard line of church doctrine that tells them apart, churches may need to draw that line close by their parent religious organization—the line they dare not cross without losing their denominational identity—but families should be open listeners to one another, to what represents each other's passion. This can lead to a real familial sense of belonging which is always good.

Why allow institutions to define our hearts if we are inclined to hugging the non-believer rather than disowning them!? I have discovered that I do not have to be so crusty, so

belligerent, so theologically apologetic with my sons when all they want is to get at the truth.

If we fear the church or fear God so much that we must defend doctrine over understanding the people we love, we should stop and consider how this might represent a reckless panic and inevitably lead to regret. Think also that we have no Scripture to support some of what we say or do in the name of a misplaced religious zeal. As harsh as this sounds: some church doctrine adds no value to the principles by which we live—beyond, that is, a feel-good, hour-long weekend ritual.

I am not suggesting that a Saturday or Sunday worship service doesn't benefit us. I am not saying that the form or ritual that we enjoy in the name of our faith has no value outside the church. Absolutely it does and every opportunity we have to stop the machinery of a stressful life, overloaded with anxieties and fears, to meditate in the peaceful presence of a loving God has a profound and positive empowerment that keeps hope and faith strong through another week or until we can meet again in the same way.

But I am drawing our attention to represent in our living the essentials of our faith, of trusting God and loving one another. I am suggesting that when the critics speak through our family members, when family quotes ideas for which we have no immediate answers, we must not go ballistic on them. It profits no one! Wisdom recognizes that a winning argument is often none at all.

Those who guard their mouths and their tongues keep themselves from calamity. Proverbs 21:23 NEW INT.

We must also recognize that some of the points that we contend for are not candidates for such effort. Non-believers do have some things right. By way of summary:

- The Bible does use myths in places when they support the spiritual lesson being taught.
- Four of the five fundamentals of our faith that support Jesus' death on Calvary as vicarious are reasoned out logically not spelled out clearly in Scripture.

- Archeology, as a bonafide science, has failed—so far—to confirm the times of the Exodus and the Flood.

And there is one more which is the next chapter:

- Sacrifice as a biblical idea *is* grounded in mythology—something we cannot and should not refute, something which I consider to be a mark of divine genius. I am about to explain.

When this speaks of the *god-sacrifice* of our Savior, which is the distinct message of grace, it requires—not a defense, but—an answer.

Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, I Peter 3:15 NEW INT.

## Sacrifices

*“God Hold us to that which drew us first, when the Cross was the attraction, and we wanted nothing else.”*

— Amy Carmichael, *God's Missionary*

The sacrifice is not just an ancient idea; it is also a modern one that comes in more forms than generally realized.

*“Of all the rituals relevant to democracy,”* writes the political theorist Danielle Allen, *“sacrifice is preeminent.”*<sup>1</sup> According to archeologist Joan Connelly, *“Democracy...is no mere political arrangement but ultimately a spiritual one.”*<sup>2</sup> Athenian democracy like our modern democracies needed a self-sacrificing patriotism to work especially in war time when that democracy was threatened. It seems reasonable to think that democracy, too, and not just Christianity, finds sacrifice part of its identity. Jared Diamond supports this notion that *“official religions and patriotic fervor ... make their troops willing to fight suicidally.”*<sup>3</sup>

*“Similar sentiments,”* Jared reports,

“motivated 16th-century Aztec warriors: ‘There is nothing like death in war, nothing like the flowery death so precious to Him [the Aztec national god Huitzilopochtli] who gives life: far off I see it, my heart yearns for it!’”<sup>4</sup>

*“Christians see the sacrifices mentioned in the Old Testament as a type of Christ. “The system of offerings appointed to Israel,”*

1. Joan Brittin Connelly. *The Parthenon Enigma*. Prologue (New York:Random House, 201), 146.

2. *ibid.* p. 147.

3. Jared Diamond. *Guns, Germs, and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies*. (New York:W. W. Norton & Co.,1999.), 281. Jared goes on to say that [*ibid.* 282] “Fanaticism in war of the type that drove recorded Christian and Islamic conquests, was probably unknown on Earth until chiefdoms and especially states emerged within the last 6,000 years.”

4. *ibid.* 281.

explains Professor Girdlestone, “*may thus be regarded as a book of pictures, sketched in shadowy outline, indicating to God’s people the work which was to be accomplished by Divine grace when the fulness of the time should have come.*”<sup>5</sup>

And it is the sacrifice of Christ that gives Christianity its identity. There is a line the church must draw in the shifting sands of social change. It must be a bold and certain line—a rift dug deep by an absolute truth and dredged of all compromise and indifference, a dividing line—of which the church should not, cannot, cross without redefining herself. She must not, cannot, surrender her passion for the Cross—turning her focus rather on other more culturally acceptable or even relevant matters—without giving up her identity as a witness for Divine Truth.

Jesus’ sacrificial death in an age of religious satire needs, more so, to become the church’s unwavering reply. Without returning blow for blow, jibe for jibe, but in a spirit of honest inquiry and christian love, the church must take ownership of the Pauline revelation of this culturally transcendent truth. She must retrace the Savior’s steps through history and draw powerful conclusions as to the significance of His life, now, in a postmodern age. Science and philosophy aside, the central truth of Christianity is the sacrifice of Christ. No logic, perhaps, is sufficient to enlighten the unbelieving mind as to its historical significance but its importance to us must not go unnoticed by them.

The missionary council meeting in Jerusalem in 1928, speaking of the good news of this Gospel, sounded a clear and unmistakable call above the din of cultural voices. In one timely and timeless cry they trumpeted

“It is first and foremost ‘Good News.’ It announces glorious Truth. Its very nature forbids us to say that it might be the right belief for some but not for others. Either it is true for all or it is not true at all.”<sup>6</sup>

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5. Robert B. Girdlestone. *Synonyms of the Old Testament: Their Bearing on Christian Doctrine* (Grand Rapids, MI: Grand Rapids Book Manufacturers, Inc. 1974), 185.

6. Francis M. DuBose ed. *Classics of Christian Missions* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1979 ), 342.

And here's the rub because in a postmodern world all paths lead to personal well-being and there is no one 'truth' that applies to all mankind. To the non-believer, truth is as personal as a fingerprint. Truth is the moral DNA that maps our individual happiness. To the believer, Christ is *'the way, the truth, and the life.'*

I cannot underscore enough that the death of Christ on Golgotha's Hill is the fulcrum of history, the central point in time upon which eternity teeters for all of us. Dorothy Sayers called the death of the Savior *"the only thing that has ever really happened."*<sup>7</sup> Acceptance of this act of grace, even without knowing how it works to save the soul, is all God requires. And to make this even easier, He supplies the faith to do so.<sup>8</sup> Believing this, that Christ died for me—in some sense vicariously—is what makes a believer, a believer.

But *"Who was this Jesus and why did he have to die?"* are questions being put under the microscope of postmodernism.

Dorothy Sayers submits an answer: *"If Christ was only man,"* she reasons, *"then He is entirely irrelevant to any thought about God; if He is only God, then He is entirely irrelevant to any experience of human life."*<sup>9</sup> If Jesus is God, then when Jesus died, God died. And if Jesus is totally man, then when He was raised again from the dead, man was resurrected. And this alone is the start and finish of our common faith.

For Christ's love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died. And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again.<sup>10</sup>

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7. Dorothy Sayers. *The Man Born to be King*. (San Francisco CA: Ignatius Press. 1990) Page 290.

8. 2 Peter 1:1 ... through the righteousness of our God and Savior Jesus Christ have received ... faith NEW INT.

9. Dorothy Sayers. *Creed or Chaos* (Manchester, NH: Sophia Institute Press, 1974), 8ff.

10. 2 Corinthians 5:14-15 NEW INT..

## Why A Sacrifice

*It is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins. -  
Hebrews 10:4*

What happened on Calvary is a matter for faith but it is not without reason—a divinely ordained reason—as to how and why it had to be. To the extent this remains mysterious, it is not beyond our human inquisitiveness to ask with former missionary Ken Daniels<sup>1</sup>, “*Why does Yahweh need sacrifices anyway?*”

Daniels questioned, “*I can’t see why you couldn’t just forgive truly penitent people for their sins without requiring a blood sacrifice, just as humans forgive each other?*”<sup>2</sup>

This is an honest inquiry that not just atheists have made. I recall having a similar, private, conversation with my Greek professor in his office telling him that only in the synoptic text Matthew 20:28 and Mark 10:45 was there a reference to Christ dying in our place—if we are included in the ‘many’. To which he responded, “*Well, it is there! Right?*”<sup>3</sup>

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1. Kenneth W Daniels. *Why I Believed: Reflections of a Former Missionary* (Austin TX:Kenneth W. Daniels, 2010.), 31.

2. *ibid.* 37.

3. see the appendix: *Rebuilding Faith* for an in depth review of Dr. Sharon Baker’s work, “*Executing God*” which expands on this inquiry.

Most other verses say that Christ died for 'sin'<sup>4</sup> and it uses the word 'concerning' (concerning our sins) that the theologian interprets to mean 'on behalf of' us. But is this language strong enough to say His death was *vicarious*? In what sense did He die for me?<sup>5</sup> One profound christian truth remains essential to the faith: Had He not died on Calvary, no one would or could have eternal life, but because He did, we do.

Nicholas Wade—he quotes Professor Ehrman in his book, *The Faith Instinct*, and is probably doing so here, as well—goes further in concluding that the vicarious atonement provided by the death of the God-man, Jesus, is a Christian doctrine based on the writings of Paul. To claim that it is based on nothing Jesus might have said misrepresents those final days of Jesus' life. The entire upper room dialogue at the final meal together gave witness to His disciples of Jesus' pending death as an eternally significant event—even if they could not see it then. Even John the Baptist years earlier knew He was the Lamb of God that takes away sin.

But Wade and others claim the the vicarious atonement was the winning theology coming out of the first half of the first Christian millennium, Wade argues, "...it was the inheritors of Paul's Christ movement who shaped the New Testament to support their version of Christianity."<sup>6</sup> All other doctrines that weakened or contradicted this theological position were deemed heretical.

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4. For example:

Galatians 1:4: "who gave Himself for our sins, that He might deliver us out of this present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father."

1 Corinthians 15:3: "For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures."

1 Peter 3:18: "For Christ also died for sins once for all, the just for the unjust, in order that He might bring us to God, having been put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit."

5. Romans 4:25 He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification. NEW INT.

6. Nicholas Wade in *The Faith Instinct* (New York:Penguin Press, 2009), 167ff.

Christian doctrine further maintains that Jesus in the person of God died. (Dr. Bart Ehrman, you might recall, claimed that Jesus never did call Himself God.)<sup>7</sup>

Jesus' ministry was under wraps for the larger part of His life and He only began to reveal Himself to the judgment of a world that '*comprehended it not*'<sup>8</sup> a week or so before His crucifixion. Paul's entire mystery was focused on revealing to the world Him whom John the Baptist had introduced as "*the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!*" Their ministries understandably differed in purpose but converge on this one truth.

### The Evolution of Sacrifice

Some non-believers hypothesize that the sacrifice of Christ evolved from more ancient myths. In today's mindset everything evolves, which means that a modern examination of religious faith is also a study in evolution, the evolution of its practices, including sacrifices.

Our non-believing friends and family find evolutionary studies reasonable that explain away any divine event on Golgotha's Hill. Did our belief in God, our monotheism, grow out of the religious practices of hunter-gatherers who lived tens of thousands of years ago? Is theism a polytheism of one god? And if so, why was it—to use Caiaphas' words: "*good if one man died for the people.*"<sup>9</sup>

This was Ken Daniel's question and it represents the kind of thinking Christians avoid—but shouldn't. Glen, an Episcopalian, and later Catholic, priest, recalled while in seminary: "*We were studying atonement theory, and I thought, 'Was there not a better way to save humanity than to resort to human*

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7. Bart Ehrman. *Jesus Interrupted* (New York:Harper Collins Publishers, 2009), 142.

8. John 1:5

9. John 18:14 NEW INT.

*sacrifice?’ But we were not encouraged to ask those kinds of questions. This particular professor mocked those who did.”<sup>10</sup>*

Should we be revisiting our belief in God’s sacrifice of Himself for us? Is our understanding of ‘*atonement theory*’ correct? We best not become entangled with evolutionists in complicated jargon of which we have not sufficient understanding to hold our own. When they begin to talk about the evolution of religion, many humble believers are intellectually outclassed—including me. Yet I have been somewhat encouraged reading Nicholas Wade admitting, “*There is as yet little evidence to help trace the steps by which religious behavior came into being.*”<sup>11</sup>

Yet again, as we know, the idea of a sacrifice is as old as the hills upon which they were offered. The *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* explains under the heading of ‘*Sacrifice*’ that sacrifices are “*almost universal, the peoples of ancient cultures (plural) offered [them.]*”<sup>12</sup> “*The principal evidence for thinking religious behavior is an evolved part of human nature,*” Wade adds, “*is the fact that religion [that means sacrifices, too] is universal.*”<sup>13</sup>

### Wading In

Nicholas Wade, formerly a staff writer for the Science Times section of The New York Times according to Wiki, theorized how religion could have evolved from its pre-historical beginnings into its present form. Religion in those early times was mostly ceremonial with accompanying dance “*to raise or maintain group cohesion, resolve disruptive feuds, reaffirm the sacred narrative and its moral prescriptions, and energize the group for*

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10. Daniel Dennett; Linda LaScola. *Caught in The Pulpit: Leaving Belief Behind* (Durham, NC:Pitchstone Publishing,2013), 49.

11. Nicholas Wade. *The Faith Instinct: How Religion Evolved & Why It Endures* (New York:Penguin Press, 2009), 74.

12. Leland Ryken editors ed. al. *The Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* (Downers Grove IL :InterVarsity Press, 1998), 749.

13. Nicholas Wade. *The Faith Instinct: How Religion Evolved & Why It Endures* (New York:Penguin Press, 2009), 40.

*warfare*"<sup>14</sup> In this one statement Wade proposes a five-fold evolutionary tract for religious life that has '*survived*' today as the '*fittest*' culturally. The operative term in this theory is the word '*group*' without which it is obvious religious life would be impossible. Religion is a communal affair that Wade sees possible without introducing a deity. Worship is not one of his criteria for explaining the reason why religion is universal. There is for him no '*god-gene*,' no apparent reason why we cannot be religious without God. (It is unfortunate to add that perhaps in modern times many church goers may have proven his point.)

His is an idea which he admits at present is not supported by the evidence because, for one, there is no evidence.

"The ancestral human population of 50,000 years ago has left no direct trace of its [religious practices of an ancestral human population] existence, and there is no good archeological evidence of whatever religion may have been practiced by its forbears."<sup>15</sup>

Secondly, '*group evolution*' known as '*group selection*' is a new idea. Darwin's idea was the '*natural selection*' of biological forms not the group selection of cultural ones. "*So few* [social anthropologists]," Wade admits "*recognized that religion might be an evolved behavior....*"<sup>16</sup>

On the moral component of religious practice Wade simply advances the idea that this was "*wired into the brain's genetic circuitry.*"<sup>17</sup>

Moral behavior ... seems likely to have a genetic base.<sup>18</sup> ... The universality of religious behavior suggests that, as with any usage, it is mediated by specialized structures in the brain...."<sup>19</sup>

This piece to the puzzle doesn't fit together with Dawkins' memetics in a picture perfect way. Richard Dawkins

14. Nicholas Wade, *The Faith Instinct*. p. 118.

15. *ibid.* p. 99.

16. *ibid.* p. 119.

17. *ibid.* p. 123.

18. *ibid.* p. 36.

19. *ibid.* p. 43.

hypothesized: “The general theory of religion [is] an accidental by-product—a misfiring of something useful.”<sup>20</sup> (His moth-to-the-flame metaphor) “The misfiring by-product...is falling in love with Yahwah... and performing irrational acts motivated by such love.”<sup>21</sup> Central to his, Dawkins’, understanding of religious memes is a suggested “cartel of genes” assembled by an “invisible hand”<sup>22</sup> (not God’s)

### Quid Pro Quo

To introduce sacrifices into religious ceremony means someone is thinking about god, because these were offered to a god or the gods depending on the religion. Nicholas Wade calls *sacrifices*—which is a significant part of any religious ritual that incorporates a deity—“A contractual arrangement based on [a] ‘dis-ut-des: I-give-to-you-that-you-might-give-back to me’ principle.”<sup>23</sup>

One apparent application of this principle with God would be tithing. We give to God so He can financially bless us—an idea based on Malachi 3:10.<sup>24</sup> In terms of christian community, group participation to reach a common purpose that comes back on me as a benefit would be another. Blessings might be viewed by some as religious kickbacks.

Religious zeal for which wars are fought (I don’t need to tell you) is introduced into Wade’s paradigm as ‘aggression.’ He knew that this, on the surface, seemed to contradict *dis-ut-des* or group cohesion which he also referred to by the word “altruism.”

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20. Richard Dawkins. *The God Delusion* (New York:Houghton Mifflin Co., 2006), 188.

21. *ibid.* p. 186.

22. *ibid.* p. 197.

23. Nicholas Wade, *The Faith Instinct* (New York:Penguin Press, 2009), 42.

24. Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. Test me in this,” says the LORD Almighty, “and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that there will not be room enough to store it.

Aggression and altruism, he tells us are “*extricably intertwined in evolutionary history.*”<sup>25</sup>

In english: religion often supplies the reason for war (aggression) at the same time guaranteeing the passion and unity needed by any army to win. Inner group cohesion or an internal social unity (the *united-we-stand-divided-with-fall* principle) is as much an aspect of social evolution, says Wade, as an outward aggression. Religion, Wade recognized—and we do, too—is a powerful force for good or evil. It defines morals, molds culture, and motivates its constituency to do things otherwise they would never do on their own.

Well, evolved or not, it is reasonable to say that *sacrifices* in religious ceremony has a long history.

### What Did I Just Read?

Let me summarize and try to simplify what I just wrote. Darwin’s idea was that the fittest form of a species would survive. Defective specie types would become extinct. If this is how it works for religion, we would expect religious practices, ideas, ceremonies, etc. to be honed to a selected one that better matched each culture that practiced it. In other words, as cultures evolve, so will the religious life that is a part of it evolve. From a scientific point of view, there is no proof of this because social science needs to identify ‘*group*’ survival of the fittest—something that has only been theorized. Survival of the fittest is a biological form construct not a social one.

But on the other hand, sacrificing animals to a god—and the ceremonial embellishments that surround them—has been around since the dawn of recorded history. It is also universal across cultures which is why the evolutionists started thinking that they were on to something when they theorized that religion evolved. Evolution, then, can imagine that this part of social evolution, like any other aspect of social change, is simply an aspect of human evolution and has nothing to do with a

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25. *ibid.* p. 71f.

‘god.’ In other words, we invented ‘god’ as a part of our ceremonial life to provide (thinking of Wade’s points spoken of already)

- A reason to go to war against neighboring cultures.
- A unifying principle, a patriotic spirit, a religious banner, that a religious society would live and die for. And dying for a religious cause is by definition, a sacrifice.
- A moral or written ‘law’ code to define conduct, duty, right from wrong.
- Established traditions teachable to subsequent generations that would insure the survival of all this.

Wade sees all this possible without the need to interject a deity into the explanation of things. And Richard Dawkins sees religion as a cultural misfiring; a good idea, which he calls a ‘meme’ gone bad. We were moths who lost our way when we used our homing instincts to fly into an open flame and die. We used dedication to a cause to commit genocide.

Science is still looking for the god-gene or a possible genetic reason for a human interest in moral codes. In biblical terms, we have from the beginning wanted to taste the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

Sacrifices to a ‘god’ are ancient and our God could use this in ultimately providing a universally understandable explanation (Dr. Baker in her work *“Executing God”* calls it a metaphor)<sup>26</sup> of the death of Christ on the Cross. The term ‘sacrifice’ could have been pre-ordained, “on-loan” to paganism as a cross-cultural explanation for mankind’s need of God, and God’s salvation. It was an idea to which God would appoint an elevated purpose raising this religious practice out of its temporal beginnings to become an eternal act of love. This also suggests that God either introduced the idea into his creation (the god instinct *is* universal) or God providentially employed the sacrifice through Israel’s religious history to give us a basic

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26. See the appendix: Rebuilding Faith

understanding of His plan for our salvation. But in so saying, I wish I could have the words *ransom* and *redemption* stuck in the reader's mind when thinking of sacrifice—not the appeasement of some supposed divine anger.

Daniels is correct in asking why God couldn't just forgive us outright instead of having to provide forgiveness through His death. But forgiveness is not a simple resolution to forgo punishment or revenge. (I devote an appendix to this topic: *Rebuilding Faith*.) His death was more than a verbal declaration. It encompassed his lifetime.

### Uniquely Christian

I have given some space to encouraging christians to stop defending our God, who needs no defense. He asks us to represent Him not explain Him.

William Foxwell Albright in his work, *From the Stone Age to Christianity* intended to show that monotheism, a belief in one and only one god is a Mosaic tradition. If this be true, it becomes a serious problem for the theory that christianity evolved. Yet, some scholarship sees monotheism as originating in the Persian belief in Ahura Mazda, the creator.

But although Mithraism, known as Mazdaism in Rome, shows many similarities with christianity, it is what Franz Cumont referred to as a "*strained parallelism [that] could result in nothing but a caricature.*"<sup>27</sup> Mazdaism was still in existence after Jesus' death and resurrection<sup>28</sup> which confuses the issue of who borrowed from whom.

What Mazdaism did not have—and for the matter no dogma or religion outside christianity had—was the Cross of a

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27. Franz Cumont. THE MYSTERIES OF MITHRA. p. 196. Kindle Edition.

28. Cumont wrote [ibid. p. 38. ], "The most ancient inscription to Mithra which we possess is a bilingual inscription of a freedman of the Flavians (69-96 A.D.)."

Redeemer, a vicarious atonement. As Dr. Gregory Boyd, a professor at Bethel College, St. Paul, Minnesota, wrote:

“There is no other belief which does this... Only the Gospel dares to proclaim that God enters smack-dab into the middle of the hell we created. Only the Gospel dares to proclaim that God was born a baby in a bloody, crap-filled stable, that He lived a life befriending the prostitutes and lepers no one else would befriend, and that He suffered firsthand, the hellish depth of all that is nightmarish in human existence.”<sup>29</sup>

In the words of Franz Cumont:

“It was a strong source of inferiority for Mazdaism that it believed in only a mythical redeemer. That unflinching wellspring of religious emotion supplied by the teachings and the passion of the God sacrificed on the cross, never flowed for the disciples of Mithra.”<sup>30</sup>

### Beyond Reason

I am told that my faith is a belief in a bloody religion, all about sacrifices and the death of God—something that has no logical appeal to non-believers. But this dogma is so central to my faith even if I don’t know all the details.

The logic behind Paul’s understanding of Jesus’ death is woefully fragmented to our way of thinking and yet it had to be said. Michael W. Smith in the refrain of his well sung melody “*Here I Am To Worship*” wrote: *I’ll never know how much it cost to see my sin upon that cross.* And Isaiah began his familiar 53<sup>rd</sup> chapter on the prophecy of Jesus’ death with “*Who’ll ever believe what you’re revealing to me, Lord!?*”

Some non-believers claim in ridicule—my guess—that if Jesus had died today, we would be wearing electric chairs on chains around our necks instead of crosses. I rather think not because His was a sacrifice. God scheduled Calvary when, where, and how He scheduled it and we are children when it comes to explaining this.

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29. Boyd, Gregory A. *Letters From A Skeptic* (Colorado Springs, CO: Cook Communication Ministries, 2004), 151.

30. Franz Cumont. *THE MYSTERIES OF MITHRA*. p. 196. Kindle Edition.

### Bible Logic

Jesus' life and death was a stumbling block to Jewish sensibilities and simply foolishness to the Greek thinker.<sup>31</sup> Some things Paul expounded on were down right illogical! ...but to our faith... still true and still, in some profound and miraculous way, reasonable.

Who, being in the form of God, ... took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men: And being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death -Philippians 2:6-8

I expanded on these verses in Philippians 2 in writing *Jots and Tittles*. Pauline theology here states that Jesus was God and also God's servant. How can he be less than himself!? He was said to have 'emptied' himself, to be less than or not equal with God, and yet He was God. No wonder Arius and the others were going bonkers trying to fit this all into some human logical framework. And yet our faith maintains it so. He was also man or "in the likeness of" man which means he grew in wisdom,<sup>32</sup> learned obedience,<sup>33</sup> and was tempted,<sup>34</sup> among other experiences which are impossible for God to experience, according to our understanding of God. And He died. To die he needed flesh and bone or to be *commensurately hypostatized* in philosophical terms. And Greek philosophers knew this to be impossible. But they were wrong.

It is here where honest inquiry might ask: *Where did Paul come up with such ideas?* There are only two possible answers. God told him this by way of revelation, which is what we,

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31. I Corinthians 1:23

32. Like 2:40 And the child grew and became strong; he was filled with wisdom, and the grace of God was on him. NEW INT.

33. Hebrews 5:8 Son though he was, he learned obedience from what he suffered NEW INT.

34. Hebrews 4:15 For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin. NEW INT.

Christians, obviously believe. Or it was an evolutionary process of ideas originating in prehistorical antiquity, through the machinations of lyrical religious minds in the form of myths, and eventually arriving at our altars as a christianized dogma. We have pointed out how weak an evolutionary hypothesis is.

It is very clear to me that the Death of Christ, which is the cornerstone of christian truth, is an idea that had to originate with God; for, the philosopher and the tellers of stories and myths were incapable over millennia of passing down traditions, both oral and written, of even dreaming such a thing. Educated minds claimed it crazy, But God's Word introduced it early in its pages and began developing this message of Calvary, this message of Grace and mercy, in one continuous prophetic thread.

"He saw that there was no one, he was appalled that there was no one to intervene; so his own arm achieved salvation for him, and his own righteousness sustained him."<sup>35</sup>

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35. Isaiah 59:16

## Higher Criticism

*Aaron's staff, which represented the tribe of Levi, had not only sprouted but had budded, blossomed and produced almonds. Numbers 17:8*

A quick look at religious sacrifices in ancient Israel includes a peek at the tabernacle in the wilderness, the moral law (which we can treat separately) the feast days, and the Day of Atonement. *'Higher criticism,'* which is the study of the origin of the biblical text, and which became popular in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century as a scholarly approach to determining the authorship of each book of our Bible, concluded that the Torah, the Pentateuch or first five books, were written by four separate persons and compiled after the Babylonian exile into one document. (The well-known historical-critical interpretation of Scripture is its offspring.) The Levitical record, one of the four, also known as the Priestly Code, 'P', included the Tabernacle in the Wilderness, the sacrifices, and the ceremonial law.

Higher Criticism brought a whole new approach to studying this Tabernacle and sacrifices. This liberal approach was spearheaded by Julius Welhausen's *'Documentary Hypothesis'* which raised doubts about the authenticity of not just the first five books but a large part of the historical record of our Bible as well. Here is not the place to delve too deeply into this subject but it needs to be mentioned as one area of controversy that has developed to challenge our simple faith in God's Word. Atheism, to be sure, found all this supportive.

The short of it is—as I see it—Israel was not a faithful representative of the Mosaic law. They didn't follow it, especially the first two commandments: You shall have no other gods, nor serve them. Idol worship in old Israel led modern scholarship to conclude that there was no Mosaic law. If the 'Law' had come down to Israel from Moses, they would have practiced it. It would be more visible in the historical record. Its

absence until after the exile indicates to liberal scholars that it must have been written much later and was not given by Moses at all. We can show that there are a few references to the Tabernacle in the historical record during the reign of the kings of Israel and Judea but these are considered to be spurious or written in later by an unidentified scribe.

Not to put too fine a point on it but even the church has been at times a poor representative of what God envisioned for her on that memorable 'Day of Pentecost' according to Acts 1 and 2. This tends to discredit not just the history but the theology or christian teaching in the mind of the nonbeliever. When we don't live the message of grace as when Old Israel did not follow the Mosaic Law, we tell our world that there is no such message when we should be proclaiming it. And there's the rub.

## The Tabernacle

We have hanging in our dining area a copy of a painting by artist Norbert McNulty of the *Tabernacle in the Wilderness*. The tabernacle has been referred to as the greatest of all the Old Testament types of Christ. It was designated as the sole, central place where all sacrifices would be offered to God.<sup>1</sup> Worship was to be centralized wherever the tent of meeting,<sup>2</sup> as it was known, was erected while they circled in the wilderness. After they entered Canaan, the Tabernacle would be replaced by a temple and Jerusalem where this temple would rest would be the city where God said "...I chose to put my Name."<sup>3</sup>

For scholarship, there have been a few difficulties with the ultimate fulfillment of—what we have supposed was—the divine plan for centralizing the worship of God in one and only one place. Besides the logistical problem of requiring an entire nation 3 times a year to 'foot-it' to a single town, there was the constant problem of the Israelites synthesizing a corrupt religious life out of their own religious practices with those of the Canaanites who remained in the land.

Consequently, Professor Wellhausen discovered that

"The religious community set up ... in the wilderness [the Tabernacle], with its sacred centre ..., disappears and leaves no trace as soon as Israel settles in a land of its own [Canaan], and becomes, in any proper sense, a nation."<sup>4</sup>

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1. Exodus 25:8 "Then have them make a sanctuary for me, and I will dwell among them. NEW INT.

2. Leviticus 1-7.

3. I Kings 11:36 NEW INT.

4. Julius Wellhausen. Prolegomena to the History of Ancient Israel p. 6. Kindle Edition.

### A Good Idea

Was the Tabernacle in the wilderness just an idea? Were the architectural drawings ever given to Moses? The single verse that suggests this, I Chronicles 21:29,<sup>5</sup> was disallowed by liberal scholarship as a late entry into the text *after* the exile when the Jewish religious life and a belief in one God would become part of the national culture.

Archeology is no help in any of this since no tabernacle site was found. Professor Dever admitted, "*In the area of ideology... including religion, archeology provides less direct evidence,*"<sup>6</sup>

Additionally liberal scholarship became convinced that if the idea behind a Tabernacle was Mosaic, it should have been built into the cultural and spiritual design of the Temple under Solomon or at least should have been the central place of worship before the Temple was built.<sup>7</sup> Neither appeared true. Some mention of the tabernacle, had it existed, would have been inevitable, it is believed, when the temple took its place.

There is one verse, 1 Kings 8:4, which refers to the *Ohel Moed*,<sup>8</sup> *the Tent of Meeting—the Tabernacle* but since there is no mention of a tabernacle elsewhere in the Judges, Samuel or the

5. according to I Chronicles 21:29 [NEW INT.] "The tabernacle of the LORD, which Moses had made in the wilderness, and the altar of burnt offering were at that time on the high place at Gibeon."

But this is disallowed by liberal scholarship as a non-historical traditional view.

6. William Dever.. Who Were the Early Israelites and Where Did They Come From? p. 198.

7. This is part of the Documentary Hypothesis proposed by Julius Wellhausen and endorsed since by a large portion of Biblical scholarship.

8. This verse is thought to be an interpolation or insertion since the name Ohel Moed, tent of meeting, occurs absolutely nowhere else in the Books of Judges, Samuel, and Kings  
The Tabernacle of the Congregation אֹהֶל מוֹעֵד

Kings (the four books of the kings), this is believed by liberals to be an interpolation. This verse claims that when the temple was finished they brought into it, besides the ark, all the sacred vessels that were there.<sup>9</sup>

### Idol Worship

The problem was Israel's conversion to Canaanite religious practice. As Wellhausen points out: "*The system of high places (Bamoth), ... is certainly Canaanite originally, but afterwards is of quite general occurrence among the Hebrews.*"<sup>10</sup> Israel's worship of Canaanite gods had caused a great amount of confusion in identifying any historical thread for the tabernacle through the narrative.

The big question is: "if Moses had been revered, why was the tabernacle *not* set up and worship *not* centralized in Shiloh or Jerusalem?"<sup>11</sup> In Samuel's day there was a central

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9. Julius Wellhausen. Prolegomena to the History of Ancient Israel p. 44. Kindle Edition.

10. Julius Wellhausen. Prolegomena to the History of Ancient Israel p. 18. Kindle Edition. see (Deut. xii. 2, 30; Num. xxxiii. 52; Exod. xxxiv. 12 seq.)

11. I Kings 14:23 They also set up for themselves high places, sacred stones and Asherah poles on every high hill and under every spreading tree. NEW INT.

place to worship at Shiloh<sup>12</sup> but Samuel sacrificed at Gilgal,<sup>13</sup> and Mizpeh<sup>14</sup>—not Shiloh.

Not only was the Tabernacle not referenced even though the Ark of the Covenant was, there was no centralized worship up through David's time. The Bible record confirms.

"The people, however, were still sacrificing at the high places, because a temple had not yet been built for the Name of the LORD."<sup>15</sup>

The northern tribes also had a separate place of worship in Dan.<sup>16</sup> Dare I add that even the Passover had lapsed into disuse between Joshua and Josiah (2 Kings 23:22)—and the men who were born in the wilderness were uncircumcised when they reached Canaan (Joshua 5:5)—in direct disobedience to the divine covenant.<sup>17</sup>

Israel's idolatry had all but blinded scholarship to any real divine intention for the nation.

12. 1 Samuel 1:3 Year after year this man went up from his town to worship and sacrifice to the LORD Almighty at Shiloh, where Hophni and Phinehas, the two sons of Eli, were priests of the LORD. NEW INT.

13. 1 Samuel 10:8 Go down ahead of me to Gilgal. I will surely come down to you to sacrifice burnt offerings and fellowship offerings, but you must wait seven days until I come to you and tell you what you are to do." NEW INT.

14. 1 Samuel 7:9 Then Samuel took a suckling lamb and sacrificed it as a whole burnt offering to the LORD. He cried out to the LORD on Israel's behalf, and the LORD answered him. NEW INT.

15. 1 Kings 3:2 NEW INT.

16. 1 Kings 12:27-29 If these people go up to offer sacrifices at the temple of the Lord in Jerusalem, they will again give their allegiance to their lord, Rehoboam king of Judah. They will kill me and return to King Rehoboam." After seeking advice, the king made two golden calves. He said to the people, "It is too much for you to go up to Jerusalem. Here are your gods, Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt." One he set up in Bethel, and the other in Dan. NEW INT.

17. Genesis 17:10 This is my covenant with you and your descendants after you, the covenant you are to keep: Every male among you shall be circumcised. NEW INT.

"...the main reason why so many parts of the Old Testament are practically a sealed book even to thoughtful people is simply that they have not the historical key to the interpretation of that wonderful literature."<sup>18</sup>

### One Place Fits All

Centralization of worship was still a long lost dream in the hearts of the prophetic spirits that clung to a love of the one true God. It was hypothesized that after the Babylonian exile, centralization of worship was finally instituted under Ezra and Nehemiah.<sup>19</sup> The author of the book of the judges, says Wellhausen

"laments the disorganization of the time he is dealing with... and yet describes Israel to us as existing in a religious centralization, such as demonstrably was never attained in the earlier life of the nation, but only came about as a consequence of the exile, and is the distinctive mark of Judaism."<sup>20</sup>

Additionally, many scholars were convinced that the book of the law, Deuteronomy, was not Mosaic at all but a later work perhaps begun during the revival under King Josiah of Judah.<sup>21</sup> Dr. Dever, however, argues for an early, Mosaic, tradition:

"Deuteronomy was really nothing more than a theory during the pre-exile period." But so much cultural change is born of

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18. Julius Wellhausen. Prolegomena to the History of Ancient Israel p. viii. Kindle Edition.

19. Nehemiah 10:34 We—the priests, the Levites and the people—have cast lots to determine when each of our families is to bring to the house of our God at set times each year a contribution of wood to burn on the altar of the LORD our God, as it is written in the Law. NEW INT.

20. Julius Wellhausen. Prolegomena to the History of Ancient Israel p. 238. Kindle Edition.

21. 2 Kings 22:8 Hilkiyah the high priest said to Shaphan the secretary, "I have found the Book of the Law in the temple of the LORD." He gave it to Shaphan, who read it. NEW INT.

oral tradition "...who would argue from this that it was not there at all?"<sup>22</sup>

And we should add that even if the words of that law are not in the book of the Judges, the spirit is.

"Of the Mosaic law not a word is said in these chapters [The Judges], but who could fail to perceive that the spirit which finds its expression in the law pervaded the community which acted thus? Had we more narratives of similar contents we should be able to solve many a riddle of the Pentateuch. Where under the monarchy could we find an Israel so united, vigorous, earnest, so willing to enter upon the severest conflict for the sake of the highest ends?"<sup>23</sup>

This allows for an oral tradition going back to Moses but pieced together centuries later after the exile.

"...it appears that instead of the whole Pentateuchal law having been given to Israel before the tribes crossed the Jordan, that law really grew up little by little from its Mosaic germ, and did not attain its present form till the Israelites were the captives or the subjects of a foreign power [the Babylonian exile]."<sup>24</sup>

This overview of our Hebrew bible is important in understanding the differences between our belief and modern thought. Many biblical scholars now buy into the Wellhausen hypothesis that we have outlined here. But this does not effectively challenge the traditional view that christianity holds to. We may still believe that the oral traditions which are the Story of Israel's beginnings as a nation are from the time of Moses.

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22. William Dever. Who Were the Early Israelites and Where Did They Come From?. (Grand Rapids MI. :Wm Eerdmans Press, 2001. ), 366.

23. *ibid.* p. 237.

24. *ibid.* p. viii.

## The Feasts

The Tabernacle symbolized the ceremonial center of the religious life of the early Israeli community. Around this rose three major national festivals which were held at the time of the three major harvests: Passover (beginning of the harvest); Shavuot (Pentecost: tithing of first fruits), Sukkoth (the grape harvest). Is it just a coincidence that the three major Jewish celebrations correspond to the three harvests? It seems an intelligent idea on God's part to collect a tithe from Israel for the Priests and Levites at the time these harvests were gathered. It is a time of thanksgiving as well and no celebration is worth celebrating without the blessings of a good harvest. Liberal expositors see this as—not a co-incidence in timing, but—merely another way in which Israel copied Canaanite religious practices. William Dever admitted,

"The fertility themes so prevalent in Canaanite religion, and no doubt typical of early Israelite religion, continue throughout as the fundamental aspect of Israelite religion."<sup>1</sup>

From a believer's perspective, it makes sense that festivals celebrating God's deliverance should coincide with major harvests. The feasts, because they were festivals, logically would have been celebrated around harvest times. (Is not our Thanksgiving celebrated at the end of the growing season?) Notwithstanding, the Jewish feasts have spiritual significance that believers must not lose sight of.<sup>2</sup>

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1. William Dever.. Who Were the Early Israelites and Where Did They Come From? (Grand Rapids MI. :Wm Eerdmans Press, 2001. ), 199

2. Leviticus 23:2 Speak to the Israelites and say to them: 'These are my appointed festivals, the appointed festivals of the LORD, which you are to proclaim as sacred assemblies.'

### Passover

If Passover were seen as a fertility or harvest celebration alone, its connection to the Exodus from Egypt would be lost from a judeo-christian perspective. It took sacrifice to redeem Israel from Egyptian bondage and not just a miracle of parting the sea. A price in blood and life was paid as Isaiah recorded, *“For I am the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior; I give Egypt for your ransom, Cush and Seba in your stead.”*<sup>3</sup>

In this regard, it has also been argued that Israel’s celebratory psalms and poetry are in the style of a Canaanite provenance.<sup>4</sup> Dr. Dever explains:

“The common Semitic early spring festival, originally a pastoral feast celebrating the birth of new lambs, became connected in Israelite traditions with the blood of lambs on the doorposts... historicized [as] ...Passover. ...Some of the oldest literature in the Bible, written in an archaic Hebrew—mainly poems in the Pentateuch and some of the Psalms—is very close to Canaanite poetry<sup>5</sup> and mythology known to us

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3. Isaiah 43:3 NEW INT.

4. The Canaanite Psalms by Fr. M. Luke is Professor of Scripture and Oriental Science at Calvary College, Trichur, Kerala.

El-Amarna is the name of an Egyptian village located on the site of the capital built by the notorious 'heretic' Akhnaton (1353-36), and the period known as the Amarna Age was one of general confusion and chaos in Egypt and in the lands forming part of the empire of the Pharaohs.

see [http://biblicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/ijt/26-1\\_044.pdf](http://biblicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/ijt/26-1_044.pdf)

5. One El Amrna text reads: “My lord is the sun in heaven, And as (one awaits) the rising of the sun in the heavens, So thy servants await the going forth of the words From the mouth of their lord” (195 :16-23). Compare Psalms 89:37: “it [the throne of David as the sun] will be established forever like the moon, the faithful witness in the sky.”

A second example: “Who thunders in the heavens as Adad, So that the whole world trembles at his thunder” (147:5-15).

Adad is the Accadian god of thunder and storm, and his counterpart in Canaanite mythology is Baal; as for biblical tradition, it too regards thunder as the voice of Yahweh (cf. esp. Ps. 29) Psalms

from... 14th-13th century B.C. Texts found at Ugarit, on the coast of Syria. Here there is a striking cultural continuity even in the basic literary forms of the Hebrew Bible.<sup>6</sup>

Mixing elements of an early Canaanite spring festival and a passover celebration is not surprising; It was inevitable given Israel's tendency to incorporate Canaanite practices into their religious life. As well, I am not singularly struck by the similarities in the use of words and expressions of cognate or sister languages. A common Palestinian literary style should be expected. But these stanzas of prophetic verse, to the believer, unmistakably hint at Christ's sacrifice. The Psalms are not Canaanite.

As to the Exodus, undiscovered by the secular mind is the agonizing cry of God looking ahead to the time He must give up His son for our redemption. The firstborn of Egypt became a type of this greater pending sorrow, visible even then in God's choice to use this terrible and extreme sadness visited upon the residence of the Nile to free His people from bondage.

When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son.<sup>7</sup>

The Passover, also, which testifies to the deliverance from Egypt, would become a metaphor for salvation in a more general sense. It would hereafter signify a divine deliverance<sup>8</sup> from all types of bondage,<sup>9</sup> spiritual as well as national:

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29:3 "The voice of the LORD is over the waters; the God of glory thunders, the LORD thunders over the mighty waters."

6. William Dever.. Who Were the Early Israelites and Where Did They Come From? (Grand Rapids MI. :Wm Eerdmans Press, 2001. ), 200.

7. Hosea 11:1 NEW INT.

8. Psalms 89:10 You crushed Rahab like one of the slain; with your strong arm you scattered your enemies. NEW INT.

9. Isaiah 51:9 Wake up, wake up, O LORD! Clothe yourself with strength! Flex your mighty right arm! Rouse yourself as in the days of old when you slew Egypt, the dragon of the Nile. NLT

Hosea 13:4 I have been the LORD your God ever since I brought you out of Egypt. You must acknowledge no God but me, for there is no other savior. NLT

"Now, Lord our God, who brought your people out of Egypt with a mighty hand and who made for yourself a name that endures to this day."<sup>10</sup>

It spoke to the return of the Jews as a nation in 1948, a possible interpretation of Zephaniah's prophecy—reverberating with the sounds of that first Passover.

"At that time I will gather you; at that time I will bring you home...."<sup>11</sup>

### The Feast of Tabernacles

And when God leads His people out of bondage and into freedom He understandably celebrates such an occasion. It has more than one prophetic fulfillment.

"I have been the LORD your God ever since you came out of Egypt; I will make you live in tents again, as in the days of your appointed festivals."<sup>12</sup>

The biblical commentary affirms, "*That is to keep the feast of tabernacles again in remembrance of a new deliverance out of bondage. Fulfilled primarily at the return from Babylon ( Nehemiah 8:17 ). Fully and anti-typically to be fulfilled at the final restoration from the present dispersion ( Zechariah 14:16; compare Leviticus 23:42, 43 ).*"

A "marriage supper of the Lamb"<sup>13</sup> is perfectly in keeping with this divine mindset.

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10. Daniel 9:15 NEW INT.

see also Amos 2:10 "I brought you up out of Egypt and led you forty years in the wilderness to give you the land of the Amorites."

11. Zephaniah 3:20.

12. Hosea 12:9 NEW INT.

13. Revelation 19:9

## The Moral Law

In Judges 20:6 we read of a Levite, whose concubine was raped by the men of Gibeah. In relating his story to an assembly of his countrymen, his deposition read:

I took my concubine, cut her into pieces and sent one piece to each region of Israel's inheritance, because they committed this lewd and outrageous act in Israel.

There is in this record an apparent disregard for the moral aspects of the law of Moses—not to mention an indifference to an innate human cry for justice and a cultural blindness to the suffering of a victim of rape. This suggests that that law had not existed yet at the time of the Judges. This account is descriptive of a lack of morality leading atheists to discredit the Bible, morally speaking, as nothing more than a book of pruriency and unconscionable violence. To atheism there is not nor could there be contained in it an absolute code of morality. I obviously disagree. Much is in the Bible that God didn't—and doesn't—approve of. It was written in such raw language because it exposes the underside of a humanity that lost its way regarding Him. As Professor Girdlestone reminded us,

"The Hebrew Bible meets us with a full acknowledgement of these manifold aspects of human suffering, and blends wrong doing and suffering to a remarkable degree, setting forth sin in its relation to God, to society, and to a man's own self."<sup>1</sup>

If we are looking for a moral code outside of a belief in a moral God, where should we look? Modernism once could propose a moral code even if they couldn't accept the idea that it came from God. But in an age of postmodernism no such code is universally held. An individual's sense of well-being is the goal of anyone's actions and such actions do not answer to another's code of ethics. In a postmodern age, individual cultures—or

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1. Robert Girdlestone. *Synonyms of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Grand Rapids Book Manufacturers, Inc. 1974), 76.

what I call sub-cultures within a larger cultural setting—the code can become part of that sub-culture’s identity. Individuals must seek out the group that lives by the same moral code if they want to be happy in a social setting. After all, we are social beings. (Perhaps, the most extreme example of this is prison justice against child rapists. They tend not to find acceptance. But those who kill cops are honored among the inmates.) How much of a sense of well-being this provides is a relative question. Being part of a prison sub-culture based on race or ethnicity and the protection it offers might make prison life far more tolerable although a prisoner’s sense of well-being is not comparable to that of someone on the outside. But I am not a sociologist. These are questions for them to raise and answer ..if possible.

This actually begs the question: is a moral code logical? Is there really such a thing in a postmodern world? Psychologist Jonathan Haidt went “*so far as to say that reasoning ...produces moral judgments... far less often [my emboldening] than people think.*”<sup>2</sup>

In a postmodern world, a question of morality is really a question of well-being and happiness. There is no one element of an absolute code that fits all. There is no elixir of emotional well-being that all humanity shares. In a postmodern world, happiness is relative to the culture—and even the individual—defining it. According to Sam Harris of the new atheists, science questions whether we should even be talking about morality as a real possibility.

“Joshua Greene and Jonathan Haidt seem to think that the very existence of moral controversy nullifies the possibility of moral truth. In their opinion, all we can do is study what human beings do in the name of “morality.” Thus, if religious conservatives find the prospect of gay marriage abhorrent, and secular liberals find it perfectly acceptable, we are confronted by a mere difference of moral preference— not a difference that relates to any deeper truths about human life.”<sup>3</sup>

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2. Sam Harris. *The Moral Landscape: How Science Can Determine Human Values* (New York:Free Press, 2010), 85. Kindle Edition.

3. *ibid.* p. 86. Kindle Edition.

Where do we go from here? Sam Harris begins to imagine a stone age culture in which:

...jolly people enjoy sacrificing their firstborn children to imaginary gods [which] would prompt ...most anthropologists to say that [they were] in possession of an alternate moral code every bit as valid and impervious to refutation as our own."<sup>4</sup>

If there is no "*deeper truth*" how can anyone place a moral judgment on the biblical history? How can we say that a religious war is wrong? Can we impose our personal code of ethics that gives us a rather private sense of well-being on an entire ancient culture?

Furthermore in saying that a belief system may not be adaptive, Dr. Harris suggests—to me—what others have concluded, that the evolution of religion can not be proven.

"But the mere endurance of a belief system or custom does not suggest that it is adaptive, much less wise. It merely suggests that it hasn't led directly to a society's collapse or killed its practitioners outright."<sup>5</sup>

Israel's foray into Canaanite idolatry, and in particular the sacrifice of children (not aborted, which makes sense to liberal thought) is merely an example of how a nation who claims God as their god can misrepresent His goodness and lovingkindness. But has not the church been at times prone to the same? Christians within a cultural flow of unexplainable cruelty have historically committed barbaric and unconscionable acts of inhumanity. Since sin is the inverse of what is said to be '*moral*' in the believer's understanding, we have even redefined the term, *sin*, to give us a sense of justification even though commonsense people saw through our hypocrisy. But all this is what a humanity does that is not in a close relationship with God. On this the believer has some insight.<sup>6</sup>

And what about ..well, killing!?

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4. *ibid.* p. 19 Kindle Edition.

5. *ibid.* p. 20 Kindle Edition.

6. 1 Corinthians 2:14 The person without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God but considers them foolishness, and cannot understand them because they are discerned only through the Spirit. NEW INT.

## Thou Shalt Kill

*“The multitude of your sacrifices— what are they to me?” says the LORD. ‘I have more than enough...’ - Isaiah 1:11*

There is a word in our Old Testament meaning ‘to butcher’ for food.<sup>1</sup> The sixth commandment, ‘*you must not kill*’ uses another word which means just what we assume it means.<sup>2</sup> But the most common term for murder is a word used throughout the bible “*of persons killing persons.*”<sup>3</sup> Perhaps of interest is the use of this term to describe what M Weippert called a “*Heiliger Krieg,*” a holy war or “*Yahweh’s war*” as, for example, in Ai when Joshua commanded that all human life be taken.<sup>4</sup> A footnote to this word in the New International Version describes this as an “*irrevocably giving over of ...persons to the Lord...by totally destroying them.*”

This is considered pure brutality by atheists and on the surface we should agree. But there is another perspective worth considering. (Of course, we are not talking yet about the Old Testament word for ‘sacrifice.’) We are talking about genocide which every fiber of a well-trained conscience understandably abhors. (If I may blurt it out: Our sense of ethics, however, nonetheless may be able to support abortion which is—is it not—a form of killing?)

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1. Genesis 43:16 When Joseph saw Benjamin with them, he said to the steward of his house, “Take these men to my house, slaughter **חָבֵט** an animal and prepare a meal; they are to eat with me at noon.”

2. Exodus 20:13 You shall not murder **רָצַח**

3. G. Johannes Botterweck; Helmer Ringgren. Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament. p. 451. The only exception is found in Isaiah 22:13 “slaying oxen.”

4. Joshua 8:26 For Joshua did not draw back the hand that held out his javelin until he had destroyed all who lived in Ai. NEW INT.

Our modern, civilized, ethic is culturally approved and that cultural mindset eventually defines the law code of that culture. Nationalism, for example, suggests that taking a life is, on occasion expedient as in war—and even collateral damage is acceptable in the fog of war. A few U.S. states still justified capital punishment.

The underside of any moral code tends to be invisible to the philosopher who defines it in such a way that exonerates his or her actions where in other cultures he or she would be criminally implicated.

The same may be said of a nation's or organization's constitution. We write them to better our own prospects but if we don't stop amending them we may eventually find ourselves on the other end of that bias. What is unconscionable when *'they'* do it never impinges upon our conscience when we do. It's the grown up version of the old third grader's chant "*I know you are but what am I!?*"

As Professor Connelly pointed out regarding interpreting 'myths', "...*everything* [has] *to do with ... self-image,*" Atheism gets to propose a new list of ethics based on the culture they live in—especially after firing God from that job. There is no ridicule intended in saying this. This is simply a postmodern observation.

A quickly add here: the church, sad to say, has a history of writing theologies with points of reason that do not connect because they were never written to exegete scripture but to promote doctrine ..and to promote their own sub-cultural sense of well-being and spirituality. Nations write histories that spin tales of national greatness— a proud patriotism that often is laced with propaganda. (I am not sure if news is news anymore.)

Judging fairly is really a job for God. We need a code of ethics defined by an outside source, if there is to be one at all. We need a third party and not the criminal or the victim, someone else like a *'god'* who can define morality objectively, without personal bias, but with fairness. ...if there is such a god. Christians believe there is.

I am often reminded that 'life isn't fair.' This may be a symptom of a 'godless' society—a society that cannot find that outside arbitrator or mediator to write their code for them... ..or we simply do not want any outside help.

But for christians, that moral law is not so much a code but a way of life, a holiness that answers to a relationship with a holy God. Yes, this is circular talk. Whoever God is, He is by definition holy and what He does is considered an outreach of His 'holy' character. God, for the believer, at least in theory, becomes the definer of what is right from wrong. A far better way to say this: we need to honor our relationship with God and live in that relationship. *"In Him we live and move and have our being."*<sup>5</sup> Sadly, we have not done so ..as we should.

### Commanded to Kill

But atheism claims that mass killings are done for religious, not political, purposes. Atheists don't start wars? Please keep in mind that I am writing not to supply Christians with arguments against atheism but in an effort to explain the major disconnection—perhaps, dissension—atheism has with the christian faith and to encourage us to value that faith.

Wars are fought by religious zealots who grow their influence at gun point. Wars are often conducted in God's name. The christian's God in the Old Testament is seen as waging war by proxy, commanding His followers to exact His judgment or vengeance on someone He has a case against. Or so it appears.

Church history records how easy it was—and is—for one nation or group to inflict evil on another and claim to be driven by a divine '*In-hoc-signa*' inspiration. But what should we do when that god—our God—not only condones the slaughter of innocent lives but He actually commands it? Doug Phillips saw this as a first cause in leaving the christian faith:

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5. Acts 17:28.

"God DIRECTLY ORDERED many, many people to kill many other people, usually over real estate disputes, exactly as we read in the Bible."<sup>6</sup>

### CHEREM

The word is '*CHEREM*' in Hebrew, '*anathema*' in Greek. It actually describes something or someone who has been *devoted* to God. Like the English word, *devoted* means given totally or *consecrated*, to God. It, he, she now belongs solely to God. They or it can never be redeemed or bought back. It, he or she has to die. It's the only way to guarantee that the devoted thing or person has been given to God. Thus the word means to *destroy*, *curse*, or simply, to *put to death*. With whole cities during Israel's conquest of Canaan this meant the extermination of an entire race of people. It is recorded in Deuteronomy 2:34 "*At that time we took all his towns and completely destroyed (CHEREM) them—men, women and children. We left no survivors.*"

Since the word stem is used 90 times in our Old Testament, it is not far-fetched to think that God was somehow behind the attempted extinction of not a few cultures and the annihilation of entire communities whose only sin was that they weren't God's chosen people. Our civilized minds are in shock by this appalling assault on women and children whose only crime was "*the-wrong-place-at-the-wrong-time.*"

Christians are now, theologically speaking, between a rock and a hard place. On one side, if we don't want to believe this scene possible, we can claim that the whole story of the conquest of Canaan could not be mapped place by place as the Book of Joshua records it—something many archeologists conclude. Or we can let the story stand as is and wonder how God could participate in such carnage.

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6. Doug Philips. *The Bad People Stole My God* (Sight66.com, 2012), (Kindle Locations 798-799).

It is also true that Joshua's campaign was incomplete. Judges chapter 1 is a record of his failure to free the land of all the Canaanites living there.<sup>7</sup>

Archeology has verified that wars were fought in Canaan during this time. Is it possible that because war is hell, people needed a higher cause, a religious cause, loftier than their own personal ethics to justify killing? Today we don't need to implicate God because we are a democracy and 'patriotism' answers to that need.

Later, Saul didn't realize or didn't want to admit that in this regard he, too, had failed in exterminating Amalek.

"But I did obey the LORD," Saul said. "I went on the mission the LORD assigned me. I completely destroyed the Amalekites." 1 Samuel 15:20 NEW INT.

According to 2 Samuel 8:12 Amalek was still very much alive as a culture and as a military force against Israel under David's reign. That means clearly that sometimes a CHEREM isn't a CHEREM—only an attempt at it.

King David also dedicated "*articles to the LORD, as he had done with the silver and gold from all the nations he had subdued*"<sup>8</sup> Here the word '*dedicated*' means simply set aside for use in the service of God.<sup>9</sup> No killing is involved.

Is it possible that there would be no war if there were no religion? I am still wondering how a godless society would be better at peace and love than one that had the Christian message of grace! And since God was undeniably a named accomplice in Israel's wars, are we far off in believing He did so to show, prove, that He was real; He was their victory, the strong arm that

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7. The archaeological record suggests that the ban was never in fact completely carried out. see <http://barrybandstra.com/rtot4/rtot4-10-ch6.html>

8. 2 Samuel 8:11 NEW INT.

9. Is it possible that CHEREM lost some of its etiological zeal and simply came to mean to destroy utterly. Even the greeks have a word 'to die' that is said to be in an intensified form: ἀποθνήσκω.

saves. One commentary says that Israel “*fights in the strength of the Lord.*”<sup>10</sup>

### Devoted

Micah prophecies (4:12-13)

“But they do not know the thoughts of the Lord; they do not understand his plan.... ... you will break to pieces many nations. You will devote their ill-gotten gains to the Lord, their wealth to the Lord of all the earth.’

Which word is a translation of CHEREM in this verse: *break?* Or *devote?* Break is breaking people. Devote is devoting wealth, money, gold, etc.

The context is a world set against God by aligning themselves in battle array against His people. The nations gather together to wipe Israel off the map and God intervenes through His people in battle.

Correct. It is ‘devote.’ The commentary reads: “*God... consecrated [CHEREM] (the New International Version reads wrestling) their possessions and taking them back to Himself.*”<sup>11</sup> Here CHEREM has nothing to do with killing.

There is something poetically descriptive about the wording here: The nations were beaten and their goods repossessed.

There is much presupposed that is inapplicable and untrue when an ancient text is wedged into a modern context. How timely of Micah to remind us: “*they do not know the thoughts of the Lord.*”

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10. C. F. Keil. Commentary of the Old Testament. vol.10. p. 474.

Zechariah 6:4 he answered and spake unto me, saying, This is the word of the Lord unto Zerubbabel, saying, Not by might, nor by power, but by my spirit, saith the Lord of hosts. KJV

11. *ibid.*

### Child Sacrifice

But sacrificing children! That's a completely different thing—so horrendous, it is unimaginable. When I read about it in the Bible I could not picture it. According to Sam Harris: *"it is only by ignoring such barbarisms that the Good Book can be reconciled with life in the modern world."*<sup>12</sup>

John Loftus wrote in disgust: *"God asked Abraham to kill and sacrifice his son Isaac. If we heard a voice today telling us to do that, we would not think this voice was God's, although Abraham wasn't horrified at the suggestion. Enough!"*<sup>13</sup>

Abraham was emotionally prepared—so we are lead to think—to kill his son, Isaac.<sup>14</sup> Abraham was instructed by God in a dream<sup>15</sup> to offer his son as a sacrifice. This story is the target of a non-believer's scorn simply because to them the true motive, the heart, of God is not exposed in this otherwise unexplainable account of parental abuse. To the believer, God knew how the story would play out, that He had no intention of allowing Isaac to die. Beside pointing out to Abraham the value of absolute surrender, total commitment, to what God was all about in his life, this was God's metaphor of a future event. Then it would be His, God's son, and the wood pile would be built in the form of a cross. To the believer, Abraham's faith, trust, in God was a raw and unconditional dependence on God's wisdom—as it should have been—even if it conjures up a horror for which not even

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12. John W. Loftus. *Why I Became an Atheist: A Former Preacher Rejects Christianity* (Amherst, New York: Prometheus Books, 2008), (Kindle Locations 1650-1652).

13. *ibid.*

14. This has been categorized as a biblical scandal along with Hosea's unchastity and the plundering of the Egyptians. An interesting perspective is offered in Adonis Vidu's work in *Atonement, Law, and Justice*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Publishing, 2014), p. 82. God's "action ...[is].. deduced from the ultimate principle of God's love."

15. Genesis 22 records God's instruction followed immediately in verse 3 with "And Abraham rose up early in the morning" The 'and' is conversive connecting the verses in the narrative, which suggests to me that Abraham received God's message in a dream.

Hollywood has a rating. Such a trust in God is what made Abraham a candidate for Faith's Hall of Fame in Hebrews 11.<sup>16</sup>

The claim by some that "*child sacrifice was probably only considered evil when it was done in the name of a foreign god*"<sup>17</sup> is not supported by scripture.<sup>18</sup> Exodus 34:10-20 has been quoted in contending that Yahwah accepted child sacrifice only when the children were torched *on His behalf*. God needs no defense against a misinterpretation of this text where God requires all the firstborn to be redeemed<sup>19</sup> and *not* sacrificed. (I cannot yell it louder that the key to understanding Calvary is '*redemption, redeemed, ransom*') The entire monologue warns Israel of the dangers that await them if they culturally mix with the Canaanites who did sacrifice their kids to their idols.

There is not much more to say. Non-believers, understandably, will see meanings in the text that are simply not there. Micah 6:6-8 ends in a timeless truth but lays bare the aching heart that pessimistically wanders through tragic thoughts—including sacrificing his own children—before arriving at the simplicity of a mind at peace with God.

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16. Hebrews 11:17 By faith Abraham, when God tested him, offered Isaac as a sacrifice. He who had embraced the promises was about to sacrifice his one and only son, NEW INT.

17. John W. Loftus. *Why I Became an Atheist: A Former Preacher Rejects Christianity* (Kindle Locations 2302-2303).

18. Deuteronomy 18:10 Let no one be found among you who sacrifices their son or daughter in the fire NEW INT.

The verses that may suggest that God accepts child sacrifices, if read correctly, clearly says otherwise: Ezekiel. 20:26, 31 "I defiled them through their gifts—the sacrifice of every firstborn—that I might fill them with horror so they would know that I am the LORD. When you offer your gifts—the sacrifice of your children in the fire—you continue to defile yourselves with all your idols to this day. Am I to let you inquire of me, you Israelites? As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign LORD, I will not let you inquire of me."

19. "Chuck Smith interprets: "Your firstborn son belonged to God. Now if you wanted to keep him, you had to buy him from God. You could redeem him, you could keep him, but you'd have to buy him from God. The firstborn son belongs to God."

With what shall I come before the Lord  
and bow down before the exalted God?  
Shall I come before him with burnt offerings,  
with calves a year old?  
Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams,  
with ten thousand rivers of olive oil?  
Shall I offer my firstborn for my transgression,  
the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?  
He has shown you, O mortal, what is good.  
And what does the Lord require of you?  
To act justly and to love mercy  
and to walk humbly with your God.

God's response to all of this?

"They have built the high places of Topheth in the Valley of Ben Hinnom to burn their sons and daughters in the fire—something I did not command, nor did it enter my mind."<sup>20</sup>

As to whether or not Israel actually did practice such a tortuous death of children, Wellhausen assures us:

"The offering of human first-born was certainly no regular or commanded exaction in ancient times; there are no traces of so enormous a blood tax, but, on the contrary, many of a great preference for eldest sons. It was not until shortly before the exile that the burning of children was introduced on a grand scale along with many other innovations, and supported by a strict interpretation of the command regarding firstlings."<sup>21</sup>

### Appeasement

Sacrifices for most non-believers, none-the-less, suggests a barbaric religious practice of 'appeasement'. This word suggests pacifying a negative emotion, an impassioned, heart-thriving impulse, to 'get even' ... to kill someone. But God's heart throbbed *for* His people. It was love not vengeance that brought Him to a cross. (John 3:16)

Mr. Loftus, perhaps confused and angrily, bewailed:

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20. Jeremiah 7:31 NEW INT.

21. Julius Wellhausen. Prolegomena to the History of Ancient Israel (Santa Cruz, CA: Evinity Publishing Inc., 2009), 90. Kindle Edition. see Jeremiah. 7:31, 19:5; Ezekiel. 20:26

"In the New Testament God the Father sacrifices his only son (Jesus) as the central redemptive act of Christianity, and God still seeks to fulfill his lust for human sacrifice by burning humans forever in the lake of fire."<sup>22</sup>

Loftus is mixing ideas, I think, for poetic effect. He, little doubt, was taking poetic license in mistakenly suggesting that God is, in some way, sadistically enjoying giving pain. Mythological deities were appeased through such barbarism but the message of God's Word is a message of grace. The biblical idea represents merely God's acceptance of Christ's death as, metaphorically, the price of our redemption. There is nothing sadistic in this. But Paul was right: the message of Jesus' sacrificial death has become to many non-believers a *rock of offense*.<sup>23</sup>

### A Cry for Mercy

"*The sacrificial animal*" Nicholas Wade, referred to as: '*... the intermediary between the sacrificer in the living world and the gods in the supernatural world.*'<sup>24</sup> To get the merciful attention of the gods, sacrifices had to be presented to them. To use a modern analogy: sacrifices were transmitters designed to read the frequency a god might be listening in on while a supplicant seeks mercy.

The Old Testament offering of a sacrifice represented more a cry of mercy not from a god who would rather smite them but from the God Who waited on their repentance to show them the mercy they sought. It was a move toward a relationship and not to placate wrath. Even though, yes, the sacrifice was very much part of a religious ritual, seeking mercy

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22. John W. Loftus. *Why I Became an Atheist: A Former Preacher Rejects Christianity* (Amherst, New York: Prometheus Books, 2008), (Kindle Locations 2294-2312). Kindle Edition.

23. Romans 9:33 As it is written: "See, I lay in Zion a stone that causes people to stumble and a rock that makes them fall, and the one who believes in him will never be put to shame. NEW INT.

24. Nicholas Wade. *The Faith Instinct: How Religion Evolved & Why It Endures* (New York: Penguin Press, 2009), 42.

from Yahweh became a form of worship if the heart was prostrate. The Bible takes one's attitude into account; so, it is never just a ritual.<sup>25</sup>

I Samuel 15:21 acclaims that God prefers obedience to sacrifice, which is not to discredit the importance of a sacrifice. The sacrifices designated by our God in our Old Testament are a look ahead to Christ. The message here is that heart and life-style count for something when performing even the ceremonial law. This does not speak of eternal separation from God. Quite the opposite: it is God's plan to avoid it.<sup>26</sup>

### They Go Way Back

In addition, sacrifices go way back in recorded history, and maybe further—for a reason. No detail in a plan to offer salvation—a plan—this fantastically simple from our perspective (just faith) but requiring every bit of strength God's eternal wisdom and power could muster from His (Jesus' death)—no detail—could be incidental.<sup>27</sup> The very existence of a sacrificial lamb is part of a dynamic that looks back beyond our historical horizon to where God envisioned details of the ultimate expression of His love.

God in His foreknowledge must have seen man embracing the sacrifice as an essential part of his religion. It now becomes the expression of God's own saving grace and is recognizable across cultures. The sacrifice once a gift presented *to* God now becomes, with Jesus' death, the gift *from* Him. The death of Jesus on Calvary was not just the death of a good man who didn't deserve capital punishment Roman style. His death was more than just the death of a young life that had so much

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25. Proverbs 15:8 The LORD detests the sacrifice of the wicked, but the prayer of the upright pleases him NEW INT.

26. Romans 8:1 Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, NEW INT.

27. Isaiah 59:16 He saw that there was no one, he was appalled that there was no one to intervene; so his own arm achieved salvation for him, and his own righteousness sustained him. NEW INT.

more to offer. His death was a *'sacrifice'* and this changes the dynamic of the event from a temporal act of misfortune to an eternal act of mercy.

When all the theologizing is said and done this moment in time must be viewed by believers as an act of God and it *is* vicarious. It has to be. There is no other way to understand the mercy and grace it provides.<sup>28</sup> The words of Chris Tomlin's "*You Are My King*" puts this truth to verse in the simplest language.

I'm forgiven because you were forsaken  
 I'm accepted, You were condemned  
 I'm alive and well  
 Your spirit is within me  
 Because you died and rose again  
 Amazing love, how can it be?  
 That you, my king, would die for me  
 Amazing love, I know it's true

It is a thought that floods the christian heart with wave upon wave of praise, It is what Dorothy Sayers called "*the most exciting drama that ever staggered the imagination of man.*"<sup>29</sup>

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28. Isaiah 53:5 But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed. NEW INT.

Romans 4:25 He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification. NEW INT.

29. Dorothy Sayers. *Creed or Chaos* (Manchester, NH: Sophia Institute Press, 1974), 5.

## Nothing but the Blood

*"God has no religion."*

— Mahatma Gandhi

Notwithstanding the gratitude to God that talking of sacrifices stirs within the believer, a cursory look at the sacrifices in the Jewish Canon still leads skeptics to wonder what, if anything, does this have to do with Jesus' death. The association—to be sure—made by Christianity—and only Christianity—seems at first glance not to 'line up' as a pure antitype of Christ's death. The burnt offering was a ram<sup>1</sup>, not a lamb<sup>2</sup> as Jesus was. It was totally consumed, not buried as our Savior was. It was consumed on an altar of fire, not a roman cross..

The Passover lamb gets much closer in metaphor to what happened on Golgotha's hill and, indeed typifies it.

The peace offering reminds us of Paul's interpretation: *"He is our peace."*<sup>3</sup> The sin and guilt offerings clearly represent the act of God by which Christ's death dealt with both sin and guilt in the believer's life. The psychological, emotional, and spiritual healing in this act is profoundly significant.

Is it a leap of faith to associate each and every detail of the Levitical law with Christ? Should we find the type for each ceremonial gesture? Can we? It is difficult for me, in total honesty, to comprehend a complete detailed view of the sacrificial system and make the association between each part of

1. Exodus 29:18 Then burn the entire ram on the altar. It is a burnt offering to the LORD, a pleasing aroma, a food offering presented to the LORD NEW INT.

2. John 1:30 When he saw Jesus passing by, he said, "Look, the Lamb of God!" NEW INT.

3. Ephesians 2:14 For he himself is our peace, who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility,

the ceremony and what happened on Calvary. Yet, as a believer, I anticipate all will be revealed by God in due course.

Some sacrifices were grains offered to God. In the Levitical record, grain offerings were accepted.<sup>4</sup> Perhaps, however, the critics are on to something regarding grain offerings as later introductions to the list of offerings. After all, it is reasonable to assume that the children of Israel were not harvesting wheat in the desert. Julius Wellhausen informs us:

“Agriculture was learned by the Hebrews from the Canaanites in whose land they settled, and in commingling with whom they, during the period of the Judges, made the transition to a sedentary life.”<sup>5</sup>

The summation of all this, as far as it goes? Wellhausen, writing about the advancing historical importance in Ancient Israel of a centralized worship in Jerusalem and the role the sacrificial feasts played in that regard, admitted,

“It is not to be wondered at that much should seem unclear to us which must have been obvious to contemporaries.”<sup>6</sup>

### It's All About The Blood

Some pastors are notorious for finding analogies, metaphors, and types everywhere in the Bible. It is the spice that makes some messages palatable—to be sure. For believers, though, the main point of a sacrifice which speaks also to the sacrifice of Christ is the shedding of blood.

“What can wash away my sins? Nothing but the blood of Jesus!”

This is the christian’s *‘Shema.’* Pentecostals seek to be “covered by the blood.” On troublesome days they “plead the blood.”<sup>7</sup> The wine of the Eucharist in some christian faiths through transubstantiation *becomes* the blood of Christ.

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4. Leviticus 2:1-15.

5. Julius Wellhausen. Prolegomena to the History of Ancient Israel (Santa Cruz, CA: Evinity Publishing Inc., 2009), 94. Kindle Edition.

6. *ibid.* 92 Kindle Edition.

7. I tend to agree here with a friend who finds no biblical evidence of such a practice.

*'Sangue di Gesù'* (the blood of Jesus) among pentecostal Italian speaking people is a sacred phrase only spoken with reverence. (I learned this the hard way when one of the Italian ladies scolded my inappropriate attempt at being funny using this phrase.)

One significant correlation that should be obvious between an animal sacrifice in ancient Israel and the death of Christ is the shedding of blood. Jesus, Himself, affirmed this at His last supper with the twelve.

"This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins."<sup>8</sup>

The elders of Ephesus were summoned by Paul to Miletus for a tearful goodbye when Paul admonished them—something all elders and pastors should make the single passion of their ministry:

"Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood."<sup>9</sup>

If Paul and Peter did have their disagreements, this was not one of them. Peter agreed:

"For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your ancestors, but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect."<sup>10</sup>

### Lingering Questions

I read one christian blogger's comment in which she or he remained unsure as to the meaning of the levitical sacrifices. Why did Jesus have to die? Why did He have to shed His blood? Because this comes from a blogger it is noteworthy here, representing, as I believe it does, many others:

"The Bible claims that God needed a blood sacrifice. Was this really the case or were the Children of Israel simply adopting the practices of the 'pagan' religions around them? I've never

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8. Matthew 26:28 NEW INT.

9. Acts 20:28 NEW INT.

10. 1 Peter 1:18-19 NEW INT..

understood why God needed death and blood in order to deal with the 'sin' of his creation."<sup>11</sup>

The *New Atheists* have to be smiling to hear this bewildering exposé from a believer. But there is a response.

Why must it take blood to be forgiven? The answer is to be found in the biblical word: '*atonement*.'

"For the life of a creature is in the blood, and I have given it to you to make atonement for yourselves on the altar; it is the blood that makes atonement for one's life."<sup>12</sup>

It took the death of our Savior to provide what God intended to provide in His salvation package for us. And since the life is in the blood, death means the shedding of blood. That's the simple logic behind God's atoning work on Calvary.

### Day of Atonement

"The tenth day of this seventh month is the Day of Atonement.<sup>13</sup> Hold a sacred assembly and deny yourselves, and present a food offering to the LORD."<sup>14</sup>

Here is not the place for a lesson in theology, but an overview of postmodern thought. The 'Day of Atonement' or *Yom Kippur* was a day of repentance and forgiveness. It was the one day all Israel sought God in prayer for the provisions of His mercy typified in the sacrifices. The main criticism given by liberal theology sees this text as an idea born during the Babylonian exile and not instituted by Moses.

"Notwithstanding its conspicuous importance, there is nothing known of the great day of atonement either in the Jehovistic and Deuteronomic portions of the Pentateuch or in the

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11. <https://seekism.wordpress.com/2005/05/18/a-bloody-religion/>

12. Leviticus 17:11

13. There are only 8 references to the noun 'atonement' in our Old Testament and all are in Exodus, Leviticus, or Numbers. But the verb meaning 'to forgive' or 'expiate' or 'cover' sins is used 94 times.

Proverbs 16:6 Through love and faithfulness sin is atoned for; through the fear of the LORD evil is avoided. NEW INT.

14. Leviticus 23:27 NEW INT.

historical and prophetic books. It first begins to show itself in embryo during the exile."<sup>15</sup>

Postmodernism, also, would call the sacrifice of innocence, brutal and vindictive:

"... His [God's] vindictive sadism was sated by the crucifixion of His own Son, who was innocent"<sup>16</sup>

### God's Heart

Vengeance does not represent God's heart. An act of atonement is an act of forgiveness. It is the process by which sins are purged, the sinner pardoned, and the past buried with no grave marker or memorial to remind us. Our regrettable past, our sins, our offenses are covered, buried (this is the most basic meaning of the word 'atonement.')

What perplexes non-believers is why must forgiveness require sacrifice? Why should God forgiving me of my offense against Him require the death of another—first the sacrificial animal then finally His Son? But that is the message in the Levitical code. As Professor Girdlestone so aptly said it: "*The people of Israel were frequently reminded that their hope lay in the death of a representative.*"<sup>17</sup>

Did Jesus have to die or did God simply allow the romans to kill Him? And if it was an integral part of a divine plan—as we believe it was—why did Jesus have to die?

This is the 'mystery of godliness'<sup>18</sup> to be sure. Our quest to know comes down to six hours on a cross. Forgiveness, yes,

15. Julius Wellhausen. Prolegomena to the History of Ancient Israel p. 111. Kindle Edition.

Wellhausen references Ezekiel (14:18-20).

16. Dorothy Sayers. Creed Or Chaos (Manchester,NH: Sophia Institute Press, 1974), 33.

17. Robert Girdlestone. Synonyms of the Old Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Grand Rapids Book Manufacturers, Inc. 1974), 129.

see also Leviticus 17:11.

18. I Timothy 3:16 Beyond all question, the mystery from which true godliness springs is great: He appeared in the flesh, was

can be just the words, and if spoken by God that forgiveness is as real as anything God spoke into existence. But the cross was more, much more, because it needed to provide much more than words alone could offer. On this stage an earthshaking, veiling drama was played out. An eternal battle was fought for the souls of men. An old ceremonial law code was called on one final time while the covenant of an eternal davidic kingdom was renewed. But above all, His sacrifice brought the birth of a living hope because Jesus' forgiveness speaks thru the ages that Calvary was not the death of a good man but the death of the God-man who could forgive sins. In declaring us forgiven, He finished the work He came to accomplish. One thing alone remained, to rise from the dead validating that forgiveness.<sup>19</sup>

### Living Hope

It is a hope that radiates like the morning sun, the reassuring warmth of an eternal tomorrow. It is a hope planted over a buried past, the flower of a divine promise of newness of life, of a reconciliation with God. And with Jesus' resurrection there is the hope of our resurrection. Dorothy Sayers reminded us: *"when He was raised again from the dead, man was resurrected."*<sup>20</sup> Jesus, through His death, Girdlestone reminds us, *"gave substance and embodiment to the divine disposition of mercy which was foreshadowed in the Levitical Law."*<sup>21</sup>

And for those who still think that forgiving someone is just a matter of words, consider how we are asked to forgive. Actions must follow the words or forgiveness has no *substance*—to use Girdlestone's term. We need to forgive in deed if we have forgiven indeed. Forgiveness is an act of reconciliation.

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vindicated by the Spirit, was seen by angels, was preached among the nations, was believed on in the world, was taken up in glory. NEW INT.

19. Romans 4:25 He ... was raised to life for our justification.

20. Dorothy Sayers. *Creed or Chaos* (Manchester, NH: Sophia Institute Press, 1974), 8ff.

21. Robert Girdlestone. *Synonyms of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Grand Rapids Book Manufacturers, Inc. 1974), 130.

Forgiveness is a powerful friend. It can melt hardened hearts, disarm a defensive stance, defuse anger, heal relationships, and for those who want it, forgiveness has provided eternal life—and herein lies our greatest hope..

Christians are asked to emulate God in this matter, to be ministers of reconciliation. *Forgive as you have been forgiven.*<sup>22</sup> And, to be sure, this is happening, thanks to Jesus' night of suffering. To the believer, the abuse of friendship may indeed be given a proper burial through forgiving tears and repentant hugs—or most definitely should. We have been given new birth and a new hope thru Christ that is confirmed in every act of forgiving. Our lives should bear witness to a spirit of reconciliation and healed relationships. Love—not american-style but God-style—should be the message of the Cross spoken in every action and every word of every believer.

Perhaps some hurts seem unforgettable. Perhaps, there is a distant memory that shows up in dreams unannounced and uninvited. Perhaps some offense requires, we reason, a vigilant watch to warn us lest it dares besiege us again. Perhaps, something too painful to remember clearly, nonetheless, still haunts us in unexplainable fears, moments of uncontrollable rage, orphaned desires that are not who we want to be—yet, they somehow show us who we have become! (Oh, how it hurts to be human!) And forgiveness is not just forgiving others, but forgiving one's self... me—the one who hurts in the solitude of my thoughts, in the heaviness of my spirit, in the regrets of a long ago that should have nothing to do with who I am now, but somehow seem to. The work on Calvary needed to address all this pain and hurt. *"the chastisement of our peace was upon him"*<sup>23</sup>

There is here, at least, a hint at the size of the work God had to and continues to have to perform on the human soul to bring us to His peace! The words *"Forgive them"* He spoke from the cross were the ultimate vindication that something real was

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22. Matthew 6:12 And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. NEW INT.

23. Isaiah 53:5

happening the day He died. And thus began His ministry to us. Today He sits at the Father's right hand praying for you and me, praying that what He provided that day on Calvary will have the full benefit of His grace in us. He sent the Holy Spirit to remind us.

It is on our own road to Emmaus when He speaks to the heart that all this begins to make sense. The truth in that moment, as to why He had to die, is revealed in such clarity as to never again need to be proven:

*He died ...for me!!*

## The Dogma

*... the question 'What think ye of Christ?' lands the average man at once in the very knottiest kind of dogmatic riddle." — Dorothy Sayers*

Is the atonement provided through the death of Christ "... hopelessly irrelevant to life..."? Is Christian unity lost in a labyrinth of conflicting theologies? Is the message of atoning grace the needle in a haystack of conflicting doctrines: Calvinist, Wesleyan, Reformed, Thomistic, Pentecostal teachings, etc.? "... the question 'What think ye of Christ?'," Dorothy Sayers bemoans, "lands the average man at once in the very knottiest kind of dogmatic riddle."<sup>1</sup>

Christianity can be confused and confusing. As a result the 'average' man's interest in the church's message is waning. We live now with social change that is worlds removed from what the church had represented over the centuries. We confess a more general confidence in scientific research, we believe will provide the solutions to society's ills. We live in a secularized culture that is saying "Take away theology and give us some nice religion or we want none at all" Churches have become more a social rather than spiritual gathering. The cry of the day is: *Become seeker friendly or close your doors!*

But Sayers is right: "If the 'average man' is going to be interested in Christ at all, it is the dogma [the message of atoning grace] that will provide the interest."<sup>2</sup> The world's disinterest in what the church has to offer may be the result of—to use the Revelator's metaphor—her candle going out and being removed by God, Himself, as He warned.

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1. Dorothy Sayers. *Creed Or Chaos* (Manchester, NH: Sophia Institute Press, 1974), 49-50.

2. *ibid.* 51.

It sounds cruel, sacrilegiously cruel, to accuse the church of such grievances, accuse her of turning God's stomach.<sup>3</sup> Yet that's the content of seven letters to seven churches, each one representing one of seven possible, however subtle, changes that like a slow drifting current have carried the church away from her message (what Sayers choose to call *'the dogma'* simply because she knew how repulsed the church has become hearing that word.)

### Seven Letters

Ephesus was just as ardent in her zeal for right but her vision had changed. Instead of focusing on Christ and His crucifixion and resurrection, she now saw purpose and meaning in legislating the righteousness of her doctrinal stance.

Smyrna was susceptible to the threat of persecution and opposition even though she knew that there is a social price to pay for promoting the message of Calvary.

Pergamum was more into cultural acceptance because she welcomed into her company a compromising doctrine that made even the most wicked feel at home. The message of a sin-purging, forgiving salvation was silenced.

Thyatira compromised practice, not just doctrine. As a witness she was unrecognizable. Her heathen practices contaminated her christian ritual; it was no longer christian.

Sardis' witness was incomplete. She lost her vision or her faith in the work of God or her passion for it and failed to complete the tasks God assigned her in her world. She was, what one minister called, "the keeper of the vision," God's vision for His church, to promote the message of the Cross, but she simply ran out of steam. She failed to keep the "Great Commission" relevant as her sole mission in life, to stay on point, to remain focused on what was, in her beginnings, her overwhelming joy to herald.

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3. Revelation 3:16 So, because you are lukewarm—neither hot nor cold—I am about to spit you out of my mouth. NEW INT.

Philadelphia was easily discouraged and failed to see open opportunities for service to the Lord.

Laodicea traded body ministry for corporate enterprise. Success was no longer seen as an expression of her faithfulness to God, to live the message of the Cross. Success was measured in coin, on organizational charts or in property value.

If you think of it, these are the seven ways our witness and the message of the Cross can be minimized, the way to muffle the Word of Salvation through Christ and we have been warned in the opening words of the Revelator to listen.

"Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches."

The church has heard these words, but she has not necessarily been listening. She may need to fix this.

### Postscript

There are reasons to think that the church—at least some 'christian' churches—may have "*forsaken the love [she] had at first.*"<sup>4</sup> Has she excluded the message of atoning grace from her repertoire? Has she failed to keep the message of Calvary her trumpet call, her emphasis, her passion, her heart?

*"The reason why the churches are discredited today"* Sayers blurts out matter-of-factly, "*is ...that they have run away from theology*"<sup>5</sup> [the message of the Cross]."

The Barna Group shares a sad statistic:

"There is not a single demographic for which church attendance is on the increase. While a few segments have demonstrated relative stability in church attendance levels over the past two decades, most people groups in the United States show declines in attendance. And because young adults have the highest levels of church avoidance, their children are

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4. Revelation 2:4 NEW INT.

5. Dorothy Sayers. *Creed Or Chaos* (Manchester, NH: Sophia Institute Press, 1974), 46.

less likely to attend churches, increasing the likelihood that they, too, will avoid churches in adulthood.<sup>6</sup>

Sayers warned:

"The thing that is in danger is the whole structure of society, and it is necessary to persuade thinking men and women of the vital and intimate connection between the structure of society and the theological doctrines of Christianity [the vicarious atonement]."<sup>7</sup>

The day one accepts Christ as Savior becomes their '*Day of Atonement*' and every believer needs to tap into all that this provides for living the christian life. A teaching on what God made available to us the day Jesus died is more than a salvation moment. The message of Calvary is an unending provision of His grace that no believer can afford to ignore and still claim a vital witness for God's Truth.

What about those who are not '*saved*'? The church since the 5<sup>th</sup> century has had a frightening answer: *eternal punishment*. Since this, too, has caught the attention of the atheist, we need to ask, "*Is the christian religious world unto something here or is this just a scare tactic to enlist adherents?*"

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6. George Barna; David Kinnaman eds. *Churchless: Understanding Today's Unchurched and How to Connect with Them* (Carol Stream,IL:Tyndale House Publications, 2015), (Kindle Locations 175-177)

7. *ibid.* 45-46.

## Eternal Flames

*The history of Christianity, ...will abundantly establish the truth ...that the temper and practice of a people is determined by the spirit of their religion and their gods.*

*- Thomas Thayer*

The question of a 'lost eternity' or an 'eternity for the lost' has generated other questions: "Where do infants go when they die? What decides heaven or hell before a child can be considered accountable? What about the third world cultures that never heard about any of this; what happens to them when they die?"

In some cases we have created theologies to answer these questions. One belief has imagined an age of accountability before which children go to heaven. Another, provided for infant baptism. One pastor theorized that it depended on the parents, whether or not they were God-fearing. (This last was before nontraditional family units became popular.)

But no matter how one sees hell,<sup>1</sup> it is a terrible place to imagine. Dr. Benson, an eminent English minister, in a sermon on "*The Future Misery of the Wicked*," fired,

"God is, therefore, himself present in hell, to see the punishment of these rebels against his government, that it may be adequate to the infinity of their guilt: his fiery indignation kindles, and his incensed fury feeds the flame of their torment, while his powerful presence and operation maintain their being, and render all their powers most acutely sensible; thus setting the keenest edge upon their pain, and making it cut most intolerably deep. He will exert all his divine

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1. "It is very plain that neither in the Septuagint version of the Old Testament, nor in the New, does the word *hades* convey the meaning which the present English word 'hell,' in the Christian usage, always conveys to our minds." - Thomas Thayer, Thomas. *The Origin and History of the Doctrine of Endless Punishment* (Kindle Locations 1100-1102). Our concept is the Greek word 'Gehenna.'

attributes to make them as wretched as the capacity of their nature will admit."<sup>2</sup>

(Yet we say, "*God hates the sin not the sinner.*" Somewhere in here is a theological disconnect that goes unnoticed.)

The tenet of one church I found on the internet verbalized the thoughts of many christians:

"The souls of unbelievers remain, after death, in conscious punishment and torment until the second resurrection, when with soul and body reunited, they shall appear at the Great White Throne Judgment, and shall be cast into the Lake of Fire, not to be annihilated,<sup>3</sup> but to suffer everlasting conscious punishment and torment."<sup>3</sup>

They added a splattering of verses to support this position.

The beginnings of this doctrine may be traceable to St. Augustine, who maintained initially that punishment has to be as eternal for the non-believer as everlasting life is for the believer.<sup>4</sup> (Both biblical phrases use the same word for 'eternal.')

That's how he read our Lord's warning about neglecting the indigent and destitute—and the criminally forgotten.

Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life.<sup>5</sup>

(St. Augustine later changed his view but the seed of this doctrine was on the wind waiting to find a resting mind to germinate in.) The logical question being asked: *How can life be eternal but not punishment?*

(But no one is asking—or has ever asked that my research can find—why *life* is the antithesis of *punishment*. Life contrasts with

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2. Thomas Thayer. *The Origin and History of the Doctrine of Endless Punishment* (Boston, MA:Universalist publishing House, 1855), (Kindle Locations 1895-1898).

3. <http://www.conservative.edu/church/church-doctrinal-statement.htm>

4. "Augustine flourished about A.D. 400 to 430, was the first to argue that aionios signified strictly endless." - Thomas Thayer. *The Origin and History of the Doctrine of Endless Punishment* (Kindle Locations 1847-1848).

5. Matthew 25:46 NEW INT.

death.<sup>6</sup> The phrase eternal death is an oxymoron that, if biblical, needs interpreting. It is not a literal idea.)

Between St Augustine and the Great Enlightenment sermons on hell, fire and brimstone made sinners tremble ...but this is no longer the case in postmodern times—and there is a reason. Talk of a *'Lake of Fire'* was within a certain emotional tolerance back before the 20th century. Fear had meaning in a pre-modern world because the way of avoiding hell and the fires that burned there was as easy as signing a church membership or confessing Christ as Savior—and the church even gave us the words to sign—or say. Life styles were unadorned, most people lived in a life-threatening poverty. Most people were God-fearing—before science claimed that seat of honor. God was an important part of culture, even though the rumblings of the thunderstorm of modernism were on the horizon.

The *pre-modern* civilized world was a society built upon christian principles even if the average person didn't realize it. So Jonathan Edwards could describe God as angry or Billy Sunday could decry a saloon as an "*incarnate fiend of hell*" in his famous 'booze' sermon mentioning 'hell' 40 times.<sup>7</sup> It was a time when simple principles for living a simpler life bonded most of society to christianity in a mutual respect for Bible based ethics, commonsense morals and a life style based on a common worldview.

But with the modern era society began to distance itself from the church. Following Christ was no longer a simple signature on a 3 by 5 card or a Sunday attendance but it appeared to be a life altering proposition that required changing society's worldview and disowning a science that civilization has invested life-times of academia in as a source of all truth. As church and society drifted farther apart, the preacher's sermon on hell was finally inaudible across a chasm of vacuous disinterest. Neither side is listening to the other's reasoning.

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6. Romans 6:23 For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord. NEW INT.

7. [http://www.biblebelievers.com/billy\\_sunday\\_booze.html](http://www.biblebelievers.com/billy_sunday_booze.html)

### Painful Levels

And hell is pain. We all have a certain level of tolerance to pain or even imagined pain and eternal flames far exceeds any such limit in either our experience or worst nightmare. The warning of everlasting fire and brimstone has exceeded our threshold for such painful thoughts.

I compare it to owing someone money. If I owe someone one hundred dollars but don't want to pay them back yet, I might reconsider if they torment me with thoughts of lawsuits or violence. The simple annoyance of repeat badgering will cause most people to redeem their sanity for a hundred dollar bill. But if I owe one million dollars which I cannot pay, no amount of threats will make any difference.

Before the 20th century, in a social not theological sense, the 'debt' of sin was small. Good people whose only sin was probably church absenteeism, an occasional swear word or getting drunk (maybe a regrettable affair) could find salvation in a few acts of contrition, a word of forgiveness, a need to shake hands and show a penitent spirit—about one hundred bucks worth of wrong doing compared to today. Today, if we want to talk 'sin', it is on another level ten thousand times more removed from any 'christianized' ideal. Society has 'evolved' beyond what was once called 'christian.' (The church in general has chosen to find such ideas as: same sex attraction, transgender activism, gender dysphoria, etc. as abominable, locking such persons out of their worship and marginalizing them as unfit for the kingdom of God) This is painful for those who wanted to be part of God's world but are being pushed away. Rejection hurts, plain and simple. Feeling helplessly unable to comply with church teaching, today's 'sinner' is far more in debt—if I can retain the analogy—far more disconnected from the church than a mere night spent in a speak-easy. What they are being asked to give up for the cause of faith is far greater. To many, it is a sum they feel they cannot afford.

The sermon on hell means nothing. If anything, it is—because there is no other way for it to be—viewed as a ridiculous, vacant threat.

This is not to say some sin is more sinful or even to define what is or isn't sin. Nor do I claim that the church has a handle on what that definition is. But in the postmodern mind the christian idea of holiness, right from wrong, wholesome from sinfully harmful is an archaic wording in an extinct language. To them our preaching is monkey chatter at best from which modern reason and truth has evolved.

In another sense, a secular world has exceeded the threshold for such painful concepts. They are in shock that christians would even think such an unchristian thought as 'hell', let alone believe it!

### Horrific Creations

"The position of one major religion is that 'Hell has always been theologically troublesome, because it goes straight to the question of who God is: How do grace and judgment, or love and justice, mix in the divine mind? Are unrepentant sinners ultimately separated from God, the source of all life and hope, which is torment enough, or are they, literally, tortured for eternity? It is hard to talk about hell because this is hard stuff to talk about, but also because the Scriptures are not clear."<sup>8</sup>

Is there really such a thing as eternal torment? Are people tossed in a lake of fire that cooks them but does not kill them? So much panic and so many tears hinge on the doctrine of eternal punishment.<sup>9</sup> And the tragic thought that apparently

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8. <http://www.presbyterianmission.org/ministries/today/hell/>

9. Daniel 12:2 Multitudes who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake: some to everlasting life, others to shame and everlasting contempt. NEW INT.

'everlasting' is in Hebrew an indefinite or undefined period of time. It actually means 'hidden time'. 'Punishment' is better translated 'scorn'.

Matther 25:46 does use the word 'punishment' which in earlier usage was more disciplinary (corrective) and penal.

'Everlasting' in the N.T. is final.

God doesn't love my family like I love them. The thought of an eternity without them while they exist in an unspoken and unspeakable torment is beyond imagination.

"It's a theological problem," says Brian Blount, associate professor of New Testament at Princeton Theological Seminary. "God is all-forgiving and all-loving, but might cast some people into a lake of fire. Theologians have been working on this for a long time."<sup>10</sup>

*"Like many believers," Ken Daniels admits, "I was aware of puzzles in the Christian faith.... Most of us, whether or not we remain in the fold, have wondered about ... the harshness of eternal hell;"*<sup>11</sup> We suspect it true that *"today a significant segment of American society (almost half) no longer believes in hell."*<sup>12</sup>

One of the most depressing verses, for me at least, is Matthew 7:13. Jesus alerted his disciples to a shocking truth:

"...wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it".

And in Matthew's inimitable style of writing, he tends to string together thoughts that show some commonality in his mind. (He groups a number of parables together in chapter 13 which were probably shared by Jesus at various different times during His ministry.) So, the context of this statement by the Savior would remain illusive. But Luke offered that context (Luke 13:22ff.) which suggests that Jesus was responding to a general disinterest in His Kingdom message by the crowds that

<sup>2</sup> Thessalonians 1:9 is worth a look: "They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might"

Punished means punished here (penal). However, 'destruction' meaning death must reference the second 'death' (in Revelation 20:14 this death is called a 'Lake of Fire' which in 21:8 we are told is burning sulfur)

In Mark 9:47 and elsewhere Jesus offers referenced the valley of Fire, Gehenna, a constantly burning. Vs 48, the fire never goes out?

<sup>10</sup>. <http://www.presbyterianmission.org/ministries/today/hell/>

<sup>11</sup>. Kenneth Daniels. Why I Believed: Reflections of a Former Missionary (Austin TX:Kenneth W. Daniels, 2010.), Kindle edition.

<sup>12</sup>. <https://www.christiancourier.com/articles/95-the-doctrine-of-eternal-punishment>

still followed Him greedy for physical not spiritual health and healing. But some inquisitive soul was bold enough to ask: “Lord, are only a few people going to be saved?” To which our Lord’s “narrow-wide gate” comment was His response.

### Hell. Praise God

I confess that the concept of an endless torment for anyone who could sense such *‘beyond-registering, off-the-meter, an eternity-away’* pain is outside the purview of my intellectualism and my sense for right and wrong. It is simply unconscionable. But what is worse is finding in Christendom whole communities of believers who can sing praises and rejoice in such unimaginable horror. If the church really did buy into this idea, shouldn’t she be *weeping* instead!? When planes were flying into the twin Towers on lower Manhattan, my wife called me tearfully to come straight home, we were so shaken. And all the civilized world joined us in prayerful silence stunned by the horror. There is a level of sadness that exceeds our ability to express it. There is no celebration here! Should not the thought of hell fire be even a greater grief!?

A few groups have attached a militant tone, a sadistic enthusiasm, to their shouts of admiration to God—as they have been taught to think—for coming up with such a brilliant idea. They are not thinking about how this impacts their own families most of whom are probably candidates for the flames.

It is natural, apparently, to enlist God in our wars; so, why not in an excited spirit of retaliation for all the supposed injustice inflicted on us—not by us, of course. “*Praise the Lord and Pass the Ammunition.*”<sup>13</sup> Here is “*the glory of the coming of the Lord, ... the vintage where His grapes of wrath are stored, [and] the lightening of His terrible swift sword.*”

Are we seeing ourselves in ancient Israel when we read of—or what we interpret as—a militant spirit that implicates God in a passion for a vengeful recompense? I have been

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13. This song came out Oct 1942 when my sister was born.

appalled to sit in church and listen to shouts of 'hallelujah' and 'amen' when the preacher assigned my unchurched neighbors to the fire. There has got to be another interpretation to all of this!

### Wild Imaginations

Emerson Drive sings of how he imagines his first meeting with Jesus will go:

Surrounded by your glory  
What will my heart feel  
Will I dance for your Jesus  
Or in awe of you be still  
Will I stand in your presence  
Or to my knees will I fall  
Will I sing hallelujah  
Will I be able to speak at all  
I can only imagine

At long last someone called their thoughts what they really are at times, an active imagination filled with awe and wonder that forms pictures without words, feelings without expression, an anticipated greeting with the Savior of our souls that exceeds hope's weak expectations, a full look in His wonderful face—as another song writer penned—that permanently deletes a painful past.

But as we think ourselves capable of describing an indescribable heaven—what our loved ones who have preceded us are doing there right now—we are equally writers and producers of frightening images in our attempt to describe a place we call 'hell.'

The idea that hell is somewhere in the center of the earth accessible by a volcano entrance is outdated and unimaginative in today's terms. But the real issue with christians in dreaming up interpretations without a scholarly concern for what they're thinking is that a description of hell is also a description of the God who made it! Again: "*it goes straight to the question of who God is.*" Atheism is right in calling this a contradiction: to see a

God of Love—who not only shows love but who *is* love—creating such a house of horrors for the ignorant masses He once cared about in Jonah’s day, “*who cannot tell their right hand from their left.*”<sup>14</sup>

### The Damned

Do believers really figure that God will damn most of His creation? Does He only hope to salvage a remnant? I am told that even a number of churched people are not going to make it. Jesus talking about rich people, who were probably just the upper middle class in His day, described their chances of getting citizenship in His coming kingdom in hyperbolic rhetoric like a camel squeezed through a needle’s eye which translates: “*very unusual and very difficult.*” Rabbinic teaching used the elephant in this illustration to show impossibility.<sup>15</sup>

“*Who then can be saved?*”<sup>16</sup> asked Peter, and I am glad he did. I hurt with Peter over this nightmarish thought that so many are destined somehow to go from this darkness to the greater darkness as if God had an ‘*Oh, well!*’ moment.

Jesus answered, “*With God all things are possible*”—a thought that goes directly to the mystery of grace with which Peter struggled—as do we all. This whole ‘needle-camel’ thing even after the Cross harassed His tender conscience..

If it is hard for the righteous to be saved, what will become of the ungodly and the sinner? — I Peter 4:18 NEW INT.

Atheism has found a certain peacefulness of mind in not asking such questions.

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14. Jonah 4:11 NEW INT.

15. Leland Ryken editors ed. al. *The Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* (Downers Grove IL :InterVarsity Press, 1998), 256.

16. Mark 10:26

## WWJD

Jesus referenced 'hell' six times that we know of.<sup>17</sup> I went to Amazon looking for resource material which could document answers. I even went to YouTube for testimonials about hell that might support some conclusion. But I was overwhelmed with images and ideas, some which conflicted with traditional views, some which expanded on traditional views. So, since this is not intended as a study on Hell but a look into what divides family, hoping that there might be some common ground for reunion, I decided to go it alone.

In Mark 9 Jesus warned against allowing our own natural proclivity toward sin to involve us in things that take us out of relationship with Him, actions which involve our hands, feet and eyes, actions that as a result are offensive to that relationship,. It would be better to be maimed and unable to indulge in such things and enter heaven as a wounded believer than to end up in Gehenna where *"the worms that eat them do not die, and the fire is not quenched."*<sup>18</sup>

Jesus was, no doubt in my mind, referencing Isaiah 66:24:

"And they will go out and look on the dead bodies of those who rebelled against me; the worms that eat them will not die, the fire that burns them will not be quenched, and they will be loathsome to all mankind." NEW INT.<sup>19</sup>

What did Jesus mean by a worm that lives on putrefaction never running out of food and a flame that never goes out? This is descriptive of 'Gehenna',<sup>20</sup> which some scholarship tells us eventually became a garbage dump outside

17. The following are the texts: Matthew. 5:22, 29, 30; 10:28, 18:9, 23:15, 33; Mark 9: 43, 45, 47; Luke 12:5; James 3:6.

18. Mark 9:44,46,48 NEW INT.

19. Isaiah 30:33 is referenced here "Topheth has long been prepared; it has been made ready for the king. Its fire pit has been made deep and wide, with an abundance of fire and wood; the breath of the LORD, like a stream of burning sulfur, sets it ablaze." NEW INT.

20. Gehenna, is the Greek form of the Hebrew words Gee and Hinnom, meaning "the valley of Hinnom." גֵּי הַיְּנוֹם

Jerusalem where even the bodies of criminals were left to decompose. As Isaiah said, it is a loathsome sight.

Gehenna is the Valley of Hinnom near Jerusalem where children were sacrificed by parents desperate to acquire divine favor. Jeremiah called the place *Tophet*<sup>21</sup> after the drum beat used (a '*toph*' is a drum in Hebrew) to drown out the cries of the children being roasted. It was the valley of slaughter, where children were offered to Moloch.<sup>22</sup> (The Bible also mentions "*outer darkness, weeping and teeth gnashing.*")<sup>23</sup> But for my purposes here a quote from *the Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* must suffice:

"The images of darkness and fire appear contradictory, but they should be regarded as symbols pointing to a reality more horrific than either symbol can convey by itself. In fact, biblical images of hell leave many details to the imagination, perhaps because no picture is capable of doing justice to the reality."<sup>24</sup>

Atheism is sufficiently appalled by all this that they cannot see how a God of love could even let it go on.

The very least we can say is that the place of the lost is somewhere we should be warned to avoid in drawing up our eternal holiday plans. No other description would have been as sharp and repulsive to the ears and eyes of an Israelite in Jesus' day. Obviously worms and fire don't mix but both describe a disposal site which itself is long-term if not forever. These in themselves do not indicate a painful existence of the disposed, but this is only a simile. No one is saying that judgment is not painful! Nonetheless, we should be nauseously repelled.

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21. Jeremiah. 7:19

22. Tophet in the valley of Hinnom near Jerusalem was well known for the human sacrifices made there to Moloch which were abolished by Josiah (2 Kings 23:10).

see also Jeremiah. 7:19; Isaiah. 66:24.

23. Matthew 8:12 *But the subjects of the kingdom will be thrown outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.* NEW INT.

24. Leland Ryken, ed al. *The Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*. (Downers Grove IL :InterVarsity Press, 1998), 377.

Truth be told, we struggle to effectively picture the horrors of an eternity without God, without His peace, without His love, without His fellowship. Perhaps no description is severely horrifying to awaken us to the seriousness of our Savior's warning. Theology aside, we need to forgo here the powers of reason and logic in determining exactly how this scene plays out in the afterlife and simply give urgent heed to Jesus' call to holiness.

### Bible Silence

The dogma of an endless hell... is not taught in the Law of Moses, nor in the Old Testament nor did Paul find it important enough to herald.<sup>25</sup> Of 12 times the word for 'hell,' 'Gehenna,' is used in the New Testament, 11 are in the Synoptics, none in the works of John. The 12<sup>th</sup> is James' reference to a fiery tongue (James 3:6). Taking into account the duplication represented in the Synoptics, Jesus may have mentioned about eternal punishment six or seven times. The pronounced absence of this doctrine in the entire Bible with the exception of a half dozen contexts in the Gospels where Jesus referenced it, suggests to me we might have misunderstood or misapplied some part of our Savior's words.

"In all this history, in all this preaching of the disciples and apostles of Jesus, there is no mention of Gehenna. In thirty

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25. I rely on Thomas Thayer for the research. Thomas Thayer. *The Origin and History of the Doctrine of Endless Punishment* (Kindle Location 286).

"It is very plain that neither in the Septuagint version of the Old Testament, nor in the New, does the word *hades* convey the meaning which the present English word *hell*, in the Christian usage, always conveys to our minds." (Kindle Locations 1100-1102).

"The Savior and James are the only persons in all the New Testament who use the word [*Gehenna*]. John the Baptist, who preached to the most wicked of men, did not use it once. Paul wrote fourteen epistles, and yet never once mentions it. Peter does not name it, nor Jude; and John, who wrote the gospel, three epistles, and the Book of Revelations, never employs it in a single instance." (Kindle Locations 1279-1282).

years of missionary effort, these men of God, addressing people of all characters and nations, never, under any circumstances, threaten them with the torments of Gehenna, or allude to it in the most distant manner!"<sup>26</sup>

One thing can be said here for certain that the term used to describe such punishment as *everlasting* or eternal does not necessarily mean *endless* or timeless. It can mean an *indefinite time*. This is particularly true in Hebrew thought. So we can think that this punishment has an end but then what? And how long? This is not a short term word which still leaves me woefully ignorant of its meaning. If the punishment comes to an end, is the 'sinner' annihilated? The term '*eternal*' can stand for a punishment that is said to be *final*.

This leaves me still wondering why God could not make His desires in this matter clearer. Perhaps, the limitation of language was part of the problem. Then again, maybe He has but we like to read our theologies into the text rather than study it with an open mind. None is better at establishing the false notion that our Bible is riddled with contradiction than a christianity that has filtered out whatever they prefer not to believe true and spin the rest their way. One scripture appears to come into conflict with another scripture and christians hold the line claiming the other groups are missing the point. Perhaps, we are all missing it.

### Origin of Doctrine

Thomas Baldwin Thayer, the leading Universalist theologian in the late nineteenth century, maintained that the doctrine of eternal punishment was borrowed from Egyptian mythology.

"Dr. Good has a curious passage on the subject in hand, in his Book of Nature, which I must be permitted to introduce here. "It was believed in most countries, that ... hell, ... or invisible world, is ... a seat of misery, a gehenna, or tartarus.... Egypt is said to have been the inventress of this important and

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26. Thomas Thayer. The Origin and History of the Doctrine of Endless Punishment (Boston, MA:Universalist publishing House, 1855), (Kindle Locations 1286-1289).

valuable part of the tradition; and undoubtedly it is to be found in the earliest records of Egyptian history."<sup>27</sup>

Even the Aeneid by Virgil speaks of "*the roaring, flaming tide of hell.*"<sup>28</sup>

But when I think of the origin of a final judgment I prefer to limit my quest for its provenance to an exposé of scripture. We know that hell is by our best description beyond description. And some think the torment described has to be forever because the soul does not die—even the souls of those who have rejected Christ's work on Calvary.

We don't know what that torment is, or will be, ...nor can we know. Our imaginations are wild with vivid images of prolonged ear piercing, soul-wrenching shrieks of pain. We see desperate souls sunken in boiling pools of molten lava crying out in an ineffable agony.

Yet some say, "*Not so!*" A God of love just wouldn't... couldn't. Others see judgment. Hell is a prison sentence but not forever. It is followed with death or a second chance.

But, if you ask me, none of this is the emphasized point of scripture. Man's rejection of God had produced a dilemma, a conundrum, that pitted God's love against His grief and anger; His grace against His holiness; His mercy against His judgment.

Dare I mention Hosea whom God instructed to marry a prostitute that Hosea had to repurchase off the auction block to make her his wife.<sup>29</sup> I was always dumbfounded over this record since prostitution by God's own command was

27. Thomas Thayer. *The Origin and History of the Doctrine of Endless Punishment* (Boston, MA:Universalist publishing House, 1855), (Kindle Locations 734- 739).

28. *ibid.* (Kindle Location 689).

see Pitt's Aeneid, vi 385, &c.

29. Hosea 3:1 The LORD said to me, "Go, show your love to your wife again, though she is loved by another man and is an adulteress. Love her as the LORD loves the Israelites, though they turn to other gods. NEW INT.

punishable with stoning.<sup>30</sup> Atheism sees this as a contradiction but it isn't. Hosea has become an object lesson in God's grief. The prophet now shares in an agony God knows.

God's heartache is magnified in chapter eleven of the prophet's book. We read words like

I loved ... my son.  
I taught Ephraim to walk,  
taking them by the arms;  
I healed them.  
I led them with cords of human kindness,  
with ties of love.  
I bent down to feed them.  
How can I give you up, Ephraim?  
How can I hand you over, Israel?  
My heart is changed within me;  
all my compassion is aroused.  
I will not carry out my fierce anger,  
For I am God, and not a man—  
They will follow the Lord;  
he will roar like a lion.  
When he roars,  
his children will come ...  
trembling like sparrows

We have through our theological wrangling endeavored to reach inside God's head but we need to place a hand on His heart and feel it beating. How does God satisfy His holiness, how can He be who He is and as repulsed by sin as He is, as jealously in love as He is, as heartbroken and grief-stricken as He is and still find a way to accept His people back and reconcile to them, without losing Himself in the process.

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<sup>30</sup>. Deuteronomy 21:22 she shall be brought to the door of her father's house and there the men of her town shall stone her to death. She has done an outrageous thing in Israel by being promiscuous while still in her father's house. You must purge the evil from among you. NEW INT.

Any parent who has been emotionally crushed over a drug-abusing child who lives with them, when they abhor the idea of illegal drugs in the home, can begin to understand God's challenge.

Hell, whatever it is to those who have no interest in living in God's heaven, becomes a necessary evil, a place where His rejection by a fallen humanity can be resolved. God's mercy, also, deals with a required retribution that God must administer to be true to Himself. God would find a way to show mercy in judgment and satisfy His holiness without disavowing His love for His creation.

## **A Personal Savior**

His Immanence,  
God

“We are not necessarily doubting  
that God will do the best for us;  
we are wondering  
how painful the best will turn out to be.”

— C.S. Lewis

## The Personality of Mercy

*“there is a God, there always has been... I pray that He is as merciful, benevolent, and gracious as His book says He is.”*

— Khaled Hosseini

Believers accept Yahweh, the God of the Bible, as capable of being jealous, angry, passionate, desirous, grief-stricken, along with hundreds of other feelings even if these seem contradictory. For someone who does not believe that God is capable of a variety of such feelings, mercy cannot have a judgmental side, love cannot possess many expressions depending on the relationship, grace cannot be warlike.<sup>1</sup> But life does not fall so neatly into such all or nothing categories of behavior. There is no universal and single application of love, mercy or grace that extends to all relationships and all persons—not for us and not for God. These aspects are features of a real personality brought to play in the dynamics of relationships. The paradox of life is that dichotomous personality traits define us. So it is with God, because He is a personal God. He declared Himself, not the God of the Universe but exclaimed: *“I am the God of Abraham...the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.”*<sup>2</sup>

By *personal*, we are not saying that He’s only the God of the Patriarchs—that He is in any sense a private playmate or friend of a select few. We are pointing to His personality in relationship with His creation, each of us, that defines how love or rage, kindness or indifference, caring or rejection are

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1. In *Atonement, Law, and Justice*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Publishing, 2014), p. 30 Adonis Vidu quotes Kevin Vanhoozer, “In describing God’s-being-in-communicative-act from different perspectives, we are not describing various ‘parts’ of God. ....each perfection refers to the whole of God’s being-in-communicative-act, though each describes only one aspect of it.”

2. Exodus 3:6

perceived. This is how we see Him depending on that relationship with Him.

Yet, only theists maintain so. Atheists and deists do not believe in a personal God. Scriptures that seem to give God personality and feelings are not taken seriously by atheists. The most obvious reason being that for them there is no such being as God. To them, a personal God is an anthropomorphic expression religious persons imagine as story tellers. We are thought to emboss our human understanding of life upon a God we want to believe is there.

If god is an impersonal being that in our Old Testament leads His people to war against peaceful Canaanites He becomes a tyrant. When it comes to our God non-believers understandably fail to appreciate the complexity of the divine wisdom at play in relationship with His creation. We, too, have but a glimpse of how glorious His intentions are toward us. C. S. Lewis saw a depersonalized view of God for what it really was and became a believer. In discussing justice, he concluded, “...*atheism turns out to be too simple.*”<sup>3</sup>

### That 's Intense

The Mercy of God is an aspect of His personality. Although our understanding of this term cannot begin to encompass what is in the heart of God or what is on His mind or what counsel this beating passion drives. We only have glimpses of His mercy in the history of His relationship with His people. In Psalms 18:1 David declares his love for God. This word *love* is used elsewhere in the Scriptures when in reference to God’s love for us in an *intensified* form and is translated “*to show mercy.*” This is what we have to do to begin to describe God—taking terms we are somewhat familiar with and, lifting them out of the context of our humanity, magnify them in a divine light.

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3. C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (Macmillan, 1960), p. 31.

If words utterly fail, the metaphor can be used as for example where God's love is compared to a mother's love. As Isaiah pointed out:

"Can a mother forget the baby at her breast and have no compassion on the child she has borne? Though she may forget, I will not forget you!"<sup>4</sup>

Professor R. C. Trench, lecturing on the importance of the study of language in the history of thought, remarked, "...words often contain a witness for great moral truths—God having impressed such a seal of truth upon language, that men are continually uttering deeper things than they know..."<sup>5</sup>

It is not without good reason that those who trust God can say with David "*All the ways of the LORD are loving and faithful.*"<sup>6</sup> The context in which David made such a declaration was his most trying circumstances—the kind that gives birth to a 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm!

### Mercy – not Naiveté

Never confuse mercy with forgiving everything and everyone even without a life-changing act of contrition or repentance. Mercy has a judgment to perform, something atheism will mistakenly label vengeance or brutality. No one is more capable of wielding a sword victoriously than the merciful.

Do God's Ezekiels know that even a Babylonian exile somehow is a loving expression of God's mercy!? Said another way, believers should rightly see God's mercy even in His judgment—especially in His judgment. God's reaction is not vengeful<sup>7</sup> as much as it is the expression of the highest love.

4. Isaiah 49:15 NEW INT.

see also Psalms 116:5 *our God is full of compassion.* NEW INT.

5. Richard Trench. *On the Study of the Words Lectures* ( New York: W.. Widdleton, publisher. Unknown), 56.

6. Psalms 25:10 NEW INT.

7. Isaiah 63:4 ascribes vengeance  $\text{D}\bar{\text{Q}}\bar{\text{J}}$  to God which Paul interprets as  $\text{\u0395}\kappa\delta\iota\kappa\acute{\epsilon}\omega$  or a judgment or punishment. (to do one justice). In order to understand the nuance of this term in relation to

And what about the possibility that God allows His people to experience hardship, conflict, and other forms of emotional or physical discomfort as a mechanism for learning wisdom? Jesus<sup>8</sup> is a prime example.

### A Merciful Judgment

The entire story of God's compulsion toward being merciful is buried, sadly, in an ancient history of Israel's idol worship. God's people did not keep<sup>9</sup> covenant, which should have abrogated any agreement God may have made with them but that's not God's way. The record shows that He never exercised that right. The ultimate expression of His mercy instead was sending Jesus to die for us.

Non-believers—I want to say this respectfully, but with clarity—favor a simple, linear, one dimensional argument that if God were merciful, He would not have permitted Israel's history to be so dystopic. They are incorrect because His mercy is most pronounced in such a history.

The dynamic of mercy is not immediately evident by those who are under a divine judgment. His actions appear vengeful because until we learn to appreciate the severer side of God's love, we tend to use such terms. But this is nothing new. When Esau lost his entitlement through the outright deceit of a younger twin, Malachi called him *'hated by God.'*<sup>10</sup> In the language of the time, this *was* hateful. God's allowing this to stand as His blessing on Jacob from whose loins would eventually come the Savior of the world seemed unmerciful and

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God, we need to ask what passion is driving Him. I think it is a desire to bring an end to wrong, unfairness, injustice, etc.—not a desire to “get even.”

8. Hebrews 5:8.

9. The word signifies “to keep watch over” נָצַר

10. Malachi 1:1-3. אֲשֶׁר speaks of one's enemy. There is a description of hate that is as intense as a man burning down his home to rid him of a rodent.

unfair. But in the wisdom of God—a wisdom we are yet to fully realize—it was indeed a vital part of His ultimate act of love.

### Good! I'm Glad

And what about this overused term: vengeance? It is noteworthy that the same word in the Hebrew text that means 'to comfort oneself' can mean also 'to take vengeance.' (Nehemiah's name comes from this word: *whom the Lord comforts*.) Even in the ancient world it felt good when someone who was our enemy "got theirs." The favored explanation comes from a passage in Aristotle's *Rhetoric*. He philosophized, "*All anger has a certain pleasure in the expectation of retribution.*"<sup>11</sup> (It feels good to get even.) But is Aristotle's insight sufficient to explain the heart of God?

Even the Bible translators saw through 'a glass darkly' when interpreting this term in Ezekiel 5:13. Is it 'comfort' or 'revenge'. Is He the comforter or the ultimate avenger?

"Then my anger will cease ... and I will be avenged. ... they will know that I the LORD have spoken in my zeal...." NEW INT.

"Thus shall mine anger be accomplished ... and I will be comforted: and they shall know that I the LORD have spoken it in my zeal...." KJV

"Thus My anger will be spent and I will satisfy [literally: comforted] ... they will know that I, the LORD, have spoken in My zeal...." NASB

The account in Ezekiel chapter 5 is not God taking comfort in getting even. It is not an uncontrolled pounding. (I tend to think that the King James translator did a good job here.) The context is God's jealous love and He needed to find a way to make that pain stop—to comfort Himself by finding a way to turn Israel once again back toward Him. It is not revenge but jealousy—the jealousy of an unrequited love.

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11. Rhet. 2.2 πάση ὀργῇ ἔπεσθαί τινα ἡδονήν, τὴν ἀπὸ τῆς ἐλπίδος τοῦ τιμωρήσασθαι:

There is probably few chapters in all of Scripture as terrifying a tale of woe as this chapter which prophesied of fathers eating their sons, of a deadly pandemic and of war. For once the evangelicals have it right: *This is the judgment of God.* And these are God's chosen people that have stirred Him to anger!

It is easy to lose sight of any idea of mercy in this text. But this is a description of Jerusalem besieged by the Babylonians at the time of their exile. Ezekiel's prophecies eventually have Jewry awakening from this nightmare to return (see Nehemiah) and restore Jerusalem. When they do, the *Shema* will be forever on their lips: "*The Lord your God is One.*" Their proclivity to idol worship forever cured! The exile was a good thing, a comforting thing, from God's perspective because now He has a people who will worship Him—and Him only. It was an act of mercy by which God would bring His people home. And while non-believers might balk at this as an act of love, the prophet Zephaniah envisions their ultimate return as a joyous occasion.

"The LORD your God is with you, the Mighty Warrior who saves. He will take great delight in you; in his love he will no longer rebuke you, but will rejoice over you with singing. ... when I restore your fortunes before your very eyes," says the LORD.<sup>12</sup>

God doesn't pick and choose to be vengeful or merciful depending on His mood. He was in Christ Who He had always been before and throughout time. He remains true to Himself, His character, His principles, and His ultimate desire to rescue His creation.

When we through some very bad choices wanted to forsake God and relegate His memory to a forgotten past, His love cried out, "*No!*". His yell resonated off the sphere of the universe—He shook the earth, tore mountains from their foundations, uprooted cultures, and caused us with paranoic

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12. Zephaniah 3: 17, 20 NEW INT.

trembling to hide.<sup>13</sup> In our sinful state we did not see His heart—nor could we. Calvary opened our eyes.

### My Hero

A. W. Tozier saw this:

“When Jesus died on the cross the mercy of God did not become any greater. It could not become any greater, for it was already infinite. We get the odd notion that God is showing mercy because Jesus died. No--Jesus died because God is showing mercy. It was the mercy of God that gave us Calvary, not Calvary that gave us mercy. If God had not been merciful there would have been no incarnation, no babe in the manger, no man on a cross and no open tomb.”<sup>14</sup>

Was God villainous to defend His people against their enemies?

“With God we will gain the victory, and he will trample down our enemies.”<sup>15</sup>

One man’s villain is another man’s hero. When the allies went to war against the axis powers as a democracy saving effort for future generations, someone would die. Even the killing of innocent non-combatants was part of the calculations of war. The reason why such violence did not go by that name was because it was recognized as an inevitable price of victory. Yet when God shows mercy to Jacob in the Exodus by necessarily killing Egyptians it is—to the atheist—not an act of redemption as much as an act of brutality.

Violence under the genre of *‘thriller’* is a popular theme in movies. A man or a woman to free a kidnapped child finds himself or herself pitted against the mob taking the kidnapers

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13. Nahum 1:5, 7 The mountains quake before him and the hills melt away. The earth trembles at his presence, the world and all who live in it. .... The LORD is good, a refuge in times of trouble. He cares for those who trust in him. NEW INT.

See Genesis 3:10

14. A.W. Tozer, *The Attributes of God: A Journey Into the Father's Heart*

<https://www.goodreads.com/work/quotes/244956>

15. Psalms 60:12 NEW INT.

out in a spray of bullets and the din of exploding vehicles. When our hero reappears out of the smoke with their child in their arms, we all are left with this climatic feeling of pure satisfaction. It was a five star-er. Yet God is a criminal when He wants to exit this world in the final act of time with His children in His arms.

There is something natural and healthy about a humanity that defends loved ones against harm. There is something very right about us when we stand ready to defend the persons in our life whose relationship with us defines who we are and whose love is the primary source—No!, sole source—of our happiness and well-being. There is something praiseworthy about the person who is prepared out of pure and limitless love to give their life to prevent another's from being taken. As did God.

### Is God Good?

Was there a better way to show Himself merciful to Israel, to mankind?

John Loftus argues, "*There are many better ways God could have done to increase belief in him.*"<sup>16</sup> He begins to list examples. Here are a few:

"God could easily keep a person from molesting a child or raping someone if at the very thought of it, the person began to suffer from severe nausea. We have the ability to do this with alcoholics, so it should be no problem for God to do this with the most heinous of crimes. God could also implant thoughts into a person's head to prevent him from doing evil... ... One childhood fatal disease or a heart attack could have killed Hitler and prevented World War II. ... A poisonous snakebite could've sent Saddam Hussein to an early grave, averting the Iraq war before it happened. ... Even if they concluded God performed formed a miracle here, what's the harm? Doesn't God want us to believe in him?"<sup>17</sup>

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16. John W. Loftus. *Why I Became an Atheist: A Former Preacher Rejects Christianity* (Amherst, New York: Prometheus Books, 2008), (Kindle Locations 4254-4255). Kindle Edition.

17. *ibid.* Kindle Locations 4044-4053

These arguments might be philosophically attractive to non-believers—and especially some who have left the christian faith and turned to atheism. But such conclusions fail to observe that even on a human level mercy combines the lenient and the severe, the judgment for and the judgment against as necessary aspects of the same action. A judgment for the defendant is a judgment against the plaintiff.

God's ultimate act of love saw Jesus outstretched raised above the horizon of our selfishness, for the world to see and take note: He was dying as the supreme expression of mercy—make no mistake about this!

### Playing God

And would a merciful God always mean a God who not only eliminated suffering but never permitted suffering to exist. We never left Eden. What atheists failed to perceive is anything good that might come from allowing suffering. Lotus said it this way: *"The extent of animal suffering cries out against the existence of a good God."*<sup>18</sup> What if we could play God? How would things be different?

In Season one episode nine. 'Hide and Q,' of StarTrek, the Next Generation, Commander Ryker is given the powers of the 'Q' by 'Q' (I apologize to those who never watched this space-age series.) Ryker now had the power to bring a small girl back to life but wouldn't because of a previous agreement he made with Captain Picard. This caused me to think: what if I had such power!

Atheism sees God as vindictive and cruel because He doesn't step in to save the sufferer.

Would I?

Would wars be a thing of the past, if you or I were God? No one would be allowed to kill anyone ever again. Or maybe

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18. *ibid.* Kindle Locations 4087-4089

as in one StarTrek episode I could make weapons too hot to handle.

I might have created people genetically predisposed to good and not evil. And I might replace suppressed past memories of abuse with happier times—a genuine miracle healing...if I were God!

The point of this crazy exercise in philosophical surreality is to imagine what we would do if we were God and we promised only to love humanity creating a world at peace that never knew war, hurt, disease, and all those things we call 'evil.'

### Hide and Q,

In the TV. episode, Q was unsuccessful in getting ordinary crew members to cooperate with his vision of imbuing mankind with godlike ability. The story closed with these two lines:

Data asked Captain Picard, "*Sir, how is it that the Q can handle time and space so well, and us so badly*"

The Captain responded, "*Perhaps, someday we will discover that space and time are simpler than the human equation.*"

When I seriously consider the quality of God's lovingkindness by trying to put myself in His large shoes, I begin to imagine a task that quickly overwhelms any effort on my part to play at His mercy.

## A Holy God

The same God who wants to be merciful, must be holy. He must be true to Himself. And is it not here at this crossroad of His personhood that Calvary stands?

*“The modern experience of the Holiness of God, and consequently the modern understanding of the Holiness of God,”* the dictionary reads, *“have been dulled by the tendency to flatten human existence and experience to things rationally discerned.”*<sup>1</sup> Because we live only on this plain and we are limited to understanding reality in the terms of our own powers of reason and our own experiences, God’s holiness remains in large part mysterious. Some atheists—though the very label ‘*atheist*’ should mean that they do not believe in God—step outside their philosophy for a moment to reflect on such a possibility. But the God they see in our Old Testament is not a ‘*holy*’ God (Holy as an idea has no meaning to them) but a brutal God. (Atheists have no shortage of words that add flavor to the sauce they serve up about a religious man’s God who in their imagination cannot at the same time know anything about love.)

The philosopher’s problem is: *“There is a tendency to see [God’s justice and mercy] as contradictory, but the biblical writers hold these actions together as characteristics of [a] holy God.”*<sup>2</sup>

When Uzzah tried to steady the ark as it was being brought from Gibeah God out of rage struck him dead.<sup>3</sup> David in turn became angry at God, an anger that soon turned to fear. (2 Samuel 6:7-9)

1. Leland Ryken editors ed. al. *The Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* (Downers Grove IL :InterVarsity Press, 1998), 389.

2. *ibid.*

3. 2 Samuel 6:7 The LORD’s anger burned against Uzzah because of his irreverent act [inadvertent sin]; therefore God struck him down, and he died there beside the ark of God. NEW INT.

R. C. Sproul admits that he had to—using his term—‘grapple’ with this:

“As I studied the Old Testament, I was also bothered by the stories about God’s ... killing Uzzah instantly for touching the ark of the covenant, and by other narratives that seemed to reveal a brutal side to the character of God. How could I ever come to love such a God? The one concept, the central idea I kept meeting in Scripture, was the idea that God is holy. The word was foreign to me. I wasn’t sure what it meant. .... Today I am still absorbed with the question of the holiness of God. I am convinced that it is one of the most important ideas that a Christian can ever grapple with. It is basic to our whole understanding of God and of Christianity.”<sup>4</sup>

Here should be the center of all our discussions about God and Christianity: What is the Holiness of God? Understanding that He is a Holy God is a necessary part of understanding man’s relationship with Him. It is in misunderstanding who God is, in depersonalizing Him and making Him some rogue force of the religious imagination that we fail to find inspiring, we fail to appreciate, we fail to even perceive, His Story of mercy in the Scriptures and, consequently, in our lives. We cannot even begin to—pardon what sounds sacrilegious—profile God (theologize) unless a pursued interest in His Holiness is part of it.

### A Matter of Conscience

Paul Schofield plays Sir Thomas More in the 1966 movie, *A Man for All Seasons*. In one rather dramatic scene he pleads with his daughter, Margaret, played by Susannah York, to sign the oath decreed by King Henry the 8th—an oath intended to weed out dissenting voices to the king’s marriage to Ann Boleyn, which the Roman church considered adulterous. The King’s ship of state was rolled over in a stormy political sea; this oath was a necessary measure in the King’s mind to upright it by assuring

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4. R. C. Sproul, R. C.. *The Holiness of God* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers. 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition. 1998), (Kindle Locations 210-213).

the loyalty of his subjects, now for his rulership and later for his successor. Long live the Tudors!

Sir Thomas, once his Chancellor, now was faced with losing his head because he refused to sign the oath. Thomas' explanation to Margaret why he wouldn't take an oath he wanted her to take? *"When a man takes an oath he's holding his own self in his own hands like water and if he opens his fingers he needn't hope to find himself again."*

I should hope to never forget these words because they contain a truth taught by a heart at peace. Forsaking our conscience for expedience's sake is a temporary fix that soon fails us: our emotional resources exhausted, our thoughts confused beyond decision, and our lives recklessly picking at choices—all of them wrong for us—we inevitably lose our way in a desperate attempt to find ourselves. We are lost in our self-deception, tangled in a web of hypocrisy and eventually self-loathing and regret.

Paul Schofield gave us another line in conversation with Cardinal Wolsey played by Orson Welles, *"When statesmen forsake their own private conscience for the sake of their public duties they lead their country by a short route to chaos."* They lead themselves there as well.

In this simple piece of wisdom lies an insightful truth about God as well. *"He remains faithful, for He cannot deny Himself."*<sup>5</sup>

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5. 2 Timothy 2:13 NASB

Keil's Commentary adds "The unchangeableness of the divine purposes is a necessary consequence of the unchangeableness of the divine nature. With regard to His own counsels, God repents nothing; but this does not repent the repentance of God ...denoting the pain experienced by the love of God." vol 1. p. 183.

### To Repent or Not to Repent

In the Mosaic tradition we read that He is “... *not a human being, that he should change his mind.*”<sup>6</sup> *Does he promise and not fulfill?*”

Non-believers read “*not...change his mind*” and remind us of the time of the Flood that “*the LORD regretted that he had made human beings on the earth.*”<sup>7</sup> And they are correct in saying that both verses use the same Hebrew word which could be translated “*repent*”<sup>8</sup> And in case we wish to argue that the forms are different—and they are in these verses—we need to know that the same form used in the Genesis Flood account is found elsewhere referring to God’s unchangeableness.<sup>9</sup>

He repents but He doesn’t repent? How can this be?

God has a right to His grief over man's rejection of Him but He will not, nor can He, deny the standard by which we know Him as God. He cannot set aside the standard of His holiness that declares His character, that defines who He is. There is no deception in Him but there are tears.

### Being Human

What one word might describe the quintessential me as a human? Is there such a word?

- Social? Some insects are social.
- Loving? God is love.

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6. Numbers 23:19 NEW INT. The word change His mind is  $\text{נָחַם}$ , he grieved over men in the Hithpael

7. Genesis 6:6 NEW INT. The word regretted is  $\text{נָחַם}$ , he grieved over men (lamented) in the Niphal

8. They is not the word ‘repent’ in the context of Salvation: repenting of sins.

9. I Samuel 15:29 He who is the Glory of Israel does not lie or change his mind; for he is not a human being, that he should change his mind.” NEW INT.

- Needy? All creatures are in some sense ‘needy.’ We are ecologically linked.
- Religious? Atheists are human but not religious.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau used the term ‘*malleable*,’<sup>10</sup> easily influenced. I seem to be a moving target when it comes to determining or defining what makes me human.

Who or what am I? What defines my happiness, my significance, my sense of fulfillment and well-being?

What makes me spin in sync with an orbiting universe of human passions?

And can evolution answer such an inquiry? Evolutionists claim that human nature is not fixed.<sup>11</sup> Whatever it is—whatever we are—is, well, evolving. But what am I now, in this current era? Philosophy seems to leave this as an open debate. When we moved into a modern age, the view of what was natural for me—what lifestyle might contribute to my psychological and physiological health—was reviewed and underwent a dramatic postmodern reinterpretation.

Compare this with the christian’s view, being ‘*human*’ is being in the ‘*image of God*.’ The idea that my humanness, who I am at the center of my being, is not evolving but is created in the image of a holy God! And if I am made in the image of a Holy God, which is the biblical message, I have meaning to my life which more importantly brings God out of the shadows of history to become visible to me in relationship.

I can understand where the non-believer is coming from when they see this view as an unfalsifiable waste of bad breath.

Yet, this view of me makes most sense for the believer because it explains best the dynamic of their prayer life and coincides perfectly with Scripture.

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10. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Human\\_nature](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Human_nature)

11. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Human\\_nature](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Human_nature)

### Being God

God is a merciful God because He is a Holy God. When God appears brutal in His response to national idolatry—or any other matter that stirs His passions or enrages Him—we should not be standing in judgment as if we understand what He is thinking, planning, feeling. In our ignorance the question should be: *Who is this God!?*

Not wanting to spew theology, let me tie this in a bow. There are three things we can say about God because He is holy.

1. God cannot show Himself *other* than He is. God cannot compromise, be compromised or deny the full expression of His holiness and still be God. He cannot be anything other than holy. Whoever God is, He cannot improve on His perfection, decide to reevaluate or redefine the principles—if I can use this term—by which He governs His actions or His dealings with man.

- When He declared, *“I will not carry out my fierce anger, nor will I devastate Ephraim again. For I am God, and not a man— the Holy One among you”*<sup>12</sup> His decision was not based on the circumstance, nor was it based on an isolated or sudden warm feeling that prompted a change of mind and heart. He did what He did because of Who He is: *“I am God...The Holy One.”*
- 15 times in 35 verses in Leviticus 19 we read the phrase *“I am the Lord”* after each instruction in a longer list of instructions. For God these were somehow typologically connected to the future Cross of Christ. God wasn’t pulling rank, instilling fear into the wilderness dwellers by requiring them to do something that gave Him a sense of power and authority over them. No! He was giving His holiness a metaphorical context that would much later translate into the

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12. Hosea 11:9 NEW INT.

plan of Salvation through His Son. To allow a compromise of His instructions to suffice would be to show Himself to Israel other than He was—something not possible for Him. A familiar story is Moses striking a rock that he should have spoken to in providing drinking water for Israel. It troubled God to be so misrepresented. *“But the LORD said to Moses and Aaron, ‘Because you did not trust in me enough to honor me as holy in the sight of the Israelites, you will not bring this community into the land I give them.’”*<sup>13</sup>

- The one thing His holiness, his person, his heart, his principles could not endure was idolatry. *“Do not turn to idols or make metal gods for yourselves. I am the LORD your God.”*<sup>14</sup>

2. God cannot show Himself *less* than who He is. A Divine self-expression must be always nothing less than infinitely wholehearted.

- When Joash, the king of Israel, was instructed by Elisha to symbolize victory over Syria by shooting arrows in the ground, the prophet was deeply disturbed that the king only used three arrows. *“You should have struck the ground five or six times;”* the prophet scolded, *“then you would have defeated Aram [Syria] and completely destroyed it. But now you will defeat it only three times.”*<sup>15</sup>
- Paul made our point for us: *“Now to Him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us.”*<sup>16</sup>
- And in speaking of the grace of God, every believer should know that Jesus’ resurrection

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13. Numbers 20:12 NEW INT.

14. Leviticus 19:4: NEW INT.

15. 2 Kings 13:19 NEW INT.

16. Ephesians 3:20 NEW INT.

made possible ours: “in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus.”<sup>17</sup>

3. God cannot show Himself *more* than who He is. God will not change. What God did God does.

- “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.”<sup>18</sup> This verse is written on many church walls.
- “I the LORD do not change. So you, the descendants of Jacob, are not destroyed.”<sup>19</sup>

### Closing Argument

If we were to profile holiness, we would have to call it *the divine nature characterized by the quality of a divine mercy*—a personality of mercy. The best scripture would be the one Jesus used in a Nazarene synagogue the day they purposed to heave Him over a nearby cliff.

“The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, To proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor. Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down.”<sup>20</sup>

This prophecy of Isaiah added

“...and the day of vengeance of our God, to comfort all who mourn, and provide for those who grieve in Zion— to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of joy instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair. They will be called oaks of righteousness, a planting of the LORD for the display of his splendor.”<sup>21</sup>

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17. Ephesians 2:7 NEW INT.

18. Hebrews 13:8 NEW INT.

19. Malachi 3:6 NEW INT.

20. Luke 4:18-20 NEW INT.

21. Isaiah 61:1,2

It is believed by some commentators that Jesus skipped over the word "*vengeance*." Vengeance speaks to God's grief over Israel's idolatry—and rightly so. Jesus stopped short of this portion of the text because it did not have current relevance to His, then, ministry.

## Undefinable Grace

*God's Reach At Calvary Extended*

One of my college professors taught that mercy is God's way of dealing with everything that is wrong in me while His grace is His way of dealing with everything that is wrong in my world, my circumstances, relationships, etc. I cannot make such a clear distinction between them. Mercy is more a judicial term and grace is God laying aside the judicial process altogether in a loving regard for our human condition. Mercy removes the bad and grace provides the good in its place?

Johann Albrecht Bengel taught: *grace removes guilt; mercy removes misery.*<sup>1</sup> Richard Trench concurred: *The [grace] of God, the gift of his free grace that is displayed in the forgiveness of sins, is extended to men as they are guilty, his [mercy] as they are miserable.*<sup>2</sup> An explanatory rendering of John 3:16 might read: *God so loved the world with a pitying love (mercy) that he gave his only begotten Son (grace) that the world through him might be saved.*

One website<sup>3</sup> concludes:

"Mercy is God not punishing us as our sins deserve, and grace is God blessing us despite the fact that we do not deserve it. Mercy is deliverance from judgment. Grace is extending kindness to the unworthy."

We are most likely to be a bit confused over these terms—which is which—because they go to the heart and mind of God, a heart and mind we, as believers, are still discovering. Even the Hebrews were confused. In the later writings the term '*grace*' in their language was replaced by the word '*mercy*.'<sup>4</sup>

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1. <http://m.studylight.org/lexicons/tsn/view.cgi?n=37>

2. *ibid.*

3. <http://www.gotquestions.org/mercy-grace.html>

The grace<sup>5</sup> of God is the ultimate explanation that makes sense out of all biblical history, the ultimate expression of His mercy. Grace is the only theological term we really need learn. Since the term means 'gift' we can and should say simply that grace is the gift of salvation. But this is far too simplistic; we are substituting one word 'grace' for another 'salvation.'

Grace is more the *act* of God *giving* than the gift. In saying: "*The exceeding riches of his grace in his kindness toward us through Christ Jesus*"<sup>6</sup> Paul is referring to "*the wealth of His kindness through Christ Jesus.*" *Kindness* is not a commodity but a term of relationship. God is engaged in giving and giving and giving and giving ...to us. His love is inexhaustible.

God keeps giving and giving causing our salvation to take on deeper meaning and significance as we go deeper and deeper into relationship with Him—a relationship that in eternity at long last will be unhindered by our human weakness to temptation and our inability to comprehend deeper, more profound, truth about God.

What other gift might we want when we get there? What else dare we cherish above the divine provision that took the crucifixion of our Savior to provide? This is to say, then, that if I can comprehend what the grace of God is all about, I can comprehend the depth of His love for me.

When our eternity begins in earnest in His revealed presence, then, I dare to think, we will finally begin to understand more fully the divine logic behind everything God did on our behalf. We will, then, find completely reasonable how a merciful God could have taken responsibility for—or why He permitted—much of the 'evil'<sup>7</sup> that is in our history and in our world. And foundational to all this, grace will finally explain Calvary.

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5. I found it curious that the word 'grace' is not a separate entry in 1998 edition of The Dictionary of Biblical Imagery.

6. Ephesians 2:7 in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus.

7. Isaiah 45:7 I form the light and create darkness, I bring prosperity and create disaster; I, the LORD, do all these things.

### Through a Glass Darkly

The biblical idea of the grace of God, frankly, has no value to non-believers. Believers, though, by their faith share a limited understanding of God's grace.

God's love is intense, wholehearted, all embracing and unending. It defies our ability in this life to define it or appreciate what Paul referred to as the depth, height, width and breadth<sup>8</sup> of God's love, the fulness of God which passes knowledge.

We view the brilliance of His love, His grace—all that He is to us—through the squinting eyes of our humanness. A prolonged look at, or a better perception of, what God has done in the name of His grace, must wait for *"the ages to come."*<sup>9</sup> So much of what God has done and continues to do on our behalf is beyond our comprehension. So much of God's work is outside our intellectual purview. We simply do not know the whole story. As Christians we believe that much of what God has done on our behalf He has done behind the scenes and out of sight: *"For,"* the Psalmist revealed peeking behind the curtain, *"he will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways."*<sup>10</sup>

I know. Not falsifiable. I sound like a religious zealot who believes what he wants to believe and calls it God. *God said.* But what we are doing is studying the history of God's dealings with His creation in an effort to profile this single aspect of His character: His grace.

### The View From Grace

I introduce here a view of God's grace that required a rethinking of a portion of my theology, but which works for me to unify portions of scripture with diverging interpretations. This book is

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8. Ephesians 3:18.

9. Ephesians 2:7.

10. Psalms 91:11.

not—you remember my saying— a work of theology but a septuagenarian's loving quest to understanding the claims of atheism without compromising my faith. This led me to revisit the message of grace so central to the story of the Bible.

Of all the chapters in my book, this one was the most difficult to write because, I anticipate, readers will read it with a set understanding of what God's grace is all about. And I suppose, if what I am proposing sounds irreconcilably different, some believers understandably will discard it as so much folderol. Others may go on the defense to disprove me—which isn't so bad if they share their thoughts with me. (I can always learn.)

Theories of atonement have a history and that means the concept of divine grace shares that history as the central part of each theory. If you are geekish, you should enjoy Dr. Vidu's work "Atonement, Law, and Justice" in which he traces this history and the evolution of atonement theory. Dr. Sharon Baker in her work, "Executing God," brings us current. Both books are listed in the bibliography.

There are just 2 premises to my understanding of grace that I consider central to my faith and understanding of the biblical record.

- Grace is not a gift but a giving.
- Grace is a relational term understood better in ancient parlance as graciousness or lovingkindness.

Grace is God's lovingkindness which operates in a wholesome relationship with us through prayer and as such it is more an act of God, an enabling, an empowering, a divine support network, God working on us, in us and through us. It is wrong to see grace as riches; it is an enrichment. Salvation, itself, is not a ticket to heaven but the process of getting heaven into us.

Grace is not a commodity, something we can claim as a gift or claim as our own. Grace is more the act of God giving than the gift. In saying: "The exceeding riches of his grace in his kindness toward us through Christ Jesus" Paul is referring to

“the wealth of His kindness through Christ Jesus.” Kindness is a term of relationship. God is engaged in giving and giving and giving and giving ...to us. An eternity with God becomes necessary because his interest in us is inexhaustible.

Grace is best translated: graciousness (lovingkindness) “But by the graciousness of God I am what I am.” It is the act of God giving, growing our faith, making us into the image of Christ.

Now, here's where it gets muddy, when atheism questions how God could be so loving to a few of us and discard the rest of His creation on the garbage heap of Gehenna? The answer is, "That's not what's happening." God isn't giving out Christmas presents to a few of His favorites, He is seeking in relationship to save but the reason 'all' are not saved, the mystery, lies in the relationship each one has with Him. The problem is not God ...it's *us*, it's each man and woman. With all due regard for the new social sciences, we have a lot to learn about ...*US*.

The mystery is in the heart<sup>11</sup> of man:

God withdrew from Hezekiah in order to test him and to see what was really in his heart. 2 Chronicles 32:31 NLT

And why did God make me the way I am? Answer: It is part of the human dynamic that makes relationship possible.

Our humanness and the million shades of feeling and thought that we profile on a daily basis represents with a believer a baffling and profound complexity of possibilities for God, perhaps, as varied as snowflakes. Grace is God's involvement in this human equation, in our humanness, in relation with us, in which He determines, in His wisdom, His opportunity in our lives. The dynamic of grace is that it is a divine involvement in our lives by which He balances His participation against our obedience. Both the Calvinists and the Wesleyans are right!

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11. Jeremiah 17:9 The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?

I love this quote:

"Blessing and obedience do comfortably and mysteriously coexist."— Jen Pollock Michel, *Teach Us to Want: Longing, Ambition & the Life of Faith*

We tend to see answers to prayer, God's answers, as a consequence of the level of our spirituality or as a product of our faith. We envision gifts of healing as the result of<sup>12</sup> our godliness rather than a timely response of the healer in order to<sup>13</sup> show Himself gracious.

And we tie everything good from God to our commitment not to Him but to church or tithing or how frequently we have gone out of our way to be a "good christian." (This kind of thinking is crediting *us* not God ..and that's not the message of grace.)

But His grace, God's hand upon us, is relational. It is simply and solely a matter between Him *and* me, or Him *and* you, as we prayerfully participate in His vision for our lives.

Atonement theory attempts to explain why Jesus had to die on Calvary, but this mystery of Godliness—as it was known to Paul— is somehow tied to our relationship with Him. He died *for us!* His death represents not a moment in time but a moment in eternity when God's relationship with us was renewed and the veil rent symbolized God's opportunity as well as ours to enter into that relationship.

Atheism's contention is simple and straight forward: Why didn't Christ die for all? How is there a "hell" for most of His creation? And why is your God rewarding a remnant only—and that, undeserved—while the larger part of humanity, whose only sin was being on this globe, gets to be barbecued in the eternal pit? How can you call this "loving"!

The view from God's grace is very different. It is a God searching the hearts of a humanity that was created with a sense of the divine. It is the picture of the Good Shepherd searching

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12. Compare ὥστε, the result of, and ἵνα, in order to -> consequence compared to purpose.

13. *ibid.*

rocky cliffs for stranded lambs that in their wanderings in forbidden adventures came too close to those cliffs and slipped over. It is God reaching out to those who want Him, who want to want Him, who sense that there is more to life than this life and more to God than a doctrine or a trinket, or a dance ritual.

Atheism is wrong about God because it is wrong about grace. This because we led them to believe that grace is rewards and free gifts and heavenly parties instead of an eternity to get closer to God. Instead of wanting to get rich on God's goodness, we should have sought to be reconciled by it...and preached that! But we religionized, dogmatized, and ritualized the concept of grace to embellish our church coffers, enhance our need for importance, and festoon our cathedrals with symbols of how important our faith, our religion, our church.

"Not so!" You say.

"Yes so." I say.

"How harsh and uncalled for an indictment!" you cry, "what's wrong with our worship?"

You're missing the point. Anything and everything that supports our faith and the heart of worship that impassions it, is spot on right. What some call religious ritual may just be you and me in deep communion with the God we love—and I get that. But I am talking about our need to appreciate more God's efforts not so much to heal our bodies as to heal our souls, not so much to make us rich in this world's terms but to enrich our experience in Him.

## The 'R' In G-R-ACE

*"..entrusted to the Grace of God."*

*Acts 14:26 HCSB*

The acrostic used to define God's grace is the familiar: *God's Riches At Christ's Expense*, which, according to an atheist, should be the easiest to discredit as unexplainable gibberish. My concern here, therefore, is not theological—what believer doesn't have a scripturally based idea as to what grace means. My interest is in addressing what appears like an irresolvable contradiction to the love of God inherent in our very definition of the term we use to describe that love: grace. If God so loved the world, why isn't He saving everyone and not just a remnant? And how does His love explain everlasting torment?

Take a look at what I call the 'R' in grace, the 'R' words that represent some aspect or benefit of God's grace. Do these offer insight that could make God's grace sound more reasonable to all of us? (I, too, want to believe that the idea of a limited grace misrepresents God's heart and actions.) Some of us, not just atheists, cringe at the thought that grace might be so selective that God would love only some of us and discard the rest, the larger part, of His humanity on the garbage heap (Gehenna) of time.

The Bible speaks of *Rewards* and *Reconciliation*, God's accounts *Receivable* (a debt payable in full) ..and of greatest importance (and most emphatically) Christ's death as a *Ransom*—all these accomplished on the cross..

As I shall soon show, none of these 'R' words resolves the matter. In fact, they seem to magnify it.

### God's Riches

There is nothing wrong with the thought that God's grace is a source of divine riches. "*At Christ's expense*" means, as we already knew, that Christ's death provided this wealth of blessing in the form of our salvation. The word *grace* means this is all undeserved not just unearned.

In Ephesians 1:7 Paul affirms::

"In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace."

It sounds as if grace is God's way of choosing one over another.

"For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love, he predestined us for adoption to sonship through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will."<sup>1</sup>

But why me and not them? Would 'love' not share this blessing with everyone!?

"He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world."<sup>2</sup>

### God's Reach

I recommend considering another acrostic: 'God's Reach At Calvary Extended'.

"But we will not boast beyond our measure, but within the measure of the sphere which God apportioned to us as a measure, to reach even as far as you."<sup>3</sup>

God's Reach is an action not a commodity and it is God, the Father, who is performing it. Calvary represents an act of love more than a ticket to heaven. What happened on the Cross when Christ died was the beginnings of a relationship between God and man. We were not being made rich as much as we were being rescued.

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1. Ephesians 1: 4-5.

2. I John 2: 2.

3. 2 Corinthians 10:13 NASB

The reach of God is said to be 'Extended' at Calvary. No one is beyond God's reach. No cliff is too high or dangerous for the shepherd of souls to rescue the lost lamb. God is center stage on the Cross (in the person of Christ, His son). There is nothing implied that you or I must do to obtain —nor do we imagine somehow to deserve—salvation. God's grace does (an action word) it all... God reaches us. We didn't find Him; He found us.

In a real sense grace is not a gift but a "giving." We should not be highlighting the cookies in the jar but the person who put them there—not the salvation as much as the author of such a salvation. We are prone to appreciating the meal without thanking the cook.

Or as Paul testified:

"I became a servant of this gospel by the gift of God's grace [i.e. The gift which God's grace has] given me through the working of his power."<sup>4</sup>

The Greek dictionary defines grace as 'lovingkindness. By a kind-of double entendre it becomes the gift for the giving—the proof or token of an act of grace. As the act it is better translated "gracious."<sup>5</sup>

### God's Rewards

Is there some sense in which God's grace could be construed as a *reward*? The problem with this idea is that 'works' or being rewarded is not grace—by definition. ("*Not of works*")<sup>6</sup> But the word '*reward*' is part of the theology.

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4. Ephesians 3:7 NEW INT.

see Romans 5:15... the gift that came by the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ, overflow to the many! NEW INT.

5. Colossians 4:6 "Let your conversation be always full of grace [gracious]"

6. Ephesians 2:9.

For the Son of Man is going to come in his Father's glory with his angels, and then he will reward each person according to what they have done.<sup>7</sup>

Some might imagine the gift of grace as a reward for a life well spent in christian service. But that's generally not how we should see this very Jewish idea. In the Jewish mind: Good people get the blessings but bad people get cursed, and when this doesn't prove an adequate explanation of life's circumstances, the ancients found it a conundrum.<sup>8</sup>

This Hebrew concept is best stated by the Psalmist: "*You reward everyone according to what they have done.*"<sup>9</sup> But is it true? Or is it just an Old Testament idea that gave Israel hope if they stayed true to 'The Law'?

According to the parable of the laborers, God is the great equalizer rewarding all believers equally though we served Him a life time or only during the closing minutes of our time here. The thief on the cross next to Jesus receives the same grace as Peter or Paul!? Might we be the '*they*' in the parable of the laborers who "*... expected to receive more.*"<sup>10</sup> Does this parable mean that only your final moment in life actually counts!? You can see how some interpretations lead to an absurd conclusion, a contradictory one, or needing clarity.

Jesus rewards the persecuted.<sup>11</sup> If you are persecuted for His sake "*great is your reward in heaven.*" But I think Jesus might be saying that the persecution you experience validates your service to God and our reward is walking through those portals of Glory having fulfilled God's will. That is the reward, we need

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7. Matthew 16:27 The word ἀποδίδωμι speaks of recompense.

8. Habakkuk 1:2 How long, LORD, must I call for help, but you do not listen? Or cry out to you, "Violence!" but you do not save?

9. Psalms 62:12.

10. Matthew 20:10 So when those came who were hired first, they expected to receive more. But each one of them also received a denarius.

11. Matthew 5:12 Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

no more. Paul did not find this unreasonable: *“We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God,”*<sup>12</sup>

As much as we want to imagine it makes sense to assume God will be passing out trophies in Glory or that one person will receive more than another, the language of scripture does not require this interpretation. Furthermore, the gift of salvation or the inheritance that is in Christ is given equally to every believer.

But this raises another point. If every believer receives the same, why should it matter if one has served God faithfully over decades and another stumbled along in sin? Reason requires some form of recognition or blessing or benefit should distinguish us apart and the idea of rewards works logically to give us a sense of fairness in the distribution of God’s blessings. Somehow in our minds, it sounds reasonable to say that the blessings of heaven, as well as those we receive while we are here, are dependent on our faithfulness to God. But grace isn’t tied to that logic. Grace is unmerited.

Life is in large part determined by the law of sow and reap<sup>13</sup>, but grace reserves the right to disallow this record into evidence on judgment day?<sup>14</sup>

### God's Reconciliation

The term ‘reconciliation’ fixes a broken relationship.

...while we were God’s enemies, we were reconciled<sup>15</sup> to him through the death of his Son.<sup>16</sup>

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12. Acts 14:22.

13. Galatians 6:8 Whoever sows to please their flesh, from the flesh will reap destruction; whoever sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life.

14. Romans 8:1 Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.

15. The idea of placating God’s anger toward us is inherent in the word ‘reconciled’ καταλλάσσω

16. Romans 5:10

Richard Trench affirmed that Christ was:

"the sin-offering by and through whom the just anger of God against our sins was appeased, and God, without compromising his righteousness, enabled to show Himself propitious to us once more."

His grace reconciled us "without compromising his righteousness," that is also to say, "without compromising His holiness." And not just 'us' but He did this for everyone who ever lived.

"He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world."<sup>17</sup>

There's no problem here. ...Right?

Wrong?

If God's grace is unearned and undeserved and provided on Calvary for all, why are not all saved?

### God's Receivables

We use to sing: He paid a debt He did not owe; I owed a debt I could not pay.... We have grown up accustomed to hearing this analogy. The debt of sin we owed needed to be paid—to the holiness of God. God's holiness could not be ignored for the sake of His mercy or grace (as already noted). This would compromise Who He is in relation to us, the attribute of holiness that defines Him. This could not be. So, we called it a debt and Jesus' death was in full payment.

The concept of a debt seems based on the New International translation of Colossians 2:14 (The ESV and NASB also use the term debt)

"...having canceled the charge of our legal indebtedness, which stood against us and condemned us; he has taken it away, nailing it to the cross."

Charles Swindol expanded this idea:

"[Jesus] tilted His head back, pulled up one last time to draw breath and cried, "Tetelestai!" It was a Greek expression most everyone present would have understood. It was an

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17. I John 2:2

accounting term. Archaeologists have found papyrus tax receipts with "Tetelestai" written across them, meaning "paid in full." With Jesus' last breath on the cross, He declared the debt of sin cancelled, completely satisfied. Nothing else required. Not good deeds. Not generous donations. Not penance or confession or baptism or...or...or...nothing. The penalty for sin is death, and we were all born hopelessly in debt. He paid our debt in full by giving His life so that we might live forever."<sup>18</sup>

But' the concept of a 'debt' is not found conveniently in the original language<sup>19</sup> of Colossians 2:14. It better reads:

"He expunged the handwritten dogmas which condemned us. He took them away by nailing them to His cross."

If we use the debt analogy, the debt is paid to God. We owed it. But the mystery still remains why He would pay my debt but not what was owed by the atheist or those whose religion does not recognize Jesus' death as this payment. Isn't grace ... grace?

The need to understand, at least in part, what happened when Jesus died, and why He had to die, has led to the use of analogies that are not clearly represented in Scripture.<sup>20</sup> Jesus' sacrifice as the payment of a debt is a leading example traceable back through church history. The theory of 'penal substitution,' as it is called, for the Reformers best explained an atonement.

This appears to many believers to make sense in explaining Calvary, though, I find it a simplistic attempt at reducing the most profound work of God down to terms we think we understand. The death of our Savior was not just a static event, a judicial proceeding wherein the jurist's gavel

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18. [https://www.goodreads.com/author/show/5139.Charles\\_R\\_Swindoll](https://www.goodreads.com/author/show/5139.Charles_R_Swindoll)

19. The word 'debt' is not part of the Greek original leading me to think that the use of this term became a convenient analogy for how it did read: *Blotting out the handwriting of ordinances that was against us, which was contrary to us, KJV*

ἔξαλείψας τὸ καθ' ἡμῶν χειρόγραφον τοῖς δόγμασιν ὃ ἦν ὑπεναντίον ἡμῖν MGNT

20. An interesting dialogue is available at <http://jonjourney.blogspot.com/2009/04/did-jesus-pay-our-debt.html>

marks the books closed on sin. It was more, much more. It was a dynamic beginning for us to re-enter Eden, the seraphim's sword having been sheathed forever. It was our opportunity to walk with God in communal peace and start anew that eternal relationship God envisioned when He first planted the tree of life in our world. It was the ultimate expression of grace, of His kindness toward man, of His love.

The 'debt' concept for me isn't clear in Scripture. I stumble over the idea that Jesus' death somehow answered to our imperfect justice system. "*Tetelesthai*" means other things as well and need not be interpreted in this way.

Beside, the biblical idea is one of a ransom or redemption and a freedom from sin, a freedom to serve God.

### God's Ransom

Paul, however, in describing the work of God's grace, saw it in terms of a ransom—nothing else. This was a story the ancients found relevant: a slave being redeemed or freed from slavery. This story is the biblical analogy told throughout the history in various forms and in various ways, from a sacrifice to Hosea finding a wife.

So I bought her for fifteen shekels of silver and about a homer and a lethek of barley<sup>21</sup>

We were enslaved to sin and the price of our freedom was Christ's sacrificial death paid to the holiness of God.

In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace<sup>22</sup>

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21. Hosea 3:2 NEW INT.

22. Ephesians 1:7. τὸν πλοῦτον τῆς χάριτος αὐτοῦ means "the abundance of His grace." This could be a subjective genitive: the abundance which His grace provides or objective genitive: His grace in abundance. Either way our concept of wealth seems weak to me.

A grace acrostic should use the word Ransom<sup>23</sup> for the 'R' word. But we struggle intellectually to explain why Jesus had to be a redeeming sacrifice for our sins. Nonetheless, the biblical typology or metaphor, is the one God uses. It should be also easily accepted as an explanation by all religious persons seeking after God because a 'sacrifice' has a cultural definition going back to the beginning of recorded history. The truth was and remains *'He gave His life a ransom for many.'*

"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."<sup>24</sup>

### Chosen

One teacher back in Bible college opened class saying, "Students, of all the young people in the world, God chose you to be here." This gave me at the time a sense of privilege, of honor. The idea that God does things for me which are totally unearned and undeserved was a thought I could not then—and I struggle now—to wrap my brain around. And that's the rub with non-believers. They have been excluded, marginalized, and they are no more sinful or crazy or ignorant—or whatever—than I. Maybe less so! Kris Kristofferson asked this question in His well-known melody: *"Why Me."*

"Why me Lord what have I ever done to deserve even one of the pleasures I've known  
Tell me Lord what did I ever do

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23. Christ became a penal substitution.

Penal substitution (sometimes, esp. in older writings, called forensic theory) is a theory of the atonement within Christian theology, developed with the Reformed tradition. It argues that Christ, by his own sacrificial choice, was punished (penalized) in the place of sinners (substitution), thus satisfying the demands of justice so God can justly forgive the sins. It is thus a specific understanding of substitutionary atonement, where the substitutionary nature of Jesus' death is understood in the sense of a substitutionary punishment.

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Penal\\_substitution](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Penal_substitution)

24. Mark 10:45

That was worth loving you or the kindness you've shown"

Kristofferson went further in his lyrics admitting how disconnected he was living his life with little thought of God's plan:

"Lord help me Jesus I've wasted it so help me Jesus I know what I am"

And then he promoted the reassuring theology that nonetheless God still loves us (some of us?):

"Now that I know that I've needed you so help me Jesus my soul's in your hand."

Our understanding of God's grace leaves many with a bad taste in their mouth. It's simply not palatable because it appears arbitrary. God whom Scriptures call "*no respecter of persons*"<sup>25</sup> (That was Peter's understanding and Paul agreed.<sup>26</sup>) before you and I were a twinkle in our parent's eyes destined us for heaven or hell [?] Those who are on the 'inside' get to call this *grace*.

Atheism has a point because beside not demonstrating the idea in the way we live (repentance and reconciliation not perfection), we have argued churches apart maintaining our denominational view on the significance of God's grace in a believer's life, Grace for some, irresistibly predetermines whether they will be and stay saved. For others it empowers free will. How important was that walk to the altar the first time? Half the scripture seems to suggest the one and half the other; so that, atheists do not need to point out the contradiction evident in our theological leanings. ..we do it for them. (I was dismissed from pastoring two churches because I refused to honor either side in this war of words.)

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25. Acts 10:34 Then Peter began to speak: "I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism

26. Romans 2:11 For God does not show favoritism.

### Scattered Seeds

Make no mistake about it, God's love wants everyone to enter into a relationship with Him.<sup>27</sup> Salvation is not just for the chosen few. Christ, indeed, "*died for all.*"<sup>28</sup> The parable of the sower<sup>29</sup> has to mean this if it is to have meaning at all. The farmer, in this story, threw the grain into the wind. Some fell among thorns and on rocky ground and on the path on the edge of his field. Since the seed represents the Word of God, scattering it means that all are intended to hear it. It is not for a select few.

This leads me to theorize a middle ground between the theological extremes which have proven insufficient to explain and unite all scripture into a single grace message. This is not intended as a theological treatise but an explanation that suggests that we have misled non-believers who assume from our separate doctrines that we describe a very partial God whose love for the few has condemned the masses to the flames. They're wrong and we wronged them.

To paraphrase God's outburst to Moses: "I will show grace on whom I will show grace."<sup>30</sup> And we have not determined who that must be because our theologies are too restrictive, our love for others too limited, our faith in God's power too narrow-minded. (*Jesus looked at them and said, "With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible."*)<sup>31</sup>

Am I suggesting a universalism? Not at all.

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27. 2 Peter 3:9 The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.

28. 2 Corinthians 5:15.

29. Luke 8:5-8.

30. Romans 9:15. Exodus 33:19.

31. Matthew 19:26.

### God or Me?

God's grace is a term of relationship. We live inside a philosophical bubble of either determinism (modernism) or self-reliance (postmodernism) and either way we are going to miss the point. The secret is to find the fulcrum—different for each of us—between God's grace and our responsibility as believers that will bring balance in our relationship with Him. There must be a unique balance of God's grace and our faithfulness to Him that defines that relationship. As Francis Schaeffer wrote:

„the central, unfolding theme of God's revelation is the love shown by God to us, and the trusting and dependent love that we are called to show him in return.“<sup>32</sup>

Like a teeter-totter the weight of God's grace is measured<sup>33</sup> by God on the one side. He sets the weight of His involvement in relationship with us. God determines the pivot point of our need.<sup>34</sup> God has to consider where we are at in our walk of faith to decide where He will apply intervening or sufficient grace.<sup>35</sup> Or where He asks something of us in response.<sup>36</sup>

The give and take of a relationship with God, which must include a prayer life for believers, will not follow a neat scientific cause and effect path. At times the give and take of this relationship appears chaotic, disorganized, reckless because at

32. Francis Schaeffer. *True Spirituality* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1971), (Kindle Locations 211-212).

33. 2 Corinthians 10:13 We, however, will not boast beyond proper limits, but will confine our boasting to the sphere of service God himself has assigned to us, a sphere that also includes you. NEW INT.

34. Hebrews 4:16 Let us then approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need. NEW INT.

35. 2 Corinthians 12:9 But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. NEW INT.

36. Philippians 2:12 Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed... continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling NEW INT.

times we are all this. It is the disorder in our lives that resets the fulcrum, that has God in His wisdom deciding more or less, what His involvement in the moment should be. But He is always there!

### A Holy God

Is it God's holiness, however, that has posed the biggest challenge to His love? Is grace God's way of overcoming the disparity between the demands of His holiness and our propensity to unfaithfulness in relation to Him? Is God's grace God's way of taking on the challenge of finding a way to rescue us from spiritual unfaithfulness and bring us back into fellowship with Himself?

With God "*all things are possible.*"

Grace is not the challenge for God's holiness. Grace is the ultimate *expression of it!* The mystery lies in our understanding.<sup>37</sup> But God by His grace knows you and me and if and when we are open to a relationship with Him. He approaches each of us differently. Zacchaeus, Paul, the thief on the neighboring cross, the Samaritan woman at Jacob's well, you and me all came to the Cross by a different route. Some require more time to intellectualize their experience of conviction; some collapse in an emotional heap acknowledging their need of a savior. Some, like Paul, need to be thrown to the ground, others like Zacchaeus, a simple invitation to dinner will suffice.

It's a new day and our christian love like God's grace must find new ways to show His love, new paths through a postmodern culture —new ways of His revealing Himself through us to many who have written Him off as an imaginative friend of religious ignorance. It is a '*new normal.*'

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37. 1 Timothy 3:16

### In Summation

Grace is God's lovingkindness which operates in a wholesome relationship with us through prayer. God's grace is not subject to a set of laws. Grace is above law.<sup>38</sup> Grace is not a commodity, something we can claim as a gift or claim as our own.<sup>39</sup> It is best translated: graciousness (lovingkindness) "*But by the graciousness of God I am what I am.*" It is the act of God giving, empowering, strengthening us, growing our faith, making us into the image of Christ.

Nor does grace bestowed prove spirituality—or lack of it. God's grace along with God's love and fellowship<sup>40</sup> (are not all three, one?) are bestowed on all believers.

Grace is God's involvement in the human equation in which He determines, in His wisdom, His opportunity in our lives.

### A Gracious Hope

The question: "Why is there suffering if God is love?" must find its answer not in man's innate sense of pity, nor alone in God's all-embracing love but in mankind's relationship with God. As already noted: Grace is lovingkindness and lovingkindness is a relational term.

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38. Galatians 2:21 I do not set aside the grace of God, for if righteousness could be gained through the law, Christ died for nothing!"

39. I Corinthians 15:10 But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace to me was not without effect. No, I worked harder than all of them—yet not I, but the grace of God that was with me.

40. 2 Corinthians 13:14 May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.

Daniel Dennett's "*belief in belief*:"<sup>41</sup> is not a correct understanding of faith. It is more about a "*want-to-to-want -to*."<sup>42</sup> It is a matter of wanting to want to have God in our lives. Asking God to prepare the heart to trust Him. It is a matter for the grace of God. It is a prayer that hope inspires.

It has been noted that trying to define God's grace is like marking out the boundaries of a lake only to discover that we have come to the immeasurable sea. The thought of receiving a gift of life undeserved where the reason is a mystery locked away in the heart of the giver leaves our logic helplessly blind. It is as if God offers us a forever with no explanation and it is very human to find this unsettling because we naturally want to look for the attached conditions, the small print, the strings that we think are attached—when there are none.

We can only imagine, as Paul already pointed out to us, the limitlessness and timelessness of God's grace.

"However, as it is written: "What no eye has seen, what no ear has heard, and what no human mind has conceived the things God has prepared for those who love him"<sup>43</sup>

Grace not only gives us a sense of God's abiding presence but an anticipation of blessings to come. Heavenly imaginations or theological daydreaming aside, God's grace in our lives—especially in tragic times—is evidence to our faith that God cares and His love is real, though He mysteriously deigns to wait at some distance while the Lazarus of our dreams and our plans, is lost in death.

Grace ultimately becomes not the explanation why life is like it is. Grace as God's part in our lives does not immediately explain tragedy and pain—nor should it. Grace is not immediate knowledge. It does not make intelligible what non-believers find unconvincing.

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41. As Daniel Dennett observes, where it is difficult to believe a thing, it is often much easier to believe that you ought to believe it.

42. Mark 9:24 help me overcome my unbelief!

43. 1 Corinthians 2:9.

Grace is, however, the voice of hope, of expectations, in God's ultimate working "all things for good"<sup>44</sup> It is this expectation of God's grace that Peter had to be referencing when he said. "*Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have.*"<sup>45</sup>

We are not asked to give a reason or offer a logical explanation for our faith. Nor are we asked to theologically explain suffering. We are encouraged to offer the explanation for our unswerving anticipation ultimately of God tying up all the loose ends of our personal histories and take us deeper into His love.

*"There is a need,"* exhorted Dr. Michael Brown, "*for a fresh infusion of anointed teaching on the beauty and glory and wonder of God's amazing grace.*"<sup>46</sup>

Grace, God's grace, inspires hope, brings alive an excitement what God might have in store for us next. A living Hope is a hope that has discovered that God's grace has been to the future and has returned with good news that God has planned an endless tomorrow of promises fulfilled.

Grace is truly '*amazing.*'

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44. Romans 8:28.

45. I Peter 3:15.

46. Michael Brown. *Hyper-Grace: Exposing the Dangers of the Modern Grace Message* (Lake Mary, FL:Charisma House, 2014), 13. Kindle Edition.

## **A Changing World**

The New Normal

“We're the most aggressively inarticulate generation to come  
along since,  
you know, a long time ago!”

— Taylor Mali

## A Postmodern World

*What moved me so much was not that he loved God, it was rather that he loved people!*

— Len Evans.

The changes that have occurred in society and society's relation to the church since the turn of the 19th century are already significant enough to conclude that what was normal then is no longer the norm. We are living in a new normal which requires changes of the local church if she wants to survive as a vital witness to God's Truth. Whether or not denominationalism will in the future be a force for change is unimportant since in biblical terms such an institution did not exist. But the believer's faith must be unshakeable and his or her love must extend far beyond old boundaries of the close-knit religious groups in which we have grown comfortable. The gospel message must be spoken in actions not just words for us who claim to be followers of Christ.

A postmodern society is a new normal. The people of God must recognize this and how to respond to it if they are to be more than relics of a forgotten time. There are three changes the church as a local body of believers must consider.

1. Her message must be, alone, Christ and Him crucified, not only in her sermon but in her witness and it must transcend culture. The church must be able to spiritually thrive in its mission— not just co-exist with postmodernism.

2. Her acceptance of others must be absolute and all-embracing. She must display a genuine unity that erases the imaginary denominational, cultural, ethical and gender boundaries between all believers. She must answer Jesus' prayer that we become one in Him—even as He and the Father are one.

3. Her interest must be in individual souls, persons, needs, and not size or corporate vision. She must surrender her personal importance for Christ's.

### Declining in Value

*"General church attendance," David Kinnaman for the Barna Group alerts us, "has been on the decline for the past decade and nearly one-third of Millennials who grew up in the church have dropped out at some point."*<sup>1</sup>

If there is a decline in an interest in church, especially by the so-called millennial generation, it should be taken seriously. It would inevitably prove to be a mistake to carry on church business as usual without reconsidering how committed we are—and must be—as individuals and as a congregation to the Great Commission, that we maintain was, given by Christ Himself.

This probably seems a bit alarmist in some communities—especially in some larger, more prosperous ministries since *"based on ... 2014 tracking data, ... [the actively churched, those who attend church regularly, which for some is just Christmas and Easter] ... represents 49 percent of the adult population."*<sup>2</sup> In other words: nearly half of the USA attends church, but Europe is less churched. One website mentioned that in Europe *"Hundreds of Churches Have Closed or Are Threatened by Plunging Membership [and in a comical vein asked]: What to Do With Unused Buildings?"*<sup>3</sup>

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1. [https://www.barna.org/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=662:david-kinnaman-and-jon-tyson-q-a&catid=12&Itemid=305#.VZpk1HgUYZE](https://www.barna.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=662:david-kinnaman-and-jon-tyson-q-a&catid=12&Itemid=305#.VZpk1HgUYZE)

2. George Barna; David Kinnaman eds *Churchless: Understanding Today's Unchurched and How to Connect with Them* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publications, 2015), (Kindle Location 152).

3. <http://www.wsj.com/articles/europes-empty-churches-go-on-sale-1420245359>

Well, my interest is not in statistics that are manipulable—though, I don't question the Barna Group's findings. We don't need math to observe the times we live in. We just need to attend church on the weekend and note how things are changing and if those changes are for the better or not.

It is the message not the ritual that needs to be kept sacred. It is about how church-goers live outside the church walls more than what songs we sing while within them.

### Worship without Walls

In addition: George Barna's New Book: *Revolutionary or Revolting?* "reveals that a growing number of people are seeking spiritual growth outside the institutional church."<sup>4</sup>

Jim Palmer's "*Divine Nobodies*" subtitled "*Shedding religion to Find God*" testified:

"In my disillusionment with institutional church, I contemplated chucking Christianity, but I discovered that these were two separate and not nearly equal things. Seeing I needed a little help to get this, God sent a variety pack of characters who communicated his truth to me in the ways he knew I needed to hear it. Sometimes it took people smeared in axle grease or sporting body piercings and tattoos to unplug my ears and open my eyes. Conditioned to expect God in church buildings and worship services, I never figured on running into him at the Waffle House."<sup>5</sup>

### Solitude

How much easier life would be if lived in a monastery, shut away—we can imagine—from all temptations, shut in with God with nothing much to do but pray, fellowship over the Gospel truth, and study the Word.

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4. <http://www.christianitytoday.com/le/2006/february-online-only/exit-stage-left-why-spiritually-mature-are-leaving-church.html>

5. Jim Palmer, Jim. *Divine Nobodies: Shedding Religion to Find God (and the unlikely people who help you)* (Nashville, TN:Thomas Nelson, 2006), 181 Kindle Edition.

Isolated this way refreshes the spirit, gives us a chance to recuperate and brings back a certain *'innocence of feeling'* that means a fresh start to life at any age.

The heart when broken slowly loses the capacity to care (and we all share in that experience) and we need time to heal. Self-imposed monasticism might be the best approach to mend the heart and revitalize within us that desire to love. Like children we become excited again, skipping, jumping, running along in rhythm with the universe.

As believers, we often seek a place of retreat to be alone with God. It might sound over reaching but there are times, He seems the only true friend we trust.

### Strangers

When Jesus prayed for our spiritual safety, he alerted us that "[we] *are not of the world,*"<sup>6</sup> ...but then added, "*I have sent them into the world.*"<sup>7</sup> These words shock us into realizing that we live among strangers. We are not told to escape this postmodern age but to pilgrimage in it.

If we are *"in"* but not *"of"* this age we can say our message necessarily must transcend it. We can also say that in every real sense we are missionary in calling. We are asked to live among a people who finding us curiously strange listen at an emotional distance. We are challenged to embrace their culture—live somehow at home among them—without losing the focus on what we are all about—who we are in Christ. We must find a way to live in peace without compromising away our witness to the message of grace. We are challenged to represent Christ to a world that does not comprehend who He is.

We are more missionary in our calling in a civilized, postmodern world than we would have been hacking our way through a pre-modern African jungle. We mistakenly think that the calling of God on a 19th century missionary without modern

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6. John 17:16

7. John 17:18

conveniences would have been more challenging with cultural and language barriers to overcome. But we, too, don't speak the same language as this age. The difficulty at hand is just as real in our civilized wifi world. We mistakenly answer in *christianeze* to street-wise fellow travelers, the unchurched, whose vulgarity offends us but who also are not familiar with our colloquial phrases and religious jargon.

We live among postmodern disciples in a postmodern culture. And our modern technologies are simply glorified machetes to hack our way through a jungle of words instead of hanging vines.

### We Are Here

We are left here to represent God as ambassadors—as Paul called us: ministers of reconciliation or as God sternly reminded Moses: to sanctify His name. We are called to be examples for Christ before others who are enraged at simply our being here. We are enjoined to be neighborly with some living near us who, philosophically speaking, have built castle walls enclosing their world as a warning to us to stay away.

Some of us, too, long for a closeness with families—families to whom we seem mysterious. Some of the very persons we love have disappeared into a fog of argument. And yet, we are here.

We are here. We are in this world with a message from the God who loves them, a message spoken loudest without words when spoken with our lives.

### Bees

The church is not an organization as much as it is an organism.<sup>8</sup> The church does not need to be incorporated as much as it needs

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8. I corinthians 12:27 Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it. NEW INT.

to be empowered.<sup>9</sup> The church does not follow a constitution; it follows a commission.<sup>10</sup> The church's success was never dependent on finance but faith, not planning but prayer, not ritual but righteousness, not size but the Spirit, not government but God, not our vision but His.

It is this church that will survive through a postmodern age as a witness. It is this church that can adjust to a new normal without compromising its witness and without losing its own identity in a confused world of unanticipated change.

We cannot any longer mass produce witness, nor should we anticipate a 'revival' that will. Revival by biblical definition is God's people repenting and returning to Him.<sup>11</sup> It is a restoration not an increase. God's interest is in filling His kingdom,<sup>12</sup> not filling our church. Everything is relative and size with God may be one or ten talents but a comparison between small groups to see who is bigger or has more equity or is more influential is not God's way—as well we know.<sup>13</sup>

Like honey bees, the real work of God is done by individual christians in single endeavors. Large groups of believers in one place singing new choruses accompanied by accomplished musicians and the latest sound technologies—

9. Acts 1:8 But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you NEW INT.

10. Matthew 28:19 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 NEW INT.

11. 2 Chronicles 7:14 if my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and I will forgive their sin and will heal their land. NEW INT.

see also Joel 2:13-28.

12. Luke 14:23 Then the master told his servant, 'Go out to the roads and country lanes and compel them to come in, so that my house will be full NEW INT.

13. 2 Corinthians 10:12 We do not dare to classify or compare ourselves with some who commend themselves. When they measure themselves by themselves and compare themselves with themselves, they are not wise. NEW INT.

these—are fun. There is a refreshing excitement about being in the hive, but the work is among the flowers.

Speaking of honey bees, the humble honey bee is more than a symbol of christian effort, it is a metaphor for christian society—the church—that, for me, suggests one more aspect of christian society worth considering: largeness. Largeness is a mindset that says, “*The bigger the better*” Super-sized churches, are they the best thing for all God’s people? We have become dependent on large farms that raise only cattle or only milk cows or grow a single grain, fruit or vegetable ...or farm the honey bee.

For the bee, one crop to feed on is a bad, bad idea. Bees are being farmed in large colonies<sup>14</sup> and in the USA according to one youtube video<sup>15</sup> hives are emptying at an alarming rate (30% per year). Some bee farms have lost up to 90% of their hives. I began to wonder if what is going wrong with the bees (Colony Collapse Disorder) could be a metaphor for learning something about a far more general interest in ‘*largeness*’ that needs to be rethought.

Marla Spivak in a TED talk<sup>16</sup> tells us

“We changed our farming practices. We stopped planting cover crops. We started using synthetic fertilizers. And we started growing larger and larger monocultures. The ..farms that used to sustain bees are now agricultural food deserts. Since World War II we have been systematically eliminating many of the plants bees need for their survival.”

Monocultures are a welcome feast for pests as well which requires pesticides which harm the bees but the point here is the lack of a varied food supply for the bee. They are living on a diet of a single crop’s pollen and nectar and that is not enough to sustain health. In a weakened state they are susceptible to disease—virus, just like us.

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14. Bret Adee, Commercial Bee keeper in California, has 70,000 hives. 200 million of his bees mysteriously vanished.

- [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EEY9tcZS\\_eY](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EEY9tcZS_eY)

15. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EEY9tcZS\\_eY](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EEY9tcZS_eY)

16. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dY7iATJVCso>

There may be something unnatural, then, about largeness. There may be something about largeness that isn't as reasonable as we had thought. Large farms may not be a cause of CCD but largeness or these monocultures do not provide a healthy environment in which bees may thrive. All your bees in one orchard? Most of the bees now in North America (1.5 of 2 million bees in 2007) are trucked to California to pollinate almond orchards. There is no clover, alfalfa or wild flowers here to sustain the hives after the almonds are pollinated; so, they need to be collected and trucked back out. It is obvious to all that this is unnatural. Can you see the comparison with church life?

I have been wondering if largeness is actually not the best idea. And now I am thinking about the church. Large congregations appear to be blessed by God because we think in terms of corporate growth. We see the line climbing on the charts and think God must be behind this. But I commend the small churches of under 300 members because it is here where there is more time for fellowship and a more prolonged focus on the Word of God. Smaller churches tend to be more organic (organism and not organization) They have more opportunity to provide time for personal prayer and testimonies, for example. In the 1960's when one major denomination instituted seminars on growth and saw a substantial increase in their membership, one well-known leader among them was reported to have deeply regretted that they had become "*so much more administrated and so little led*" as a denomination. Largeness became a straight jacket of sorts for pastors who wanted to break form to minister to individual needs. Largeness discouraged modern pastors from getting close to their people, from visiting them in their need or even being available by email or phone. Schedules have to be rigidly honored. Special occasions that might benefit the congregation have to be more carefully screened based on a set of criteria that has more to do with business than God.

Not every christian belongs in a large church. This is not to suggest that large groups are not ministering to needs but it is suggesting that many persons, for God to effectively minister to

them, need the smaller group and the attention it provides. Many smaller groups instead of one huge work means greater opportunity for more people in ministry. More smaller works means more bible students can exercise a calling into the work of God. More laborers can enter the harvest. (And if the large group is harmed by wayward leadership, the impact is even greater. I regret saying this but pastors are human.)

Dr. Francis Schaeffer saw the old pastor in the small village as a spiritual landmark to God's great work among His people. Pastor Thomas Reed tells a story which might inspire the lonely pastor whose labors seem exhaustively unproductive. 'Tommy,' who lived in Western New York enjoyed pastoring<sup>17</sup> a church that admittedly excited his interests in a growing ministry. One night in a vision Tommy drew God's attention to his church building as it lit up the night sky. Tommy was reported to have remarked, "*Lord, what do you think of my church?*" God took Tommy higher until he could see dotting the landscape below a thousand lights coming from a thousand homes. Then God asked him: "*What do you think of mine?*"

### Defensive

The social changes in our world have shocked christian sensibilities to the point where churches are desperate to affirm their commitment to the polity and core beliefs that have been foundational—they believe—to their very existence as institutions. Change comes slowly for denominations, if at all. The status quo of a religious past is deeply rooted in each denomination's history and consequently cultural change which is all around seems life threatening.

Most christians have too much invested in these traditions that have given them a sense of spiritual stability. They are not able nor willing to welcome change so easily. The line between compromise and acceptance is blurred and

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17. <http://thetab.org/category/the-tab-blog/tommy-reid>

compromise is strictly forbidden. As a whole some religious groups have become more apologetic than loving, more defensive than evangelical.

### The Key

The key to our existence as a church, a body of believers never was tied to denominationalism or to church government or to theological positions. It has always been linked to the strength of our conviction that Christ died to save the world from itself, to bring all of us, without respect to persons, cultures, lifestyles, or any other artificial division of men, to a place of reconciliation with God and one another. The key to our existence has always been our love and our ability to love even those whose need to be loved is so desperate they cannot recognize that love. Len Evans called christian love *"the foundation of all realized ... aspirations of faith."*<sup>18</sup>

The key to our existence has been a sense of calling to let Christ love the world through us—a world He died to save. If the church wants a witness and not to culturally insulate herself from the world around her, she has to blow the same trumpet Dr. Evans blew back in the mid 1970's when he preached this single message. Dr. Evans wrote:

"One cannot receive Jesus' love commandment into his heart seriously, and remain as he was or where he was. To receive Christ's powerful and universal and personal love is shattering to all man-made boundaries, dangerous to prejudice, threatening to traditions, and destructive to arrogance and fear.... Where would love lead them? What strange bedfellows would result? What essential truths might be lost, altered, or dissipated?"<sup>19</sup>

Dr. Evans said more than he knew. His words have more relevance today than they did a half century ago when our major struggle was with—now outdated—beliefs that separated us. But today this represents a major paradigm shift for some

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18. Len Evans. *Love, Love, Love* (Plainfield, NJ:Logos International, 1978.), 131.

19. *ibid.*p. 121.

believers. It suggests that decades of service for the Lord were wasted effort because we were serving the church's interests and not the kingdom's. As wrong as that statement is because no believer's life is wasted in service—even if along the way they make mistakes—it is still important for believers to hone their ministries now to cut through bigotry, prejudice, and the red tape of denominational constraints and find a way outside the church to love.

Jim Palmer's sarcasm is all too real:

"In my world there was no such thing as a "gay Christian"; a greedy, gluttonous, hateful, prideful, selfish, lustful, dishonest, hypocritical, vengeful, callous, slanderous, angry Christian maybe, but not gay. God can tolerate only so much and has to draw the line somewhere."<sup>20</sup>

Dr. Evans, again saw this as an *'earthshaking'* revelation that *"God's love was not a ghetto love. Our .. Sacred traditions were not necessarily His! ... We would be forced by God Himself to reexamine our man-made boundaries and terrible lovelessness which we masked in many ways."*<sup>21</sup>

Today the mask of love has to hide a distaste for same-sex marriage while claiming that Christ died for all. And the church is alone with her stance because the civilized globe from government to popular view are accepting this. Saying this is not to support a position on this latest cultural change that church must research. It is to point out the challenges ahead for the believer who finds all this an offense to their faith.

We need to be able to love people where they are at while pastors preach and all believers exemplify the message of Jesus' life, death and resurrection. Jesus was able to dine with tax-collectors (social rejects in His day) and prostitutes—as well we know already—and yet His mission was never compromised. Quite the opposite: He was able to impact lives to

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20. Jim Palmer. *Divine Nobodies: Shedding Religion to Find God (and the unlikely people who help you)* (Nashville, TN:Thomas Nelson, 2006), Kindle Edition.

21. Len Evans. *Love, Love, Love* (Plainfield, NJ:Logos International, 1978.), 122.

follow Him to do things for the kingdom of God that otherwise they would never have had the capacity or reason to do. Zacchaeus virtually bankrupted himself<sup>22</sup> the week he invited Jesus to dinner. Mary Magdalene<sup>23</sup> would never let Him out of her sight since the day He freed her from demonic control. She became the first recipient of the good news of His resurrection and not without reason because her life seemingly ended the day He died, her grief overwhelmed her. The woman at the well turned evangelist<sup>24</sup> and many others felt the embrace of His warm words and kind eyes. He didn't become them by loving them; they became like Him.

Our concern around gay marriage is misplaced. This doesn't say that we will now preach that gay sexual relations are fine, no more than we would want to call heterosexual affairs and divorce and remarriage among believers as acceptable. We can recognize a divine ideal, a 'Garden of Eden' vision God introduced and we can, nonetheless, still embrace others like ourselves, who are not the best examples of that vision and whose spiritual perfection is an ongoing concern for God.

And how sure are we of all our facts? How do we know where someone else is at in their relationship with Christ. Let me pull Jesus' famous last words to Peter out of that context and into this one: "*what is that to you? You follow me!*"<sup>25</sup>

We might, in error, become a bit like Jewry in Christ's day when they had a separate word for their sins than the gentile world. The Greeks were no different" Non-greeks were called *barbarians* by them. And the Hebrews called others who

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22. Luke 19:8 But Zacchaeus stood up and said to the Lord, "Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount." NEW INT.

23. Luke 8:2 and also some women who had been cured of evil spirits and diseases: Mary (called Magdalene) from whom seven demons had come out; NEW INT.

24. John 4:29 Come, see a man who told me everything I ever did. Could this be the Messiah?" NEW INT.

25. John 21:22 ESV

were not Israelites *'people of the earth.'* There is no real difference between them and us but we pretend there has to be to give us that added sense of spirituality. This has to be addressed if our witness for Christ is to remain vital in a changing society.

### Tear Down This Wall

One of the most convincing arguments atheism can put forward is the obvious fragmentation of the church and the disunity among believers. We joke about the 'labels' coming off as we rise in the rapture but Jesus' prayer for unity can only be answered in this life: *"so that the world may believe that you have sent me."*<sup>26</sup> Any debate or argument we might have with a non-believing family member pales to meaningless chatter compared to the discord we sow among ourselves.

We all must have stories to tell about churches we have left in shambles—I mean, we left them because they were in shambles. Sorry about that. Most believers if they are christian for very long will experience or be able to observe a church splitting, not as a matter of church planting but a chaotic and disorganized attempt at promoting a doctrinal change. (Healthy church growth often results in a portion of one congregation starting another but this is not a doctrinal split.) If the core beliefs in Christ's work on Calvary are all that matters, no jagged edge congregational fracture is possible.

### Healthy Differences

Differences in worship style are non issues because they are not biblical issues. A denomination build on a particular worship has reason to be blessed of God—because the emphasis here is on worshipping God. Private faith is not at issue either because:

- Some of us need to feel less in control of our lives and to see God's grace as a resolute aspect of His will keeping us safe and on the path.

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26. John 17:21 NEW INT.

- Some of us have a need to be more directly involved through prayer and piety with the outcome of our salvation. The Word of God is our GPS but we want to do some of the driving. For conscience sake we like to keep ourselves in subjection, lest we become the castaway the first group knows they can never be.
- Some of us have made certain diets or certain habits which have become principles for life. They might be part of a fast or some dedicated behavior that God will honor. Some of us—heavier sets—not so much.

“For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit, because anyone who serves Christ in this way is pleasing to God and receives human approval. Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification.”<sup>27</sup>

But when we disagree on a list of pet doctrines that have nothing to do with spiritual growth or our walk of faith and we split a church over these, the non-believer sees right through this hypocritical self-deception. They see what we really are all about—and it is not Christ and Him crucified.

*“Mr. christian, tear down this wall!”*

### The Central Self

C.S. Lewis tells the story of a young boy who was asked what He thought God was like. *“He replied that as far as he could make out God is ‘the sort of person who is always snooping around to see if anyone is enjoying himself and trying to stop it.’”*<sup>28</sup>

When non-believers talk about a ‘new normal’ they are talking about a social acceptance of all natural expressions of one’s desires—including sexual behavior—which, they say, cannot be morally wrong as long as no one is being hurt and it is not illegal. The new normal to them includes a more relaxed

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27. Romans 14:17-19

28. C.S. Lewis. *The Complete C.S. Lewis Signature Classics* (San Francisco, CA.:Harper 2002), 65.

definition of family and marriage. It leaves room also to accept all behavior that has the sanction of culture. There is no 'sin' as the church understands it. Government is the new moral police. Democratic society, by judicial decree, legislative action or referendum, has written the new code of ethics. It's a new normal.

C. S. Lewis is a '*one-man-one-woman-only-in-marriage*' kind-of guy; so, many atheists will disagree with him. And he certainly would not be a new-normal leader if he were still with us. He leaves no room for same-sex relationships as a morally healthy lifestyle. My intention is not to argue the pros and cons of same-sex attraction. Perhaps even some family and friends have such an experience and we want to go on record as loving them.

I quote Lewis not to support my own opinion or belief on marriage, but to draw our attention to what he referred to as "*that tiny central self no one sees*" in each of us. The thoughts that preoccupy our time and upon which we subsequently act, for good or bad, shamefully remembered or honorably recalled, leave their "*mark ..on that tiny central self no one sees in this life but which each of us will have to endure—or enjoy—forever.*"<sup>29</sup>

It remains in the best interest of each of us to either train the conscience to accept our thoughts as wholesome or to allow the conscience to direct us in such matters because this is who you or I are becoming. Life's action are not isolated pleasures but character forming, personality molding events. This is not to discredit the work of forgiveness but, as Lewis explained:

"...Taking your life as a whole, with all your innumerable choices, all your life long you are slowly turning this central thing either into ... a creature that is in harmony with God, and with other creatures, and with itself, or else into one that is in a state of war and hatred with God, and with its fellow creatures and with itself"<sup>30</sup>

For non-believers or those who do not believe in God, this quote understandably excludes the reference to God. But

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29. *ibid.* p. 81.

30. *ibid.*

we need to see that it is not just the impact of our actions and choices on other people that should concern us but the consequences of such choices on ourselves.

One more important C. S. Lewis point to make. I agree with Lewis when he alerts us that Christianity does not regard unchastity as the supreme vice. It is our least concern. What he calls

*“the Diabolical self”*<sup>31</sup> is worse:

“the pleasure of putting other people in the wrong, of bossing and patronizing and spoiling sport, and back-biting, the pleasures of power, of hatred... That is why a cold, self-righteous prig who goes regular to church can be far nearer hell than a prostitute.”<sup>32</sup>

You’re welcome. I was happy to mention it.

### Gay Attraction

A postmodern world is also more open to the gay lifestyle. But where does this leave a believer who doesn’t endorse the gay lifestyle but who wants to do and say the right thing and at the same time not deny their own convictions in these matters? We probably all have gay family members or we have friends who are gay or have gay family members. We need to accept them in love and familial affection.

If they wish to inform us of their relations, we should be listeners. If they want us to be ‘on board’ with their gayness—when we are not—we must lovingly clarify the matter: we love them but do not accept gayness as something God envisioned when He created man in His image. Whether we are right or wrong is not the issue. This impacts our faith and we ask them to honor that but we also want them to remain a vital part of our lives as family and as friend.

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31. *ibid.* p. 89.

32. *ibid.*

### Held Accountable

There are some believers who struggle with this idea. They are incapable, it appears, to remain in a strong and loving relationship with someone whom they just found out is gay or atheist, who is leaving the faith or leaving the church. And that's sad because it is not family and friends but you and I who are being "*Challenged*" by the love of God to stay involved.

## **The Preacher's Last Words**

In Closing

“Some things scratch the surface  
while others strike at your soul.”

— Gianna Perada

## A Final Thought

*"Have patience with everything that remains unsolved in your heart. ...live in the question." — Rainer Maria Rilke.*

My faith has been given voice by the experiences that are reminders to me that the biblical message of grace is not to be dismissed so readily on argument alone. The disgruntled and the inexperienced, no matter how educated or intellectual sounding, offer me no substance that explains away the possibility that my life has entertained from time to time a divine presence.

In addition, my personal studies have given me pause to consider a divine signature in the writings of scripture—even if I concede that some of what has been canonized might be worth reconsidering for that honor.

This is my epilogue to these matters.

## Circumstantial Evidence

*No sooner does the subject of miracles arise than someone must ask whether anyone can today really believe in such things. — Eric Metaxas,*

Gary was an atheist. He was a philosopher and a prolific reader who was prepared to win any debate. In fact winning meant everything to him. Whether it was chess, or baseball—he had a non-hittable curve ball. Whatever the contest, he had to win. He didn't cheat. He just drove himself to be as good at it as he could be. He would practice his pitching hours a day. He was dedicated to self-improvement and winning.

I remember on one occasion sitting opposite him on the floor playing chess and another time table top hockey. He would sit cross legged on the floor. Gary is tall and lanky. Sitting awkwardly on the floor with his legs pretzeled into a bow he kept a focus on the game. Gary was serious about winning.

If you cheated by trying to interrupt his concentration with a joke or incessant babble, he would become very angry and ready to call it quits in disgust. The short of it is : Winning was everything to him.

I never beat him at anything...well, until...

One Sunday afternoon, during the time I was dating his sister, Jeanette, I went over to their house to call on her for church. For me, it was an emotionally confusing time going to church with a girl friend and having feelings of love and attraction jumbled inside in such a swirl of emotion that I couldn't tell you which part was for God and which part was for her. But my story really began when I invited Gary to join us for church.

He didn't say, "No." He rather challenged me to a game of toss.

His younger brother had a toy clown face which came with a few bean bags. The clown's mouth was a large opening into which to toss the bags. Coincidence of coincidences, the clown

face sat on the kitchen floor against the far wall. (When will children learn to put their toys back where they belong?)

Gary grabbed the bags and wagered, "If you beat me by tossing more bags than I in that clown's mouth, I'll go with you guys."

We stood across the room—oh, 10 feet away?—and began. Gary tossed and got two out of three in. He wasn't happy but no concern; unlike him, I was no basketball player and could be sure to miss two or all of them.

I let fly the first bag and, yes, right into the thing's pie hole. And the second one went in, too. What no one knew was that my thoughts were somewhere between church and his sister. I had no interest in this stupid game and, further, I didn't believe he would come with us even if he did win. Furthermore, I knew I would lose. I lobbed the third on in the direction of that dumb face and—wow!—it went in. I beat Gary!

Can you picture the look on his face, Gary's, not the clown's, when he realized for the first time since I have known him, I was the winner? He demanded, "Best out of three!"

I agreed; and to shorten this account a bit, I beat him three out of three times. I couldn't lose! I think I could have done this with my eyes closed because I was just playing; Gary was disassembling a live bomb.

I love chance and co-incidence. Fate is such a good friend to give you a moment of triumph, a feeling of self-worth like a chemical high that elevates the spirits until you feel like the whole world just lined up to high-five you in your moment of victory.

Jeanette and I, along with the rest of her family, went on ahead to church that evening. Gary did not leave with us which did not surprise me.

When we got to the church, we found the pastor, Pastor Christie, calling the congregation to the altar for prayer! This church had a low wooden rail about two and a half feet high for an altar positioned about three feet in front of the platform and running almost the entire length across the front of the church. We called this 'the altar.' People were kneeling there while our organist, Esther, played.

I thought we had missed the service because I never recall this ever happening in the four plus years I had been attending—accept, of course, at the end of a service. And I never missed a service. Never! Well, almost never. I just sat there confused at what I should do next when Gary walked in.

Gary sat in the back row a few minutes and then, as he related later to me, thought about leaving but his mother had the only key to the house and she wasn't about to give it up. He sat there for a few minutes and then to my utter amazement—I never saw this happen before—he stood up and called out for the pastor's attention. Later he explained that since he couldn't leave without standing out in the cold for—dare I say it?—God knows how long, he decided to win a debate with the pastor. He went to the altar to speak with the man in charge. Later he remarked to me that either the pastor was going to convince him that God was real or he would convince the pastor that God was not.

Gary knelt on one side of that rail and the pastor on the other, no doubt arguing their individual points. It must have seemed like an eternity went by for his mom and sister while they stood to the side with tears streaming down their cheeks. If there is such a thing as intercessory prayer, and I believe there is, this was it.

Gary stood up somewhere between then and now, spun around and kicked the carpet as if he was trying to use his intellectual sand wedge to get his mind out of a divot. He went back to his discussion. Time stood still or it had to pass by as in another dimension of reality because nothing was happening and yet everything was happening. Gary left the church with his family without any apparent win or loss under his philosophical belt.

But Gary went home and read through the entire gospel of Mark that night and Matthew the next and then proceeded to read through the Bible. After this I remember going over his house to spend all nighters listening to William Branham. During that summer, we listened to tape after tape containing sermon after sermon, testimony after testimony, until 5AM many mornings.

We spend more than one Saturday passing out hundreds of tracks that he would purchase for distribution downtown near

the theaters between movies when the streets were flooded with people.

Last time I met up with Gary, he was pastoring. His competitive spirit was now channeled into winning for a congregation he cares about and defeating spiritual combatants and circumstances that challenge their right to a strong faith.

I cannot tear myself away from the belief that somehow or other there was another player in this drama other than Gary and pastor Christie, other than me or his mom and Jeanette. Someone else choreographed this dance. I never thought to apply math to this series of events that led to Gary's conversion but I have remained in awe about my winning three in a row at bean bag toss and then no key for Gary to return home early and an altar call without a sermon. If these had occurred on separate occasions, it would have been noteworthy, but happening as they did in sequence that led to Gary reading the Gospel of Mark and then going on from there to eventually become a pastor in the faith leads me to consider some intelligent designer behind it all.

If you think Gary was in sympathy with his mom's religion so it is understandable that even without bean bags he was planning to go to church, rethink it. I was aware of Gary's atheism and his strong argument against Christianity. He came to the church because he lost a bet and Gary always honored his bets and his commitments.

I am unable to escape agreeing with Solomon's conclusion: *"In his heart a man plans his course, but the Lord determines his steps."*<sup>1</sup>

This story serves as a reminder to me of those times in my life when God like the unseen wind was moving the circumstances of my life. This is why I can look back at some situations in my past and conclude a divine presence must have responded in some way to whatever was happening or about to happen and He influenced the outcome. Isaiah 43:1-5 is one of my favorite scriptures: *Fear not: for I am with thee.*

I have no other explanation.

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1. Proverbs 16:9 NEW INT.

## It's Greek to Me

*"a language that even the gods would have been ready to speak —  
Andriotis*

We are all different in our experiences, our personalities, the things we value, the principles by which we govern ourselves. We all have different interests, different dreams of the future and the resources to make those dreams come true. For those of us who believe in God, He takes our uniqueness into consideration in relating to us which means that even our faith is tied directly to who we are.<sup>1</sup> It is our spiritual DNA.

With me, my interest in the Greek language, in which the New Testament comes to us, became a major source of encouragement for my faith. Hidden in the language, or at least of little interest generally, are features that suggest to me that God was selective, indeed, in bringing our New Testament to us in this language, called *'the Koine.'* Intending not to be too technical, I have minimized footnoting my comments in an effort to only provide you a taste, a 'scratch-and-sniff' moment, in areas few scholars consider in discussing the existence of God. But here is a primary source of information that for me contends with the atheistic point of view.

Richard Dawkins generalized an observation which does not apply to the Greek language in concluding that, *"It seems probable that language evolves by the cultural equivalent of random genetic drift. ... Latin drifted to become Spanish, Portuguese, Italian, French...."*<sup>2</sup>

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1. The word ἑδιος means "pertaining to one's self" translated 'to each on' in 1 Corinthians 12:11 *All these are the work of one and the same Spirit, and he distributes them to each one, just as he determines.*

2. Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (New York:Houghton Mifflin Co., 2006), 189.

Professor Caragounis, whose entire career was consumed by a driving interest in understanding the development of the Greek language corrects this notion, clarifying that *“The Vedic-Sanskrit language gave rise to a number of Hindi languages and dialects. While in Europe, the second oldest language, Latin, broke up into the Romance languages.... Greek, on the other hand, never gave birth to any daughter languages.”*<sup>3</sup>

The greek language is on its own branch in the family tree of language. This alone does not give indication that it might have been God’s choice for our New Testament but there is further indication that this is so. In its 4,000 year history, the language went through four phases, the third of which is of keen importance to me. Allowing Dr. Caragounis to explain (I added the numbering):

1. “The first phase occurred when the Greek... was differentiated from ... Sanskrit and the Iranian languages. At that time it was a unified language.
2. The second phase came ... with the coming of the Greeks to the Hellenic peninsulas... when the ... language broke up into ... dialects, which takes us down to ... classical times.
3. In Hellenistic times [when the Scriptures were compiled] the ... language is reunited, ... and as such goes through its third stage [Koine].
4. In Byzantine ... times it breaks up once again into Modern Greek.

This resilience, this capacity of the Greek language to divide up into dialects and then to reunite and assert itself ... *“for the third time in its longer than 4000-year-long history, is unparalleled in the history of language.”*<sup>4</sup>

The fact that the language combined 7 different dialects<sup>5</sup> into one common (Koine) language was unparalleled. It has never

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3. Chris Caragounis. *The Development of Greek and the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI.:BakerAcademic, 2006.å), 2.

4. *ibid.* p. 21.

5. Caragounis says [*ibid.* p. 38] “Attice Greek could not preserve its purely Athenian character, and entered a course simplification, amalgamating elements from the other Greek dialects... it became ... Koine [the Greek of the New Testament].”

happen before or since in any language! To me, that's the providential hand of God. "*Andriotis* [in 'A History of the Greek Language' calls it] *a language that even the gods would have been ready to speak.*"<sup>6</sup>

Dr. Caragounis is not alone in his observation and the impact this language might have upon faith. There are in fact many scholars of the Bible whose knowledge has deepened their faith in God and the message of His grace.<sup>7</sup>

### It's Perfect

My personal studies observed the historical development of the perfect tense in Greek which was a tense that was often used for emphasis or to show something in a more permanent or consistent state. This particular form was dropped from the language in phase four, the Byzantine period and replaced by a simpler form, the *Aorist*. But during the biblical period, this tense could signify something as done, completely, unchangeably (permanently), and in a sense, finally. Jesus words "*It is finished*" spoken from the cross are in this form. Salvation in Paul's theology is spoken of in this form.

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6. *ibid.* pp.33-34.

7. Bart Ehrman in *Interrupting Jesus* argues that scholarship has discovered through the styles of writing and vocabulary in Ephesians and Colossians that Paul could not have written these letters. "The writing style of both letters is uncharacteristically Paul's" (p. 126.)

But Dr. Chrys Caragounis, himself a Greek, a Greek scholar and a doctor of Christian Theology (<http://chrys-caragounis.com/index.html>) supports the writings as genuine (*The Development of Greek and The New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI.:BakerAcademic, 2006.â), 432.): "The discussion of Pauline texts indicates that while Paul, not infrequently exhibits elements that were deemed.. necessary to good composition, he seldom made a conscious effort to adhere to literary rules for elegance in style... his more felicitous choices of words and compositions seem most of the time to be the result of instinctive feeling and natural taste; they are the spontaneous intellectual outbursts of a great soul...."

If I may, when Jesus spoke calm to the sea<sup>8</sup> of Galilee (The well-known phrase in the KJV: *'Peace, Be still'*) the *'be still'* command is in this form and spoken as a command it became a rather unique use of this form. (There is no other example in Scripture and few in the classics.) The greek word means to *'muzzle the mouth.'* Thus, Jesus was commanding the storm to muzzle its mouth—now! Not another gust of wind!—and keep it muzzled!

With Jesus on the Cross it spoke of the plan of salvation being finally, completely, and forevermore done.. Done!

### Passivity

I also observed, but would need a volume to detail this comment, that *'we are saved'* is not just a perfect form (tense) but it is a passive (voice) one as well.

For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God<sup>9</sup>

The passive idea has a history and how it developed out of the so-called *'middle voice.'* (There is no such voice in English.) The Hebrew use of the passive idea, something done *'to'* you instead of (active) *'by'* you is weak in comparison to the Greek concept. The so-called passive form in Hebrew, Professor Bowman tells us, *"indicates that the action...is done to the subject as coming from the outside."*<sup>10</sup> But it does not, thereby, say that the subject was in no way responsible for what happened. Much of what happened to ancient Israel, for example, that was painful and punitive did not exonerate them or prove they had no part in their own demise. In Haggai 1:8 the Lord instructs *"Go up into the mountains and bring down timber and build my house, so that I*

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8. Mark 4:39 He got up, rebuked the wind and said to the waves, "Quiet! Be still!" Then the wind died down and it was completely calm

9. Ephesians 2:8 NEW INT.

10. Thorleif Bowman. Hebrew Thought Compared to Greek (New York:W. W. Norton. Co., 1960), 35.

*may take pleasure in it and be honored," says the LORD.*"<sup>11</sup> The word honored which many scholars might call a passive can have a reflexive meaning: *'to show one's self to be great.'*

If I am right about this, even Pharaoh was in some sense responsible for his hardened heart.<sup>12</sup>

*"As regards its meaning," Gesenius teaches that this form "bears some resemblance to the Greek middle voice."*<sup>13</sup> It also expresses mutual action (done to one another). It has the meaning of the active with the addition of *'to'* or *'for'* oneself. It becomes to mean a passive idea, Gesenius informs us, *"in consequence of a looseness of thought."*<sup>14</sup>

The idea behind the grace of God is much stronger as Paul pointed out, *"this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God"*<sup>15</sup> The Greek language developed a true passive and added it to the perfect form to begin to describe what God provided through His grace at Calvary.

Is it possible for me to think of this as evolutionary or as an historical co-incidence!? Honestly, I cannot! For me, the development of these forms have to be somehow under a divine guidance.

### Uncommonly Common

One primary regret I have is that I had to exit this study to support a family. It is not that supporting family was regrettable. I regret I could not support them on a pastor's salary at the time and it was a blessing of sorts to be able to go back to college and start a second career.

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11. The word honored is the Niphal of **נָדַד** and can also mean 'to show one's self great.'

12. Exodus 7:13.

13. Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar (Oxford, England:Oxford at the Clarendon Press. 1909), 137.

14. *ibid.* p. 138.

15. Ephesians 2:8

But the final point to make here is to mention the mystery that beclouded the language of our New Testament. New Testament Greek was recognized to be in some sense special. Biblical scholarship would have to wait until archeological finds would catch up with answers.

Dr. Caragounis admits that

“We do not have any substantial documents of spoken or written Koine by Greeks from the time of the NT [New Testament]. The two works of sufficient length, written at this time and often regarded as illustrative of Koine Greek, are the LXX [Greek translation of the Old Testament] and the NT, but both of them were written by non-Greeks and evince (especially the former) heavy Semitic influence.”<sup>16</sup>

How do we view the historical portions of the Bible? Professor Caragounis points out that before the 20th century New Testament “*scholars [had] debated whether the NT [New Testament] was written in ‘pure Greek’, in ‘biblical Greek’, in ‘Jewish Greek’, or in ‘Holy Ghost Greek’.*”<sup>17</sup> In 1908, Dr. Deissmann discovered a vernacular or common Greek dialect (Koine) in a collection of general documents written by ordinary citizens.<sup>18</sup> This is the language of our New Testament and the Greek Old Testament. Prior to this discovery, the Greek words and language used in the writing of the New Testament were considered a spiritual language because it was not exactly the language of a Plato or an Aristotle.

All of this technical mumbo-jumbo made one woman in a church I pastored to take offense because in her mind the implication was that she apparently had no clue as to what the Bible did say—it was all so confusing for her. Dr. Eshbaugh,

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16. Chris Caragounis. *The Development of Greek and the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI.: Baker Academic, 2006), 40.

17. *ibid.* p 3.

18. Bishop J. B. Lightfoot is reported to have said: “...if we could only recover letters that ordinary people wrote to each other without any thought of being literary, we should have the greatest possible help for the understanding of the language of the N(ew) T(estament) generally.” Professor Caragounis has further explained the historical process which gave us the language of our New Testament. *ibid.*

whose PhD was in textual criticism, did warn me about appearing 'one-up' on members of the congregation I pastored. I, metaphorically speaking, preached in sackcloth and ashes after that.

Listen! Enjoy reading a translation of the Bible that makes sense for you and understand that by virtue, alone, of your relationship with our Lord and your hunger for His Truth, you will be enlightened with all the understanding needed to live for Him.<sup>19</sup> (It helps to sit under the teachings of a good pastor.) But for me, the language had written upon it the clear signature of its Divine Authorship.

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19. Matthew 5:6 Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. NEW INT.

## An Epilogue

*I feel like I finally understand how family love is. Tangled, wounded, and wonderful. Imperfect. A forever love.*

— Hannah Tunnicliffe, “The Color of Tea”

My sympathies lie with those who have left the faith because many of their conclusions are unquestionably astute. In the appendix ‘*Circumstantial Evidence*’ I tell the story of a friend, Gary, who was himself an atheist but came to Christ after a lengthy discussion with one pastor who took the time to listen. What can one say to bridge the space that has opened between those whose faith might be in crisis and those whose faith appears unshakeable? No one should think that whatever this pastor said or how he reacted is in itself a template for keeping anyone in the faith. We cannot play God or be God or do what only God can do and must do if anyone is going to come into a living faith.

But we must be what the label reads: christian! We must stop imagining that our defense of God is adequately and ingeniously thought out when all this does is poke the hornet’s nest. We must learn to listen with a sympathetic mind making sure that what we believe to be true is a working part of our faith.

Regarding my faith in God, my trust in His love for me, I am not prepared to give this up on a hunch that someday some evolutionary theory might prove some translation of my Bible incorrect. This is far too vague especially when the ‘experts’ are not really expert on everything they are assuming.

This is not said in a disparaging way since I am one of those ‘*want-to-be*’ scholars who missed his opportunity to become a definitive voice. The argument continues to be a war of words and I can only recommend that you do what I did. Read, read, read. Read both sides. Read the stuff that makes you want to toss your lunch as well as the stuff that makes you want to write

blogs. Most students who are inquisitive about atheism make the mistake of choosing only one side of this debate. Stay open but I recommend staying in the faith.

Peter Ward (or was it Donald Brownlee, his co-author) in *"Rare Earth"* with refreshing honesty compared our knowledge of our universe to a toddler's first observations about their play world. *"We ... are like 2-year-olds, just beginning to comprehend the immensity, wonder and hazards of the wide world."*<sup>1</sup> His context was the mysteries of the physical universe. For me, the mysteries of life span beyond the visible realms of discovery.

Much of life's learning is like a good mystery which at times is not what it appears to be, where the facts seem to suggest one thing when they are really pointing elsewhere. I would give my bible the benefit of the doubt until I could 'own' an intelligent argument to the contrary. And I would be careful not to throw out the complete text because of some spurious reference. I wouldn't toss the whole bible because I didn't like what I read in one book. Study a bit more to be sure what your convictions are.

### My Bible

Peter wrote:

"Therefore, with minds that are alert and fully sober, set your hope on the grace to be brought to you when Jesus Christ is revealed at his coming."<sup>2</sup>

And in one sentence he zoomed in on the only doctrine we should be theologizing, the only message we should be heralding, the only idea worth sharing.

As already noted: Bart Erhman, a textual critic, claimed that *"most critical scholars"* believe that Peter's works were *"not*

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1. Peter D. Ward & Donald Brownless. *Rare Earth* (New York: Copernicus Springer-Verlag, 2000), 287.

2. I Peter 1:13

*actually written by Peter<sup>3</sup> but by one of his followers, pseudonymously.”<sup>4</sup>*

I must admit that reading Peter’s epistles in the Greek impressed me with its style and astuteness regarding spiritual matters. And I, too, was struck with a sense of how incongruous it must sound for—and how naive of Christians to accredit these biblical writings to—a fisherman from Galilee.

Was Peter an early Billy Sunday able to employ slang and colloquialism to ignite the crowd into believing his message? Or was his speech as elevated as perceived by the crowd whose hearts came under conviction about his message?

But since following Jesus for—what 1, 2, or 3?—years, it is no wonder to me that on the ‘Day of Pentecost’ Peter stood out, exposed, outspoken and with impassioned inspiration, and spoke as an orator.<sup>5</sup>

Regarding his epistles, Peter may have had a ghost writer, or at least a proofreader.

“With the help of Silas, whom I regard as a faithful brother, I have written to you briefly.”<sup>6</sup>

He also had 3 decades of ministry behind him before writing his thoughts for us.

But why say all this in a ‘final thought’? Because it is the summation as well as the focus of our faith. When Peter spoke of being (I like the New International version) ‘*fully sober*,’ whatever could he have meant? Be *sober* or guard yourself against mental foginess, spiritual drowsiness. ‘Fully?’

3. Wiki adds: “Most critical scholars are skeptical that the apostle Simon Peter, the fisherman on the Sea of Galilee, actually wrote the epistle, because of the urbane cultured style of the Greek and the lack of any personal detail suggesting contact with the historical Jesus of Nazareth.”

4. Bart. D. Ehrman. *Misquoting Jesus* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 2005), 31.

5. Acts 2:14 uses the word ἀποφθέγγομαι, elevated speech as perceived by the hearers.

6. I Peter 5:12

Perfectly and completely. Doesn't this say that Peter's message, which was Paul's as well, should be our sole message, also, as Christians?

"set your hope on the grace to be brought to you when Jesus Christ is revealed at his coming"

### My Family

The Bible is the message of God's interest in our eternity with or without Him. And as simple an idea as this sounds, it is profoundly complex—at least for language.

'*agape*' love, for example, is a scriptural term Plato and Aristotle might have mistakenly understood in terms of '*eros*.'<sup>7</sup> Paul describes it in I Corinthians 13 but does not define it. Its definition according to John is '*God*.'<sup>8</sup>

The knowledge of scripture, like any discipline, is not merely an academic exercise but must be experienced to be understood. You have to live it to begin to appreciate more than a poetic appraisal of its qualities and power. Thomas a Kempis paraphrased I Corinthians 13:4-7:

"Love feels no burden, thinks nothing of trouble, attempts what is above its strength, pleads no excuse of impossibility; for it thinks all things lawful for itself, and all things possible."<sup>9</sup>

But these are just words if not lived out in relationship.

Hands-on involvement in those instructions that relate to life must be a real part of any biblical education. We make a big mistake when we argue only from an academic level of understanding. It is not sufficient.

My family, my extended family, includes gays, atheists, agnostics, and a whole lot of '*I-don't-go-to-church-anymore*'

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7. The verb 'to love,' ἀγαπάω, includes romantic love in Greek literature. See Ephesians 5:25 "Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her"

8. I John 4:8

9. [www.brainyquote.com/quotes/authors/t/thomas\\_a\\_kempis.html](http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/authors/t/thomas_a_kempis.html)

people. I love them all and refuse to distance myself from them or their views.

My faith in God can handle it. My love for them can extend beyond any misplaced aggravation because they don't buy into my beliefs. Perhaps, some of my beliefs shouldn't be for sale. Perhaps, some of my beliefs are not really worth owning; they are just stuff the preacher keeps pushing but not part of the message of grace, the biblical focus, as our fisherman friend outlined it.

### Profiled

There is a person out west whom I never speak to—whom, in fact, I have never spoken to. I might speak of them from time to time based on my general impression about westerners. I once had family who lived out west and they lived a rather carefree and wild life—at least that was my impression from things I imagined years ago as a kid.

Well, this person I never talk to is not family. My family members are all gone now. This person just lives out there, but one has to consider where they live in profiling them. How they think and what terrible things they are capable of is all part of the overwhelming influence of that depraved culture they live in. If this person did anything illegal, I wouldn't be surprised. I assume that they don't love God. No surprise there!

*"How unfair!"* You think.

I agree. But isn't that what some atheists think of me because I attend church? And isn't that what some Christians think about atheists simply because they don't believe in God or don't know what to think about Him?

And even church goes profile God (we call it theology) even though they may never talk to Him. We fail to appreciate the importance of prayer in the matter of faith. This is paramount to failing to appreciate the value of communication and dialogue in healthy relationships. These are the horse and

carriage of a real relationship with a real God. You can't have one without the other: trust and prayer.

### **Finally**

My love for our three sons has prompted me to write this book. It is a product of an all consuming interest in their happiness and well-being. And even if at times the verbiage seemed raw and abusive toward the church, it was actually spoken in the spirit of full disclosure and honesty. We need to be collared. We need to reevaluate our lives for the sake of love. Our need for holding family close to our hearts is challenging us ..as it should.

## **Leftovers are Sometimes Better**

### The Appendix

Appendices are included to offer additional material which like a footnote needs to be separated out to avoid a lengthy tangent from the main thought of the text. These appendices are what debates are made of and since my main interest is acceptance and not argument, they have been included here.

## In My Son's Own Words

*...the bungee cord snapped.*

*And my sense of spirituality shattered into a million pieces.*

I was born into a Pentecostal family. My dad was the pastor.

All versions of my story start the same way, with that line.

For decades, I was stepping further and further away from the faith I was taught as a kid. But the emotional core of my faith was still fundamentalist, and I still thought of myself as an Evangelical. And I still believed in fundamentalism (kind of like Daniel Dennett's "belief in belief"). By the end of 2013, there were two of me living inside my mind. There was the fundamentalist, who believed in some version of Evangelical theology. And then there was the rationalist, who would admit that it's all just a story, a religious narrative, but—I believed at the time—a useful narrative. I thought of myself as an agnostic Christian, because I didn't think you could prove whether God existed—all the "evidence" people cite are just stories—but I believed in him anyway, just because.

And at the same time, I didn't feel I could talk openly about these thoughts. The few times I had cautiously put out feelers in front of religious friends, or even worse, religious leaders, I had been soundly thrashed with [by] them.

When my daughters were studying for their bnot mitzvah, one of them admitted to me that she didn't know whether she believed in God. I urged her just to go through with the bat mitzvah, and then she could figure out what she wanted to do after that. Now, I wonder, what if I had just told her the truth, that I didn't think I believed in God, either, but I was scared to lose the support I got from my religious community.

On another occasion, at a small-group study with a religious leader, we were talking about demon possession in the New Testament and how it sometimes could be describing what we

now know to be physiological disorders, like epilepsy. I pointed out that we tell a narrative about demon possession, but an atheist, for example, might tell a narrative that is completely naturalistic, and either narrative can potentially explain the facts of the story, and the narrative we tell affects us more than what actually happened. I don't remember exactly what he said, but I do remember his tone of voice, and knew from then on it was probably dangerous to say anything nice about atheists ever again. I did not have the heart to tell him that I was very comfortable with the atheist's naturalistic narrative and thought it explained the facts of the story (assuming it's a true story) perfectly well.

And then there were Evangelical views on sexuality. I was raised to be scared of sex, and ashamed of my sexuality. Growing up, my parents never acknowledged that sex was even a thing, except to guard my tender mind from learning about it. And the few times that sex was alluded to in church or Sunday school, it was always something holy, sacred, restricted, and scary. These attitudes are still mainstream within Evangelicalism, and they extend to Christian views about gay relationships.

In April 2012, I wrote in a blog post:<sup>1</sup> "That doesn't put God's seal of approval on modern homosexual relationships. It only means we can't indiscriminately pull out proof-texts, mete out condemnation, and expect to get anywhere constructive. On the other hand, we are all struggling..." That captures where I was as a believer. I didn't actually believe that there was anything fundamentally wrong with someone just because they were gay, but I couldn't just come out and say, "God loves gay people and approves of gay relationships." It was as if there were a bungee cord attaching me to my fundamentalist roots, and all those years it had been stretching tighter and tighter.

Then the World Vision fiasco happened.

World Vision is a Christian charity. No, it's an Evangelical charity. They do not hire non-Christians and do not hire gay people, and do not hire gay Christians. On March 24, 2014, they

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1. <http://blog.jtimothyking.com/2012/04/18/redefining-marriage>

announced that they were revising this policy, because Christianity is changing, and gay relationships are becoming more and more accepted by Christians. They said they would no longer care whether a Christian was in a gay relationship or not. They would hire him anyhow.

And Evangelicals hit the roof. Albert Mohler Jr., president of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, used the word “disaster.” The Assemblies of God asked its members to stop supporting World Vision. The rank and file hit social media with their own invectives and threats. And they started dropping their sponsorships on the floor. Thousands of poor children in third-world countries lost their sponsors, and millions of dollars in expected donations evaporated. Because everyone knows, it’s better that a poor child suffers than that a gay accountant writes the check.

Two days and 10,000 sponsorships later, World Vision President Richard Stearns had announced that “our board acknowledged that the policy change we made was a mistake,” that they now “see that with more clarity...and we’re asking you to forgive us for that mistake.”

We now know it was more like 15,000 to 19,000 children,<sup>2</sup> and some 5–6 million dollars expected over the length of those sponsorships.

On Facebook, I saw an Evangelical friend publicly jump ship. And other Evangelicals were talking about leaving Evangelicalism, including Rachel Held Evans.<sup>3</sup>

Every war needs an ethical justification, and the culture war is no exception. “We know that innocent people are getting hurt and killed, but it would be even worse if Hitler were to take over Europe.” There are arguments against that rationale, but at least they’re ethical arguments. I thought that if there were any ethical rationale for the culture war, or some ethical argument that I had

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2. <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/formerlyfundie/world-vision-child-sponsorships-abandoned-its-almost-double-what-we-thought/>

3. <http://rachelheldevans.com/blog/what-now-world-vision>

missed, this would bring it to the fore. After all, little kids were being left in the lurch, all to win a battle against homosexuality.

I had already decided that Evangelical homophobia was paranoid, bigoted, and very wrong. I had already decided that not only was there zero ethical basis for their religious morality, but that in fact Evangelicals were often very unethical about their morality. But ever the skeptic, I thought this a perfect opportunity to falsify that hypothesis. If I was wrong, I wanted a chance to prove it before I jumped off the the edge of the cliff.

But no ethical arguments were forthcoming. There were lots of theological arguments. Fundamentalist Christians love to quote the Bible, because their theology, their interpretation of Scripture, means more to them than their good, common sense, and means more to them than starving children. I became simultaneously convinced and disgusted. I now believe I was ashamed for having once been on the wrong side of this war, having once stood idly by while religious fundamentalists bashed innocent victims. I was ashamed, because I had been emotionally powerless to help, because I bought into the theology and the ideology, and was trapped by it.

(The Bible doesn't actually say what fundamentalists say it says, nor do they actually believe what they believe they believe, nor do they act in as noble a manner as they think they're acting. A big part of being trapped in fundamentalism is pushing to the side the cognitive dissonance that would otherwise alert you to these facts.)

But while this was all going on in my mind, at a more basic level, my formerly Evangelical friend and Rachel Held Evans had changed my perspective. I had never before considered something that now seems obvious: I didn't have to be an Evangelical fundamentalist if I didn't want to. When you're in the middle of the religion, you don't stop to consider heresies like that. When your entire social support structure depends on believing a certain way, you do anything you have to, say anything you have to, pretend anything you have to, in order to fit in and to be accepted. And you stay far, far away from apostasy. Part of this is emotional. Part is logical. All of it is nonsensical.

On April 2, in an obscure comment thread on Rachel Held Evans's blog post, I was debating with another Evangelical. (In the quote below, I used the word tolerate, but I think the correct word is probably accept.)

I wrote: "The reason Evangelicals come across as hate-filled bigots is not because they don't personally support gays and gay life, but rather because they refuse to tolerate [accept] them. They proactively take steps to prevent gays from meeting needs, such as needs for community and love and purpose. Those very steps, to my mind, are unethical, because by so doing I would be treating others differently than I would want to be treated myself. And that's the crux of the matter I'm wrestling with, and the reason I've come to believe that we need a more refined sexual ethic..."

"I still don't see a good ethical justification for Evangelical morality or for the tragedy Evangelicals justify via that morality. And that's what I was looking for, an owning up to the consequences, beyond just, 'It's clear that the Bible says yadda yadda yadda'..."

"Remember that scene in Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade, where our hero takes a 'leap of faith' off a cliff and finds a hidden bridge? I think I may have just taken my final step off the Evangelical cliff. Thank you, at least, for pushing me."

And he replied: "I have never understood why people with liberal or progressive theological and moral convictions insist on self-identifying as Evangelical while disparaging the characteristic commitments of Evangelicalism to theological and moral conservatism. If you still shared the Evangelical faith in the first place, beyond the outward trappings, you would not be leaving. So please, don't implicate me personally in your decision to go."

And the bungee cord snapped.

And my sense of spirituality shattered into a million pieces.

The next morning, I woke up, and I was no longer an Evangelical. Just. Like. That.

That visceral feeling, deep in my gut, that told me that I had to defend correct theological belief, no matter the cost, it was gone.

And I was suddenly free to think anything I really thought was true, to believe or disbelieve as reality led me, to act in whatever way I thought was right. I was free to be the person I truly was.

If I could only figure out who that was.

## The Flying Spaghetti Monster

“The Flying Spaghetti Monster”<sup>1</sup> is my son’s imaginary entity for the existence of the unprovable and what is not scientifically falsifiable. He uses it as a synonym for God but it has other applications. There is an entire list of mysteries in the world of science which are ‘monstrous’ puzzles, incongruous pieces that do not fit together in our current paradigm of an evolutionary worldview. “*The greatest mystery of evolution,*” admits Carter Phipps, “*is consciousness itself.*”<sup>2</sup>

The problem is how do we explain self-awareness in a pre-biotic soup and the subsequent mysterious creation of a multi-cellular organism with live DNA from single-celled organisms (bacteria) that have neither a distinct nucleus with a membrane nor other specialized structures capable of the processes necessary to evolve into complex life forms, as man.

God or an intelligent designer is for a believer the obvious explanation, but for the atheist, evolutionary theory must come up with another explanation.

Elizabet Sahtouris, evolutionary biologist and self-described biophilosopher, suggests a cooperative effort within a community of differing bacteria with specialized functionality or purpose. She refers to the symbiotic (cooperative) state of early prokaryotes bacteria as living in “*complex bacterial colonies*” having a “*collective intelligence.. ...to turn aggregate action into intelligent behavior.*” Phipps is awestruck, agreeably calling it “*off the charts.*”<sup>3</sup>

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1. Referenced in Dawkin’s ‘The God Delusion’ p. 53.

2. Phipps, Carter. *Evolutionaries: Unlocking the Spiritual and Cultural Potential of Science’s Greatest Idea.* (New York:Harper Perennial, 2012), 71.

3. *ibid.* p. 53.

### Friends

The problem with this idea, that of a symbiotic relationship among complex bacterial colonies, is that it proposes a process counter to Darwin's original theory of survival of the fittest. Life evolves by war in Darwin's mind, not peaceful co-existence. Sahtouris was rewriting the script but it was based in part on an astute observation that symbiotic relationships do work in nature—even man is a beneficiary. The evolutionary process this way can even create *'friendships.'*

"We are just beginning to appreciate how the human urge toward friendship, toward connection and camaraderie, toward deep solidarity and true companionship, toward working together in more and more profound ways has a real and demonstrative evolutionary precedent."<sup>4</sup>

### Going Somewhere

We are no longer talking "*random selection*" "*blind selection in nature's laws*" or survival of the fittest. Dawkin's "*selfish-gene*" has turned cooperative. Evolution is now thought to be by design after all and all life is progressing forward. The evolutionary process is *'directional'* and *'predictable.'* In a word the evolutionary worldview must be *'teleological.'*

Such optimism that accompanies this new brand of evolutionary thought has contradicted the second law of thermodynamics that all things are in a process of decay—not getting better because of a cooperative effort among different forms of life.

We know that the christian argument does not see history this way but prophesies of the final end to all things by fire. On top of this, some scientists are in agreement with the late Stephen Jay Gould who saw [the teleological idea] as *'untestable...'*<sup>5</sup>

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4. *ibid.* p. 64.

5. *ibid.* p. 75.

### The Teleological View

"...a teleological view...is one that sees [a] process as having a particular purpose or direction," explains Phipps, who "sees it [evolution] as going somewhere"<sup>6</sup> Phipps is giving consciousness to the evolutionary process and to mother nature, herself, and then adds,

"...any sort of identifiable, recognizable directional trajectory in evolution smacks of purpose, [and] purpose smacks of intelligence..."<sup>7</sup>

This explanation according to die-hard Darwinians is not science but "*nonscientific speculations.*"

Evolutionists who subscribe to this new approach are closet evolutionists. "Scottish physiologist, J. S. Haldane wryly remarked that '*teleology is a mistress without whom no biologist can live, but with whom none wished to be seen in public.*'"<sup>8</sup>

Some like Howard Bloom, a publicist who calls himself a '*stone-cold atheist,*' envision in the evolutionary process the "*design in the universe*" as "*deeper layers of science—fundamental ordering principles that might account for the surprisingly non-random character of the cosmos.*"<sup>9</sup>

But when asked by Phipps, "*How does a godless universe create? So what is the source of creativity in the universe?*"

Phipps admitted "*For once he doesn't tell me a story.... He answers simply... 'I don't know.'*"<sup>10</sup>

Such honesty is commendable but it doesn't answer what has come to be known as "*the god-problem.*" For that we needed a new theology.

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6. *ibid.* p. 71.

7. *ibid.* p. 75.

8. *ibid.*

9. *ibid.* p. 108.

10. *ibid.* p. 111.

### A New Theology

John Haught, a Roman Catholic theologian and Senior Research Fellow at the Woodstock Theological Center at Georgetown University, is, to use Phipps's term, an 'evolutionary' who offers direction.

*"Writing as a theologian..."* Haught expounds,

Our understanding of God is considerably diminished by failing to reflect fully on the fact of novelty [creativity] in nature. The concept of 'design' [intelligent design] is too stiff to accommodate the complexity of nature.<sup>11</sup>

And Phipps agreeably adds,

"Creativity and novelty are not simply curious sidebars in the evolutionary script... fortuitous flourishes of a designer God. They are written into the very cosmic narrative itself."<sup>12</sup>

At the foot of the San Gabriel Mountains in California the Claremont School of Theology is teaching a 'contemporary' or 'evolutionary' theology in which the theological world is coming out of its postmodern depression *"incorporating God into the picture of an evolving universe."*<sup>13</sup> This has also been referred to as *"process theology...the evolution of divinity ... an evolutionary worldview... forged in the rekindled theological furnaces of faith."*<sup>14</sup>

Clergy who subscribe to this evolutionary worldview optimistically see the world in evolutionary time moving forward toward a utopian state or perfect harmony and well-being. Such a view is directional but not goal oriented.

"...The challenge for theologians and all those who care about the fate of deity in a scientific age is to explain what the intrinsic and transcendent perfection of God's being has to do with the very imperfect, incomplete world of becoming that we all share."<sup>15</sup>

They needed to explain God's part in an independently evolving cosmos. Sadly, as they see it,

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11. *ibid.* p. 122.

12. *ibid.* p. 124.

13. *ibid.* pp. 340-343.

14. *ibid.* pp. 344-345.

15. *ibid.* p. 369.

"Our knowledge of the richness and wondrous beauty of nature seems to increase every day whereas our connection with a transcendent theistic presence seems to simultaneously grow more ephemeral and theoretical."<sup>16</sup>

This translates into a prayer-less religion. (A knowledge of God's existence comes from a relationship that is kept thriving by regular communication with Him—*prayer!*)

It is a life without prayer that must ask: "*How can a world where God is immanent be full of strife and suffering?*" In evolutionary terms: suffering has to be a symptom of a world evolving or progressing toward health. Suffering is in evolutionary time ever so slowly in a cultural as well as biological sense becoming extinct. This new kind of progress theology is said to be *panentheistic*.

### Panentheism

Panentheism sees God as both immanent and transcendent. We have not stepped down into a fallen world of spiritual depravity, as once believed. We are "*moving forward into a new dimension of divinity.*" God, in an immanent sense, too, is evolving. "*Suffering is simply the absence of God.*" He transcends it.

This is all very philosophical and I want to employ here Phipps' terms '*ephemeral*' and '*theoretical*.'

Phipps theologizes that "*the fulness of the divine experience*" is being realized through the evolutionary process. He calls it "*an evolutionary spirituality*"<sup>17</sup> Imperfection is only a creative becoming. "*When that which is perfect is come*" speaks of the final stage of the evolutionary process which will never be reached.

This changes the christian notion of a salvation that is a deliverance from sin to making us a part of a "*work of renewing*

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16. *ibid.*

17. *ibid.* p. 381.

*and extending God's creation.*"<sup>18</sup> There is no shame here in our imperfections. There is no sin in it.

Phipps thinks with Teilhard that this theological worldview is a matter of evolutionary survival. And in a very poetic way describes the core idea of this new evolutionary theology:

"God is not up above, He's up ahead."<sup>19</sup>

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18. *ibid.*

19. *ibid.* p. 383.

## Designing Intelligence

What is the probability<sup>1</sup> that life began by chance in a prebiotic soup? Stephen Meyer addresses this question in his book, *The Signature in the Cell*.<sup>2</sup> Meyer offers best estimates in chapter 9 from which the quotes for this article are taken (page 212ff.). Meyer shows that the origin of life happening by chance is mathematically unimaginable. Up to this point, chapter 9, he has been preparing us for the math. He discusses DNA and nucleic acid, amino acids and proteins, the history and philosophy of scientific research—a detailed description of the processes occurring in a living cell and how scientists reach their conclusions. Chapter 9 for me is the fulcrum of this work and a primary reason why it is subtitled: ... *Evidence for Intelligent Design*.

Is it important to note that the probability of life originating by chance was calculated only after decades of research in a number of disciplines by renown scientists including Nobel Laureates. Meyer's book is well documented. These are not the ramblings of religious opposition to Neo-Darwinism but the reasonable concerns of scientific minds that culminated in the Symposium, now famous conference, of mathematicians and biologists held in Philadelphia in 1966 at the Wistar Institute.

"The New-Darwinian mechanism faced what they called a 'combinatorial problem'."

Meyer explains. He takes complex biological and chemical concepts and explains them using down-to-earth illustrations.

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1. Dawkins' entire suppositional conclusion for the non-existence of God rests on probability: He contends: "The argument from improbability is the big one... The argument from improbability, properly deployed, comes close to proving that God does not exist." *The God Delusion* (New York:Houghton Mifflin Co., 2006), 113.

2. Stephen Meyer, *Signature in the Cell* (New York:Harper Collins Publishers. 2009), Chapter 9.

In short: cells are not merely plasmic collections of proteins and other organic and inorganic compounds as scientists once thought in the 19th century. For example, Darwin's limited understanding of cellular processes helped him conclude that if natural selection worked for existing life (microevolution), it could also explain the beginning of life (uniformitarianism: the present is the key to the past). Because cells were simple protoplasm made from organic compounds and since it had been shown that organic compounds can be derived from inorganic ones, it was reasonable to extrapolate backward to the beginning and assume that the origin of life was the same as its evolution.

But cells are not simple plasmic units of chemical reactions. Cells are complex living units with at least 250 functioning protein clusters. Proteins in the cell are made of a chain of amino acids—not any amino acids—but specific to the functionality the cell requires to be alive. There were 3 calculations that went into mathematically estimating the probability of life from the chance combining of amino acids into proteins. A simple 150 amino acid chain was used.

- The probability that the amino acids will join or link up at all—peptide bonding( $1 \times 10^{46}$ );
- The probability that they will join in the correct order—like words on a page to relay information in a readable sentence and not gibberish ( $1 \times 10^{74}$ );
- The probability that the correct amino acids will be joined—amino acids form isomers which are mirror images of themselves but only the left-handed amino acids (not the right-handed isomers) are functional in a living cell. ( $1 \times 10^{46}$ ).

"The odds of getting one functional protein from a prebiotic soup is no better than  $1 \times 10^{164}$ ." [ $1 \times 10^{46 \times 46 \times 74}$ ] "Now consider that there are only  $1 \times 10^{80}$  protons, neutrons, and electrons in the observable universe... [the odds of ] finding a functional protein among the possible 150 amino acid compounds, the probability, is 84 times the order of magnitude smaller than finding 1 particular particle in the universe. ... That life came by chance is "a trillion trillion trillion trillion trillion trillion (7 trillions) smaller than the odds of finding a single specified particle among all the particles in the universe."

Now, the minimally complex cell needs at least 250 functioning proteins to maintain life which is 250 times the probability of a single protein  $1 \times 10^{164}$  or  $(250 \times 164 = 41,000) 1 \times 10^{41,000}$ .

"The probability of producing the proteins necessary to build a minimally complex cell—or the genetic information necessary to produce those proteins—by chance is unimaginably small." <sup>1</sup> followed by 41,000 zeros!

Meyer adds this to the list of reasons he, along with other scientists, have considered intelligent design as the cause for the origin of life.

Meyer as a scientist doesn't explain this as the work of a creator. But I would... and do.

Thank you, Lord, for making me so wonderfully complex!

I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made;  
your works are wonderful, I know that full well. NEW INT.  
Psalms 139:14

## A Study in Prayer

I have been asked to consider the topic of prayer and this writing is just a tiny corner of the whole picture. I do not know if this will approach the interest of the request but all in all: Not a bad idea, since, talking to God is central to everything that is Christian. The believability of the Scriptural message of salvation; the strength of conviction and commitment to live out that message—all—depends on a prayer life that knows how to talk to God and more importantly how to hear from Him and listen. In direct terms, things like the peace of God, His mercy and grace, and faith itself are just debatable concepts without a direct link with the provider of these spiritual benefits. So, when one of the disciples asked Jesus to show them how to pray [Luke 11:1] their own faith—and this is true of all of us—would somehow hinge on His response.

Without an open line of communication with God, all else is pure religion. Christianity needed to become more than ceremony and offerings; more than rote catechisms, dogma and Sunday morning ritual. It needed to be backed by the most powerful and least understood power in the universe, God! [Mark 16:20] Christianity needed to replace chanting with live conversation. Christians need to learn to value less the so-called “Great prayers” of the champions of religious rhetoric and value more their own private tears and the language of their own heart.

The true story is told of a young man who had just accepted Christ as his Savior. This spiritual novice when asked to pray for a meal—and he had not yet learned Christianese—closed, not with an “amen” but, after a brief pause saying, “that’s all, God.” Music to the divine ears. [Proverbs 15:8]

Over the years, I have gleaned five lessons about praying that deserve comment here:

- Talking about God and talking to God are not the same. With the first, we seek our own answers; the second, we seek His. Professional counseling knows the value of dialog even when it is in a letter never mailed or a soliloquy in the woods when no one else is around. Only true believers who value prayer know that sharing the same concerns with God is a real conversation and has the added benefit of someone listening that can do something about it. [James 5:16]

- Answers to prayer often are found in the very prayer itself. Much of what God reveals, He reveals to the heart not the head. Prayer is more than therapeutic; it brings answers because often when talking to God, the hurts and fears we carry are rolled on Him. [I Peter 5:7] Prayer inspires peace. [Philippians 4:6-7] This is often visible in the Psalms [Psalm 42:11; Psalm 51:10]

- Theology and prayer are often unrelated. God does not grade our understanding of Him. Truth be told, no one's theology is perfectly logical. There is much to learn about God to give a believer the completed picture of a God Whose grace and love defies our definition of fairness and whose mercy often needs to exact revenge on those who would challenge His right to work in the believer's life and on the believer's behalf. Prayer isn't sharing our wisdom with God but often shows our lack of it. [James 1:5]

- God's silence while we pray is the wisdom of listening. Most days are ordinary. Most circumstances are mundane repetition. Most of life is lived out in daily routine and yet it would be nice if God would spice things up with a spiritual high once in a while by sharing something with—well, personalize this with—something only I am privileged to know. Not going to happen! [2 Peter 1:20] Will God share? Absolutely! But not as often as we would like and probably not about all the little day to day decisions He has invested wisdom in us to make. Abraham lived over one hundred years and in the record of Scripture we read of only a half dozen or so Divine responses in all that time and each of them spoke to Abraham's future.

Most of all: There is no relationship without communication. Those who do not believe in Him, simply, don't talk to Him. So,

all the rambling about atheism and the ongoing debate with their conclusions is so much static because only an audience with God proves anything.

A prayer recorded in Scripture and worth looking at is Numbers 12:13. It is also one of the shortest prayers (oh, length means nothing, heart means everything with praying). The Jewish community has set this verse to music. *Mi Sh'beirach*. Miriam, Moses' sister is stricken with leprosy. Each word in this one sentence carries with it a sermon on the subject before us:

And Moses cried unto the LORD, saying, Heal her now, O God, I beseech thee.

Moses cried Not necessarily with tears but clearly in anguish of soul, grief stricken, and in desperate want of God's help. It is not his head that is doing the talking, but his heart.

*unto the LORD* doesn't mean don't see a doctor. Just be clear about which one is God.

*Heal her*. Moses commanding God! It is an imperative but until we get serious about our need of God, we are not serious about a God who meets our need.

*Now...I beseech* In Hebrew it is the same word written twice. Twice is emphatic and the word itself is a particle of incitement or excitement. Our word please comes the closest. [Psalm 34:18; Psalm 51:17] Prayer always to be prayer must be heartfelt. And that should go without saying.

The Good News Translation of Psalm 34:18 is the best, not in terms of the translation but because it brings us to our ultimate need to value a prayer life that knows God, the real God, who is as personal as He is able to meet need.

The Lord is near to those who are discouraged;  
he saves those who have lost all hope.

Talk to Him!

## The Story of Prayer

### THE DEARTH OF PRAYER

The history of prayer in our Hebrew Bible is not the story of prophet, priest or king talking to God, nor does prayer

have a continuing importance in ritual and ceremony. You are poised to disagree—thinking of David, no doubt, in the Psalms—but the word for pray meaning to meet with God is not found in any Psalm.

In fact, this word for prayer was rare and the significance of meeting with God in pray was eventually lost altogether in the Old Testament or the Tanach. Prayer understood as a meeting with God never occurred in the literal sense of a man calling on God. Did God call on man? Aside from an exceptional Patriarch or Moses... no. The Lord withdrew from Israel. What else is there to say.

Do not plead with me (meet with me to intercede for them), for I will not listen to you [Jeremiah 7:16].

Even Job in his despair failed to see the value of an audience with God [Job 21:15:

what profit should we have, if we pray unto him?]. There was no one to meet with God and no one God would meet with.

Isa 59:16 And he saw that there was no man, and wondered that there was no intercessor (someone to meet with God on man's behalf) therefore his arm brought salvation unto him; and his righteousness, it sustained him.

## THE THEOLOGY OF PRAYER

Eliphaz, Job's friend—lost for words and an explanation for Job's tragic circumstance, theologized [Job 22:27] that if a person stays humble [Job 22:29-30], keeps their vows current, and follows the law of God [Job 22:22] Thou shalt make thy prayer unto him, and he shall hear thee. A sound theology but spoken in the comfort of a warm sauna rather than outside in a hurricane. Eliphaz was not living Job's trauma. He was preaching from the comfort of his own health and good fortune along with 2 other preacher types who couldn't begin to know what was happening to their old friend. Job's suffering exceeded their imagination for pain but not for theologized explanations. You know the story. The point here is: a theology of prayer cannot replace the practice. They should have sought God on his

behalf. They thought it better to talk about God instead of to Him.

Eliphaz used an old term for prayer meaning also to burn incense. [makes one think of Revelation 5:8: they were holding golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of God's people] But it has less to do with burning incense than the idea of the pleasant fragrance, the heart-honest supplication, ascending and pervading the heavenly courts and arresting God's attention with delight.

Moses would have been a better friend to Job because he knew the use of the term—not just its definition [Exodus 8:8, 29-31: *And Moses ... intreated the LORD. And the LORD did according to the word of Moses*].

David entreated the Lord, not with words but offerings [2 Sam 24:25]—something not unexpected. Comparably, we often see our dedication to God in terms of a church service rather than actually talking to Him.

Ezra fasted [Ezra 8:22-23]—probably because he boasted in the Lord's deliverance claiming they didn't need any help from the king of Persia. Ezra preached The hand of our God is upon all them for good that seek him. He was right, but I recommend caution when implicating God in our theology of faith. We may need to back that up with fragrant prayer and fasting!

#### THE FRAGRANCE OF PRAYER

The tribes living on 'this side' of the Jordan (East side) prayed in desperation for God's help [1 Chron 5:20]. The verse says they cried out—a word the prophet used of a woman in child birth [Isaiah 26:17]. God came through. Whether they knew it or not, they caught the meaning of the term in that life or death moment of tribal warfare. Their cry for God's merciful intervention became the pervading scent of God's favorite perfume.

Entreating God's deliverance symbolized as a perfume that pleases God is one of two picturesque terms to describe how

honest prayer can move God to action. True prayer is a fragrance that brings a Divine embrace [Proverbs 27:9: *perfume make the heart glad*; Song of Solomon 4:10: *How delightful is your love.... How much more pleasing is your love... and the fragrance of your perfume ...*].

But the most noteworthy example is King Manasseh: His prayer also, and how God was intreated of him [2 Chronicles 33:12-13, 19]. Space does not permit here rehearsing the complete record of this Judean king's sinfulness. It exceeds the imaginable for most Christians. And here is not the place to profile God—the kind of God He is—that He would restore this man as He did. But what catches the eye in reading this story is how genuine Manasseh's contrition was and how real his repentance.

“And when he prayed to him, the LORD was moved by his entreaty and listened to his plea; so he brought him back to Jerusalem and to his kingdom. Then Manasseh knew that the LORD is God.”<sup>1</sup>

The LORD spoke to Manasseh [2 Chronicles 33:10]. God broke His silence of 175 years or more, since He spoke to Elijah [1 Kings 19:15-16]. And this would be the last time in the Hebrew Bible we would read: And the Lord said anything to anyone. God had been speaking to His prophets through dreams and visions—you recall. What shall we make of this?

In simplest terms: Repentance and asking for God's mercy does get His attention [Psalms 34:18].

The Story of Manasseh's repentance is the story of fragrant prayer! He went from wearing a stench [Proverbs 13:5: *the wicked make themselves a stench*] to carrying the delightful fragrance of repentance that always attracts the Divine heart.

## THE GESTURE OF PRAYER

Manasseh 2 Chronicles 33:12: *sought the favor of the LORD.*

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1. 2 Chronicles 33:13

The Greek translation gets closer: He sought the face of God. The actual Hebrew is best: He stroked, caressed, the face of God. Here prayer is spoken of as a gesture—the other picturesque word—for imploring God to be merciful by gently stroking His face. It worked for Jehoahaz as well: And Jehoahaz besought the LORD, and the LORD hearkened unto him. [2Ki 13:4]. And for Jeroboam: *And the man of God besought the LORD, and the king's hand was restored him again* [I Kings 13:6]. But Moses best exemplifies someone who knew how to soothe the Divine heart into a merciful calm:

“And Moses besought the LORD his God, and said, LORD, why doth thy wrath wax hot against thy people, which thou hast brought forth out of the land of Egypt with great power, and with a mighty hand?”<sup>2</sup>

Daniel points out that Judah could have used another Moses in his day to prevent being taken captive:

“As it is written in the law of Moses, all this evil is come upon us: yet made we not our prayer before the LORD our God (we did not caress or stroke His face), that we might turn from our iniquities, and understand thy truth.”<sup>3</sup>

And Malachi pleads with the captivity to correct this:

“And now, I pray you, beseech God (caress His face) that he will be gracious unto us.”<sup>4</sup>

Perhaps, we little realize how meaningful to the Lord just our talking to Him is, how greatly He appreciates our coming to Him in our need. If I may say: asking God once only for anything and never again for the same thing—because it was asked in faith and now God is expected to respond favorably, praying only once for anything—totally disallows the spirit of the Old Testament context and idea of prayer. God wants us to ramble on, to turn our hearts lose on Him, to repeat ourselves in our pain or hurt because it is a natural thing to do. God wants to be wanted!

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2. Exodus 32:11

3. Daniel 9:13

4. Malachi 1:9

## THE POWER OF PRAYER

The ability to get God's attention to calm storms was a lost spirituality in Old Testament days. Prayer like that of a Moses or an Abraham to discuss options with God in the service of His mercy was less and less common as the history unfolded.

Without suggesting a compromise to God's absolute Holiness or accusing Him of repenting, God's prayer warriors have entrance into His court to beg His reconsideration, to let the Divine heart reflect on what it appears He will do. It is part of the arrangement God had made to develop an honest and living relationship with His people whom He genuinely loved and wanted to love Him in return. [Exodus 32:9-11]

By far the most common word for prayer—79 times in Scripture—is another word which means to mediate justice. Instead of praying for mercy, one would ask for God to judge injustice and bring about a fair and equitable result. The theology undoubtedly maintains that God's fairness equates to His mercy. [Genesis 18:25]

But this prayer—to me—is self-centric. It is not talking to God to understand Him, to delight Him, but to use Him to mediate a desired judgment. When Hezekiah prayed, he wanted God to make the Assyrians go away [2 Ki 19:15]. In the Wilderness, Israel asked Moses to: Pray that the LORD will take the snakes away.... And even when Job prayed for his friends [Job 42:10] it brought about his own restoration.

And how easily this word can be translated: to make request of God.

"In the morning, LORD, you hear my voice; in the morning I lay my requests before you and wait expectantly."<sup>5</sup>

We should not lose sight: There are many instances where someone prayed for someone else [Genesis 20:17; Numbers 21:7; 2 Kings 6:17-18] but I think it safe to assume that they wanted to mediate a reconciliation between God and the person they were praying for.

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5. Psalms 5:3

Gensenius' Grammar calls the form this word for prayer uses as: "*in one's own special interest.*" referencing Isaiah 1:15:

"And when ye spread forth your hands, I will hide mine eyes from you: yea, when ye make many prayers, I will not hear. Isaiah is implying here that if one man offends another man, they can go to the law to mediate a just resolution, but if one sins against the Lord, who shall mediate for him?"

"*Prayer,*" says Delitzsch in His commentary on this verse, "*is regarded as mediation, which sets right and [he added: my italics] establishes fellowship.*"

The operative word in all of this is relationship. God is not a gum ball machine with prizes in plastic balls for a dime. No prayer is worth praying if it is just for... stuff. God always wants to discuss it so we can appreciate His response and more than that, appreciate Him. Historically, Old Israel lost this contact with God. Prayer was a forgotten concept. Not even in sacrifice and ceremony were they able to appreciate the God who snatched them from the jaws of Egyptian slavery.

What about us?

### A Prayerful Conclusion

CAUGHT!

Reading *Caught in The Pulpit: Leaving Belief Behind* by Dan Dennett and Linda LaScola, I noted speckling the text was the occasional reference to prayer. (*Caught in The Pulpit* is the collected comments of a sampling of clergy and seminarians who came to recognize that they no longer held the beliefs their parishioners thought they held. Most of those interviewed had left the ministry and a few left the faith.) With a few of them—as odd as this may sound—prayer was the one thing they missed. And that says something to me.

Jim, an Episcopal priest, spoke about prayer as something one should think hard and long about before giving it up.

"I suppose I would lose my prayer life, and that would not be good."<sup>6</sup>

Tony, a Roman Catholic parish priest who left the priesthood, shared this:

"I guess you could say I lost my prayer life."<sup>7</sup>

Candice, a former seminarian, speaks candidly about a sense of missing her prayer life.

"So there are certain things I feel a longing for. When I was reading Mary Johnson's book "An Unquenchable Thirst" [the memoir of a former nun in the order founded by Mother Teresa], I found myself weeping at certain parts where she would detail her prayer life, because I realized that in some ways I missed that prayerfulness."<sup>8</sup>

These former clergy—if they believe in God at all—have backed away from the idea that God is involved with man. God, as the Creator—if I might try to sum up what they are saying—in their understanding lives outside the range of human experience; He exhibits an insouciance. When life is unfair or replete with suffering, God, simply put, doesn't seem to care what happens to us. If He does care, He appears powerless to do anything about it.

This quest for answers to unfair suffering is as old as the Book of Job. When bad things happen to good people from stubbed toes to tsunamis, God appears not to intervene. He has left us to the randomness of a chaotic world.

But for me, this is where prayer plays a critical role in my inner stability. Prayer, to me, is the anchor that holds my ship of emotional and spiritual state in place on the stormy seas of suffering and failure. Otherwise, somewhere out there in the dark on waves of overwhelming grief, guilt, fear, pain without prayer as an anchor I would be tossed about struggling to steer toward some meaningful shore of explanation. But I would be simply caught in the storm.

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6. Dan Dennett and Linda LaScola. *Caught in The Pulpit: Leaving Belief Behind* (Durham, NC: Pitchstone Publishing, 2013), 184.

7. *Ibid.* p. 197.

8. *Ibid.* pp. 198-199.

## SPIN

Pastors need to address this matter because it goes to the heart of our worldview, our understanding of God's will for us, and how to peacefully accept life's unfair judgments.

Perhaps, this is an example of “cognitive dissonance” in pastoral work—a pastor's explanation when he or she is between a lie and ambivalence about bad things happening to innocence. He or she feels they must put a good 'spin' on the outcome of unexplainable tragedy. Honest pastors find themselves obliged to put the divine image in the best scriptural light. God is both an all-powerful God and at the same time a loving God.

“Consider now: Who, being innocent, has ever perished? Where were the upright ever destroyed?<sup>9</sup> Tell the righteous it will be well with them.”<sup>10</sup>

## RANDOMNESS?

“Can you accept the idea that some things happen for no reason, that there is randomness in the universe? Some people cannot handle that idea. They convince themselves that God is cruel, or that they are sinners, rather than accept randomness.”<sup>11</sup>

## GETTING IT WRONG

I once preached on Psalm 37:25:

“I was young and now I am old, yet I have never seen the righteous forsaken or their children begging bread.”

After my inspiring message that God is reliable and trustworthy, I was verbally accosted by a dear lady who had lived in Latvia. She had seen God's people begging for bread and she was quick to inform me that I had no idea of the suffering believers endure elsewhere in this world. I won't disparage her understanding of what she observed.

Everyone by now knows about the recent tragedy of Malaysian Airline Flight 17 downed by a heat-seeking missile in which 298 innocent people died. From the perspective of

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9. Job 4:7

10. Isaiah 3:10

11. Harold Kushner. *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* (New York:Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2007), 23, 53.

God's oversight—and no one who believes in God can imagine that He did not see it happen—there is no theology that will suffice to offer comfort to address the unspeakable weight of sorrow their families are being crushed with.

Prayer alone can find God in this fog of heartbreak. Because we care and there is nothing we can say that would comfort the bereaved, all we can ask is that they might find God, embrace Him and hold on tight [a Hebrew word for waiting on God: Psalm 27:14] at least until the skies begin to clear and hope again returns to walk beside them. [Psalm 121:1-2; Isaiah 26:3; Philippians 4:7]

(Many know what I am saying here. Until there is a real heaven to go to, I maintain that prayer is the one part of a pre-Christian experience that should never be sacrificed for a confused theology.)

#### NOTHING TO SAY

Prayer for many becomes a word that holds no meaning. Between our own acumen and the benefits of modern science can we do nicely without it?

I think you can understand that I am not denigrating the position subscribed to by believers in a transcendent God. I am not scolding them or mocking them. I have empathy for them because these things speak to our common humanity.

Giving up on the idea that God is an all powerful Lover of souls, some toss prayer aside.

Sherm, an Orthodox rabbi, explained,

I've stopped praying. It's just words to me."<sup>12</sup>

Candace, a Roman Catholic seminary graduate confessed:

"I wasn't praying because I believed I was communicating with God, I was praying to assuage guilt for not doing it."<sup>13</sup>

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12. Dan Dennett and Linda LaScola. *Caught in The Pulpit: Leaving Belief Behind* (Durham, NC:Pitchstone Publishing,2013), 17.

13. *ibid.* p. 56.

These are just two—of how many others?—who have experienced ceremony without meaning or found church work to be one crisis after another. And no scripture seems to work to explain where God is in all of this. All the while they find themselves in deepening waters of politically and theologically new and challenging social issues. Add the threatening undertow of board supremacy trying to sweep them out into the sea of an unknown and frightening end to their career.

On the top of all this for some is spousal pain. Some will lose a spouse's support as the final hole in the bottom of their sinking boat. [Job 2:9]

(And they left family and friend behind... for this!?)

I do get it! Where is the divine reality of a hands-on God in that!?

#### FINDING GOD

Not to be smug about it but I have never felt forsaken by God. The more my pain—yes—the louder I yell. Yet, I never concluded that this was a sign of a God who didn't care.

I believed Him especially near when the doctors diagnosed cancer.

Immaculee Ilibagiza—I can't pronounce her name, either—wrote of her experience during 91 days of total chaos known as the Rwandan Holocaust.

"I believe that God had spared my life, but I'd learn during the 91 days I spent trembling in fear with seven others in a closet-sized bathroom that being spared is much different from being saved...and this lesson forever changed me. It is a lesson that, in the midst of mass murder, taught me how to love those who hated and hunted me—and how to forgive those who slaughtered my family. My name is Immaculée Ilibagiza. This is the story of how I discovered God during one of history's bloodiest holocausts."<sup>14</sup>

#### CONVERSING WITH GOD

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14. Ilibagiza, Immaculee (2007-06-01). *Left to Tell: Discovering God Amidst the Rwandan Holocaust* (Carlsbad, CA: Hay House, Inc., 2007), Introduction.

If God is reachable and willing to do anything about the path I walk [Psalms 25:4-5] it can only be made real to me through prayer. It is not enough to see Him in my biased interpretation of history or my understanding of nature as a natural revelation—that He is the force behind nature. I need to know somehow that I can contact Him on my level. He needs to be able to kneel beside me and give comfort to a child, as I, who is far too young to understand why I am going through what I am going through. I need to know how to make prayer a working part of my experience—if praying has any value at all.

By the word prayer I mean actually sharing my thoughts, my day, my life with God. Prayer is not talking to the wall or into the air, not a soliloquy or a meditative state, but an actual one-on-one with an immanent God.

Prayer time is not simply the theological fancy of christians interpreting a heightened feeling of peace after a stress-reducing catharsis or a self-counseling session. What christians do "on their knees," if it is for real, has everything to do with a living God who cares. [1 Peter 5:7]

It is this connection, this contact, with God that makes christianity christian. If prayer is not talking to a God who cares, believers are living with a gross deception. It is not enough to believe in a dogma that declares God's involvement or His providence in our lives. We must confirm the truth of that dogma through real prayer.

#### THE KEYSTONE OF REVELATION

Prayer is, by its very nature, the keystone of any revelation of God. Prayer opens our spiritual and intellectual eyes to the inspiration that brings the Bible to life. The archway to Truth exists no other way than with this keystone.

It is the head of the arch that marks the entrance way to an understanding of God:

"We have not made our prayer before the LORD our God, that we might ... understand thy truth."<sup>15</sup>

All of our understanding about God depends on it. It is the only means of communication, the sole connection, between God and us.

Dennett and LaScola said it this way:

"Oversimplifying somewhat, we use the term "literal" to refer to Judeo-Christian denominations that profess Scripture to be the inerrant word of God, a source of unvarnished truth on all matters. Literals profess belief in a personal God who ...intervenes in the world, answering prayers[my emboldening]"<sup>16</sup>

(I am personally not hung up on a literal hermeneutic. There are allegories and parables in scripture.)

Probably, a large portion of scripture I will never figure out this side of the veil—but I am learning. This only makes a prayer life that much more critically important in the absence of total knowledge that explains it all.

#### THE RELATIONSHIP

Said another way: it is the foundation upon which any relationship with God can be built—and relationships are developed between living beings, not theological ideas. Prayer is, therefore as the act of communion or talking to God, the process of developing a relationship with Him and like any relationship it needs to grow. Praying needs to become a prayer life—in the good times and in the bad. [1 Thessalonians 5:17]

Unfortunately, the enthusiasm for God that brought many of us to seminary or to church is too often replaced with study, debate, argument and inevitably just the struggle for professional survival. We lose our way when it comes to prayer. Praying becomes an outcry for what we want—or think we want. It is a means of asking God to calm storms rather than direct our craft to a shore of His choosing. [Matthew 8:25-26] We cease to let prayer be an opportunity to inspire us. We begin to

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15. Daniel 3:19

16. Dan Dennett and Linda LaScola. Caught in The Pulpit: Leaving Belief Behind (Durham, NC:Pitchstone Publishing,2013), 16.

conscript prayer to our cause because life got desperate and confusing. Prayer becomes a tool and not a line of communication.

Prayer at times is reduced to a written piece of would-be prose for a public gathering or a time capsule or some such occasion. It is relegated to a cleric's opportunity to put their seminary or bible school training on display—nothing more. Or it becomes vain repetition without heart or passion. [Matthew 6:7; Psalms 34:18; 51:17] If I were God, I wouldn't be listening either!

The immanence of God or His involvement in my life never meant that every decision of my life needs His immediate approval before I make it. I usually ask for a peaceful heart and a supportive 'gut' on the big ones but generally I don't think God cares whether or not I eat ice cream for desert or what time of day I exercise. And when I was diagnosed with thyroid cancer (with a follicular variant—whatever that means) prayer brought peace.

When I was dismissed from my ministry because my theology was deemed more reformed than wesleyan and then again a few years later in another church because my theology was seen as more wesleyan than reformed—well—I wept a lot, but not alone. I let God know how I felt—just to let Him know. ... And life went on....

I, for one, even in the middle of a debate over the question of God's involvement or when I am in doubt about what tomorrow might bring... I cannot give up on prayer... ever.

### Private Prayer

"Think of us," she wrote home, "going into a place where there is sawdust on the floor...." [Ida Tarbell spoke these words according to Doris Kearns Goodwin.<sup>17</sup> I read this simple line and pulled it

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17. Doris Kearns Goodwin. *The Bully Pulpit*. (New York:Simon and Schuster, 2013), 174.

out of its context to put it in mine. My mind went back to a week in the Summer of 1960 at Lakeview N.Y. camp grounds on Lake Ontario and the tabernacle where we, kids, spent hours weeping before the Lord. The floor was wood shavings and saw dust over bare earth. Here is where God became real to me, so real that no argument can now reason Him away.

For a fifteen year old boy to confess tears, even 55 years later is not easy but in the context of a search for meaning and love (God's love in this case), prayer and tears cannot be left out of the story.

It isn't universally recognized, but many of us make prayer a vital part of life. It is the lodestar that guides our course thru life's difficult waters.

For me, I confess, prayer is a very private moment. If I bear my heart in public, I might expose myself to editorials and the talk of social circles—I fear.

Just so you know: I generally do not talk to God thinking He will question my meaning. Publicly I measure my words, for the sake of political correctness and only speak out after I have thought them thru—twice. Privately, I bear my soul. God knows my heart and my words just come out in real time. [Hebrews 4:16] The rule of thumb is simple: if the heart's right, the words are, too.

(Now, you have me wrong. Public prayer meetings are biblical—I know that!)

Praying is private for me because I tend to walk carefully through a minefield of hurting thoughts and I don't know where to step. I may not know how to say it. Sometimes the words aren't there at all and I am silent before Him. He hears silence, too. God is never offended by honesty but of great value also is the fact that as I talk to Him, I hear me. And God makes a better wall than a wall off which to bounce my concerns. The echo I hear back often enough is His wisdom.

There are people in my life that need Him to do something about their pain. And I pray for them. I want Him to drown out the voice of pain by speaking louder. I know they

are suffering. But I admit: being at peace means far more to me than a thousand miracles. [Mark 4:38-39]

My biggest problem, though is myself. I talk to God about my past to make sense of things I had done—things I shouldn't have. When will I finally be at rest inside because I will know that I am at last living above temptations and hurtful memories? [Hebrews 4:9]

So you see: I have no one else I dare talk to about this. And I know publicly I would be embarrassed to talk about such things when some believers are being martyred for their faith. (I also prefer crying in private.)

Oh, people say that they would not think less of me, but I cannot take the chance.

I still wish I had one friend to confide in ...

I guess I do! [Philippians 4:6]

## Postmodern Theology

A late arrival to my attention is Graham Ward's edited anthology of Christian essays on Christianity's survival in a postmodern world: *Postmodern Theology*.<sup>1</sup> The following quotes are, for the most part, taken from an article by Stanley Hauerwas: *The Christian Difference, or Surviving Postmodernism*. The fact that Ward could compile such a work is itself a testament to the church's awareness of what Hauerwas called "*a life and death struggle with the world*."<sup>2</sup> ...adding: "*I think it is a serious mistake not to take postmodernism seriously*."<sup>3</sup>

The primary issue is an evolutionary worldview that has pronounced God dead. Graham Ward in his introduction observes,

"broadly, I would say... that the death of God had brought about the prospect of the reification and commodification (theologically termed idolatry), not only of all objects, but of all values (moral, aesthetic, and spiritual). We have produced a culture of fetishes or virtual objects. For now everything is not only measurable and priced, it has an image."<sup>4</sup>

And "*commodification*" is the appropriate term since as he explained: "*...commodities [are] the possession of which represented happiness*."<sup>5</sup>

In this new age, we are rightly labeled '*consumers*' who are objectifying every aspect of life in an effort to secure a sense of wellbeing. We desire things in order to find happiness. We are addicted to '*things*' that we imagine will define fulfillment,

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1. <http://www.amazon.com/The-Blackwell-Companion-Postmodern-Theology/dp/1405127198>

2. Graham Ward, ed. *Postmodern Theology*. (University of Manchester: Blackwell Publishing Ltd. 2008), p. 145.

3. *ibid.*

4. *ibid.* p. xiv.

5. *ibid.* p. xiv.

success, significance. This is the context by which we perceive what is moral, aesthetic and spiritual. But like all things that evolve, it is a never ending process, a search for utopia. "... *Desire*," Ward says,

"does not seek its fulfillment, for that would terminate the pleasure of desiring. Desire promotes the allure and attraction of an object that stands in for what it lacks, but its enjoyment lies in not having what it wants. The commodified object then becomes the cause of desire rather than the object of desire itself."<sup>6</sup>

Society has become in every sense a global marketplace—a *global capitalism*<sup>7</sup>—where the poor, Hauerwas tells us, are "*those who have become expendable, too poor even to be debtors, and therefore from the market's perspective 'non-persons.'*"<sup>8</sup>

As Christians our sense of significance is not dependent on what we have but on God, who He is, in relation to us. This gives us the ability to rise above the marketplace, to live, as Paul said, "*content whatever the circumstances.*"<sup>9</sup> We can rise above any need for 'things' which gives us a more objective view of where the world is at. Postmodernism has no such vantage point. In Hauerwas' words:

"Christians must be able to narrate postmodernism in a manner that postmodernism cannot narrate Christianity. Or more adequately: we must show how Christianity provides the resources for a critique of its own mistakes in a way that modernity or postmodernity cannot provide."<sup>10</sup>

But even Christians, if I can put it this way, have become postmodernized. We attend church for blessings and we love our toy stores that sell the latest technologies. We live to eat—as the saying goes—instead of the reverse. We proclaim our dependence on God because it is the politically correct thing to say when we gather together but we find ourselves most content

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6. *ibid.* pp. xx-xxi.

7. *ibid.* p. 153.

8. *ibid.* p. 154.

9. Philippians 4:11 I am not saying this because I am in need, for I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. NEW INT.

10. Graham Ward, ed. *Postmodern Theology*. (University of Manchester: Blackwell Publishing Ltd. 2008), 147.

roaming the malls with a pocket full of credit cards. Equally true: churches are in the 'business' of expanding their own interests. And we, as Christians, are capable of self-evaluation enough to see all this clearly. As a church, marketing the faith for the sake of cultural acceptance and numeric growth, or as a individual christian, living on a level of mundanity with no truthful witness of Christ's love, is not a definition of faithfulness.

"Indeed," Hauerwas writes,

"one of the illusions of postmodernism is to give a far too intelligible and, thus, comforting account of where we are. Our world and our lives are far too fragmentary and disordered to know where we are, but at least Christians owe it to themselves and their neighbors to confess that such disorder is but a reflection of the failure of the churches to be faithful."<sup>11</sup>

What Hauerwas is getting at, if I understand him, is that it isn't a postmodern age that wields any true power over God's church. Christianity through its lack of faithfulness to witness for Christ and honor the commission He gave has more than become vulnerable to the influences of postmodern thought. In a real sense the church is to fault for postmodernism thriving unchallenged.

"Postmodernism, in short, is the outworking of mistakes in Christian theology correlative to the attempt to make Christianity "true" apart from faithful witness."<sup>12</sup>

Nor can we speak of a world history without including the church. A history of the world is a history of the church but when the church lost its vision for the cross—or to the degree it consented to gentrify away its humble station as servants of God, "— as Robert Jenson puts it *'the world lost its story.'* ... *modernity and postmodernity are the result of mistakes in Christian practice and theology.'*" He continued:

...Christians must challenge the postmodern narrative that simply forgets that Christianity had anything to do with the world. ... The attempt to make God knowable separate from how God has made himself known through scripture makes a

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11. *ibid.* p. 147.

12. *ibid.* p. 147.

world without God thinkable. God could not help but become another “thing” amid other metaphysical possibilities. Accordingly, Christians robbed the world of its story.<sup>13</sup>

What is that story?

### A Trojan Horse

The Scripture is the story of Grace told in a three-fold revelation of God as Creator, Judge, and Savior.<sup>14</sup> Any philosophical—what I refer to as an—attack on Christian truth therefore has to be a three-pronged assault against this revelation of God. Any attack on our faith is not immediately obvious because it is couched in scientific terms and buried in the writings of a thousand other ideas, many of which have merit. It is a trojan horse of ideas that fascinate even believers who want no more than to practice their faith in peace.

But the Gospel message cannot effectively be assimilated into the collective of modern thought. The Gospel remains, as it was in the beginning, offensive to the logic of anyone who does not have a faith in God. Dorothy Sayers had it right when she wrote in *Creed or Chaos*:

“It [is] a grave mistake to present Christianity as something charming and popular with no offense in it. Seeing that Christ went about the world giving the most violent offense to all kinds of people, it would seem absurd to expect that the doctrine of His Person can be so presented as to offend nobody... Nobody need be too much surprised or disconcerted at finding that a determined preaching of Christian dogma may sometimes result in a few angry letters of protest or a difference of opinion on the parish council... At the risk of appearing quite insolently obvious, I shall say that if the

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13. *ibid.* p. 148.

14.

I found Romans chapter in to be a good example of this idea.

verse 14 - 16 references the Gospel: the gospel is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes:

verse 25 references the Creator: They exchanged the truth about God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator—who is forever praised. Amen.

verse 32 references Judgment: God’s righteous decree that those who do such things deserve death....

Church is to make any impression on the modern mind She will have to preach Christ and the Cross. .... The people who hanged Christ never, to do them justice, accused him of being a bore; on the contrary, they thought him too dynamic to be safe.<sup>15</sup>

### The Lion's Claws

"Therefore put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand, stand."<sup>16</sup>

We must no longer attempt to project an image of Christ as harmless because we want to worship in peace. The day of a passive indifference by the voice of opposition to the message of Calvary has passed. We who have been around for decades or know church history know all too well how a centuries-old brand of christianity has, to use Dorothy Sayers words, "*surround[ed] him [Jesus] with an atmosphere of tedium. We have very efficiently pared the claws of the Lion of Judah, certified him 'meek and mild,' and recommended him as a fitting household pet for pale curates and pious old ladies.*"<sup>17</sup>

Well, the Lion needs to grow His claws back.

### The Cross

It is *The Cross!* John Yoder explains further: "...it is the cross ... which gives the hope...."

"Yoder sums up this ... in a word: Jesus, the slain lamb, the one who took up the cross and not the crown. ...we must challenge the knowledges currently enshrined in the academic disciplines dominating the modern university."<sup>18</sup>

All of scripture is interpretable—and must be to be understood correctly—in terms of *The Cross*. A sound

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15. Dorothy Sayers. *Creed Or Chaos* (Manchester,NH: Sophia Institute Press, 1974), 8ff

16. Ephesians 6:13, 14a NEW INT.

17. Dorothy Sayers. *Creed Or Chaos* (Manchester,NH: Sophia Institute Press, 1974), 8ff

18. *ibid.* p. 146.

hermeneutic, for example, of all things apocalyptic has to be a revelation in effect of Jesus Christ the crucified and risen Lord.

"Commenting on the apocalyptic character of Ezekiel, Daniel, Mark, and John of Patmos, John Howard Yoder observes that these texts are not either about pie in the sky or the Russians in Mesopotamia. "They are about how the crucified Jesus is a more adequate key to understanding what God is about in the real world of empires and armies and markets than is the ruler in Rome, with all his supporting military, commercial, and sacerdotal networks."<sup>19</sup> Postmodernists cannot help but think such a claim to be the grandest of grand narratives, but I cannot imagine Christians saying anything less. Not only saying it, but also thinking it true."<sup>20</sup>

### Survival of the Fittest

But make no mistake about it: *"the world' cannot be [a christian] society,"* Hauerwas alerts, *"and we only distract ourselves from building a truly Christian society by trying to make our nation into that society, rather than be content with living as a community-in-exile."*<sup>21</sup> We remain foreigners and exiles in this world.<sup>22</sup> We are not of this world.<sup>23</sup> Robert Jenson theologizes:

"To survive, moreover, means we must have skills of resistance. I believe God has given us all we need not only to survive but to flourish. To survive will require us to develop practices and habits that make our worship of God an unavoidable witness to the world. By unavoidable I mean that we must help the world discover that it is of course unintelligible just to the extent that it does not acknowledge the God we worship. That God is whoever raised Jesus from the dead, having before raised Israel from Egypt."<sup>24</sup>

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19. John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus: Vicit Agnus Noster*, 2nd edn. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), p. 246.

20. Graham Ward, ed. *Postmodern Theology*. (University of Manchester: Blackwell Publishing Ltd. 2008), 152.

21. *ibid.* p. 153.

22. I Peter 2:11 *Dear friends, I urge you, as foreigners and exiles, to abstain from sinful desires, which wage war against your soul.*

23. John 17:17 *They are not of the world, even as I am not of it.*

24. Robert Jenson, *Systematic Theology: The Triune God*, vol. 1 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 63.

Ward agreeable chimes in: *“That is the God, who ... created all that is.”*<sup>25</sup>

We, christians, were in the driver’s seat but choose to take a backseat to a postmodern world. We gave the moral high ground to the philosopher who now sees no absolute law from an all wise God. It is we who are *“challenged”*—not postmodernism. We need to unleashed the power of the love that God has given us—the power of our own salvation—and show our faith alive and well in Christ.

### Morals

“The moral authority the church derived from its past... will have to be drawn from elsewhere if the church in this new age is to continue to be different, to continue to be unassimilated to the secular world.”<sup>26</sup>

We need to be found in the marketplace with a different purpose in mind, not primarily as consumers but as consummate witnesses. And this witness must be a universal—united—one. *“...the worship of ... God,”* Hauerwas continues, *“means that we must pray and pray fervently for the reconciliation of Catholics and Protestants, as our very division wounds not only ourselves but the world itself.”*<sup>27</sup>

And our message must be universal with *“...confidence in the face of the universal market to claim universality, that Jesus of Nazareth was raised from the dead.”*<sup>28</sup> (The message of the Cross.)

### Summary

Dr. Hauerwas concludes:

“Such a church is surely necessary if, ...we are to learn to see God in the world in which we find ourselves, and not only in

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25. Graham Ward, ed. *Postmodern Theology* (University of Manchester: Blackwell Publishing Ltd. 2008), 152.

26. *ibid.* p. 154.

27. *ibid.*

28. *ibid.*

some past golden age ... To be such a people in this time we must be sustained by our worship of God who wills himself known in Christ and so known can safeguard 'us from self-worship and maintain us in the conviction that nothing we know in this world is ultimate...' Through the faithful worship of a God so known, Christians can not only survive postmodernism but even flourish."<sup>29</sup>

The differences between the new age we find ourselves in and a past that some of us still remember—before science and knowledge was refined enough to answer questions once asked of God in prayer, these differences—are impossible to be ignored or even exaggerated. Some of us remember a time when there was no other explanation for the miraculous and unexplainable except the hand of God. A few of us are still able to regale people of faith with stories of God's direction, deliverance, and doings that brings tears of praise and nostalgia to our eyes. These are the stories that deny doubt. These are the recollections that encourage faith.

Living in a postmodern age, however, must be more than reminiscing. For faith to be alive and well we need new accounts in our personal lives of the marvels that, to us, only God can do. We need to relearn the joys of conversational prayer with the God we claim is in our lives. He needs to be what our theology claims He is.

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29. *ibid.* pp. 154-155.

## Rebuilding Faith

### Introduction

I have been tasked with the privilege of writing a review for Dr. Sharon Baker's revolutionary work titled *Executing God: Rethinking Everything You've Been Taught about Salvation and the Cross*. My thoughts as I read are racing on into the land of many sermons. I am on the verge of rambling on which has to tell you how excited I am to review this work. This is a *must read* for any pastor who by revelation and conviction understands the place Calvary holds in their teachings and in their vision for the people of God.

From a high up view: *Executing God: Rethinking Everything You've Been Taught about Salvation and the Cross* is the story of atonement but from a perspective of love, mercy and compassion instead of in payment of a debt of sin or appeasing an enraged God. And this change of perspective will probably put your current theological understanding of the Cross to the shredder.

Dr. Baker confessed that her "whole belief system came crashing down around" her. She "wandered around in the rubble, kicking at the broken pieces of [her] absolute certainty"<sup>1</sup> when she revisited all she had been taught to believe about the atoning work of our Savior on Calvary. It is what Dorothy Sayers, the mystery writer, called "miraculous and unfathomable"<sup>2</sup> admitting

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1. Sharon Baker. *Executing God* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press) page 2.

2. Dorothy Sayers. *Creed or Chaos* (Manchester, NH: Sophia Institute Press, 1974), page 8ff.

in her play *"Man Born To Be King"* that *"When you understand this, you will understand all prophecy and all history."*<sup>3</sup> But understanding the atonement. There's the 'rub'—as they say.

For Dr. Baker *"one foundation survived...that Jesus Christ is Lord and Savior.. And upon that foundation"*, she wrote encouragingly, *"I began to rebuild."*<sup>4</sup>

Along with her students she began to ask forbidden questions—questions raised in this postmodern age of intellectual honesty. These are questions that deserved answers even though the answers might rewrite the theology on which we have built denominational kingdoms: *Did God have Jesus murdered? Does God require the suffering of innocence in order to redeem? Is God such a god that will not forgive until blood is spilled?*

In this book atonement theory is being turned on its head. How punitive, retributive, penal, violent was God in sending Jesus to a roman cross? Did God execute Jesus in order to bring salvation? And if God is our leader, does this justify the suffering that Christendom has caused in His name?

Dr. Baker understands that a postmodern age will not receive the witness of a militant christianity. There appears to be no logic that makes the torture of innocence (which is what we are looking at with Jesus on a cross) a reasonable or acceptable explanation of why He had to die.

Sharon Baker suggested that *"we reinterpret our tradition [in a way] that it remains relevant for our changing world and powerful enough to transform our world with the good news of salvation through Jesus Christ."*<sup>5</sup>

To allay your fears: she is still evangelical but in more of an *"absolutely-it-is-good-news"* sense since she has captured in this work a purer revelation of the love of God and the God of love

3. Dorothy Sayers. *The Man Born to be King*. (San Francisco CA: Ignatius Press. 1990) Page 290.

4. Sharon Baker. *Executing God* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press) page 2.

5. *ibid.* p. 6.

than the tradition “*smite-them-Lord-hip-and-thigh-make-Christ-suffer-until=my-salvation-is-guaranteed*” view of what sent Jesus to the Cross.

In the section, *What You’ll Find In This Book*<sup>6</sup> Sharon Baker makes my job uneventful by outlining each chapter for me. But where’s the fun in that!? My mind is so focused as I read and my hand shakily begs to tell the story!

### Chapter One

How violent is—or was—God? Dr. Baker starts by tracing the history of a “Christianity that kills” back to a fourth century doctrine of atonement. Violent christian behavior has been rationalized and justified in the image of a God who annihilates and who sent a sinless being to his death to satisfy his enraged sense of honor—what Baker maintains the current theories of atonement project.

This chapter includes Dr. Baker’s ‘book of the martyrs’ because we have grown theologically to believe that the ultimate suffering for Christ gives us membership in that special club: ‘*The fellowship of His sufferings.*’ But does it?

Dr. Baker defines violence in terms that we understand for the purpose of showing that was not what the Cross was all about from God’s point of view. “*That’s what I am doing in this book,*” She summarizes, “*rethinking, reinterpreting the theories surrounding one of the most important doctrines of the faith in order to minimize the future violence these theories may continue to generate.*”<sup>7</sup>

### Chapter Two

Chapter two is where literalists get nervous because Sharon Baker talks *metaphors*. A major point she makes is that metaphors are culturally understood and this might mean changing the metaphor, that describes some truth, into a form or

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6. *ibid.* p. 7.

7. *ibid.* p. 16.

story that better explains that truth. Here we are talking about the atonement and the Bible uses Hebraic metaphors, such as a sacrifice, to relate the story of God's love for us. (My mind went to Don Richardson's *Peace Child*. ...another good read.)

After attempting a definition of the term—adequate for her purpose here—she shows how often we stretch the value of a metaphor to cover the absurd, the theologically contradictory, and what ultimately puts God in a false—not to say bad—light.

She then outlines the popular views of atonement: A victory over the devil, an eternal debt to be paid, serving the justice of God, a ransom, and the one that bleeds through everywhere in Scripture, a substitutionary sacrifice made to God for sin.

Dr. Baker starts to unveil her interpretation of things:

*"The literal blood of animals does not rid us of sin. Neither does the literal blood of Jesus. But the metaphorical sacrifice of Jesus 'purifies our conscience from dead works to worship the living God.'"*<sup>8</sup>

*"If taken literally," Sharon Baker sees it, "[The sacrifice of Christ to God] really amounted to a miscarriage of justice in that God required a human sacrifice of an innocent man in order to redeem humanity."*<sup>9</sup>

Dr. Baker includes a final section to this chapter titled *What's The Point?* (forgive my analysis here) probably sensing a need to explain further since this shocks our theological sensibilities.

So, what is the point? In her words:

*"The Bible provides us with metaphors that enable us to get a glimpse of a divine reality, not in its entirety [what a literalism suggests] but in part. ... Metaphors describing God's redemptive work through Christ provide us with only one small piece in a much bigger picture. We can't construct a dogmatic, definitive theory of atonement. ..we have..reified into dogma that we defend at all cost."*<sup>10</sup> ..

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8. *ibid.* p. 45.

9. *ibid.*

10. *ibid.* p. 46.

(and thus, the violence, the militancy, the civil war within Christendom that is so, so wrong!)

Is Dr. Baker saying that the cross is a metaphor of divine love? The entire story behind God's choice of the sacrifice of His son is yet to be told. To Dr. Baker, the Cross is "*the way of love, obedience, mercy, compassion, justice, hope, reconciliation and joy.*"<sup>11</sup> ..and not violence nor Jesus' way of satisfying the rage of an offended god.

### Chapter Three

Sharon Baker next reviews the more popular theories of atonement which most christians should be familiar with. What disturbs her—and many of us—most is the way these theories portray God: "*in collusion with violence, complicit with deception, contradict[ing] the concept of justice by requiring the death of an innocent man.*"<sup>12</sup> One theory argues that God's honor needs to be satisfied as a result of the Fall. And then there's "*the infinite payment to satisfy an infinite debt.*"<sup>13</sup> But if this is owed to God by His own reckoning, how does not simple forgiveness expunge it? Why must God demand payment. Dr. Baker compares this to protection racketeering by the mob. God will protect us from hell if full payment is made but the hell He is protecting us from is one He made for all those who don't pay up.

We should agree with Dr. Baker that "*an educated faith is a stronger faith.*"<sup>14</sup> She makes a point of emphasizing that these well established theories of atonement are not to be discarded or thrown away. She is simply asking us to "*consider the strengths and weaknesses and determine if there might be alternative ways that contribute to being the peacemakers that God calls us to be.*"<sup>15</sup> It is these flaws in the theories that drives her to "*keep looking for an*

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11. *ibid.*

12. *ibid.* p. 53.

13. *ibid.* p. 57.

14. *ibid.*

15. *ibid.*

*interpretation of the cross that portrays God as more restorative, reconciling, and just.*"<sup>16</sup>

## Chapter Four

If I were arrested for murder, I should strongly hope that those who know me would be saying, "Not possible! John is not capable of such a thing." What appears to be bothering Dr. Baker is that any atonement theory that suggests God is a murderer has to be wrong. A God of Love is so incongruous with such an idea. The historical facts are indisputable but the explanation for that history just doesn't line up with whom the scriptures know God to be.

What's worse, we not only worship this God, we follow His example.

Is it co-incidental that the history of the theory of the atonement lines up so perfectly with church history. (A point not lost on Dr. Baker's reevaluation of it in the first three chapters.) Dr. Baker will justify a need to re-evaluate atonement theory "*because our theology emerges from worldviews inherent in our societies and cultures.*"<sup>17</sup> "*The layers of reinterpretation in the history of christian doctrine,*" Baker teaches, "*lead to the realization that the tradition is [she emphasizes this word 'is'] to reinterpret the tradition.*"<sup>18</sup>

But it isn't *what* happened on Calvary that is being questioned here. We are trying to figure out the *why* of it all and Dr. Baker is showing us how the flavor of our world affects the taste of how good God is in our understanding of the cross.

This chapter, "*The Problem of God in the Atonement*" looks at how the traditional theories of the atonement portray our God. "*What do we believe about God when we hold to these*

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16. *ibid.* p. 62.

17. *ibid.* p. 79ff.

18. *ibid.* p. 80.

*theories?*"<sup>19</sup> she asks, examining not just the theology but our behavior in light of such teachings.

*"If we want contemporary society to understand and relate to the gospel message,"* she urges, *"we must continue reinterpreting it, rethinking it—especially if what we believe about God affects our actions toward others."*<sup>20</sup> *"If we think through what we believe,"* Dr. Baker enjoins us, *"we might be able to see the inconsistencies?"*<sup>21</sup>

I am drawn in to her lecture hall because she is not arguing against a ransom theory as much as she is arguing for a theory that more adequately looks on the cross and sees the throbbing heart of God. Yes, that heart tore at the world with every beat (the guard at the cross saw the earthquake) but not out of vengeance but the co-lateral effect of how intensely God was in the moment. She wants us along with the centurion to look up at Jesus and exclaim, "Surely, God does love His creation!"<sup>22</sup> And on that, I am with her.

And what does all this say about forgiveness and justice? These two ideas seemed to be pitted against one another in our thinking. Punish the prodigal! Don't just accept him back as if nothing bad has happened! Or should we just welcome him home by killing the fatted calf and holding a banquet in honor of his return? Which is it and which was it on Calvary? Forgiving us by punishing Jesus? Does anyone else see how logically out of sync this all sounds? Sharon Baker does. Dr. Baker will extend her thoughts on this in later chapters. *"We really don't see love and punishment as bed partners in the teachings of Jesus."*<sup>23</sup> Sharon Baker reminds us.

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19. *ibid.* p. 69.

20. *ibid.*

21. *ibid.* p. 70.

22. Matthew 27:54 When the centurion and those with him who were guarding Jesus saw the earthquake and all that had happened, they were terrified, and exclaimed, "Surely he was the Son of God!"

23. Sharon Baker. *Executing God* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press) page 77.

## Chapter Five

Must justice be retributive? Or can it be restorative? Must justice always sentence the accused or can it seek to acquit? Was Jesus' death a form of punishment that He took in our stead or could His death represent God's plan to reconcile us to Himself? Must the atonement be penal? Must it be the means for God's [offended?] honor to be satisfied? Or could the atonement be a conciliatory act of God to provide a way back to Him?

Sharon Baker then proceeds to favor [she calls it her *interpretive paradigm*] the many scriptures that support a restorative brand of justice. The most pronounced attribute of a divine justice is God's ability to forgive unconditionally. It should be no surprise that the words *grace* and *forgiveness* share a common linguistic form.<sup>24</sup> "As revealed in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus," Baker summarizes, "the process of forgiveness, reconciliation, and restoration without retaliation demonstrates the most profound level of justice."<sup>25</sup>

In the face of unconditional forgiveness without seeking restitution or vengeance—*such grace*—<sup>26</sup>the penitent melts in shame and begs forgiveness.

## Chapter Six

"...penal and satisfaction theories of atonement compromise the nature of forgiveness"<sup>27</sup> Dr. Baker begins chapter six.

Dr. Baker speaks of forgiveness as a removal of sin and punishment, a purification from sin. After reiterating that forgiveness is a mutually exclusive concept with paying a debt

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24. Ephesians 4:32 Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.

25. Sharon Baker. *Executing God* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press) p. 95.

26. *ibid.* p. 97.

27. *ibid.* p. 100.

or punishment—which is what the traditional theories of atonement propose—she invites us to “reinterpret” our understanding of forgiveness, only now, “consistent with our image of God as loving.”<sup>28</sup>

Here is Baker’s logic ...and it’s sound: “For God to require that we earn our forgiveness or that Jesus earns God’s forgiveness for us through death or merit or satisfaction does not meet the standards for a pure gift of forgiveness.”<sup>29</sup> If Jesus “earned” God’s forgiveness for us through His death, then it is owed us—it has been paid for—and no longer a “free gift” which is what grace really is.

The offense that needs to be forgiven is not simply swept under a rug of indifference. No. It is effectively and eternally dealt with through reconciliation and restoration of our relationship with God. Punishment is unnecessary and actually very ill-advised for reasons that should be obvious.

“How did this reconciliation happen? God first forgave us,”<sup>30</sup> she teaches. What “satisfied” God? It wasn’t a violent death but it was Jesus’ love as He sought God’s forgiveness on our behalf. Baker appeals to Colossians 1:20: “and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.”

Forgiveness is a powerful force for good—granted—but why the cross? In Baker’s terms: Our debt was not paid for; our debt was forgiven. And that sounds very New Testament. “In forgiving sin,” Dr. Baker interprets, “God in Christ sacrificed receiving the debt we owed God for sin.”<sup>31</sup> God didn’t require payment, He simply forgave the debt; so, Jesus’ death on Calvary could not have been in payment for a debt of sin; it was an act of forgiveness.

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28. *ibid.*

29. *ibid.* p. 107.

30. *ibid.* p. 109.

31. *ibid.* p. 111.

## Chapter Seven

In the seventh chapter, Dr. Baker brings us to the threshold of a new perspective on "atonement."

*"Old Testament writers," Sharon Baker begins, "...focused the blood sacrifice as a way to cleanse the sinner... The Hebrew sacrifices had more to do with purification, cleaning, and forgiveness, and nothing at all to do with substitutionary punishment.... The blood of the sacrificial animal, then, cleanses the people from sin, wipes [their sins] away."*<sup>32</sup>

But now, it is clear that Jesus' death had nothing to do with placating an angry God or paying off an eternal debt, but had everything to do with forgiveness and the wiping away of sin. As I said it to one of my sons—and the simplest explanation is sometimes the most profound—God said, let's start over again, wipe the slate clean and begin again to grow a relationship.

*"Cleansing or purification is synonymous with forgiveness," Dr. Baker emphasizes a point made obvious through 6 chapters, "It had nothing to do with appeasing God or with the punishment of the animal as a substitute for the people."*<sup>33</sup>

Then why the ritual? She wrote, *"The external ritual actually symbolized the internal offering of the sacrificer's life to God."*<sup>34</sup>

And why the shedding of blood? It is symbolic. *"Blood sacrifices symbolized...the inward condition of the heart dedicated to God."*<sup>35</sup>

So sacrificing animals was kind of an emphatic lesson in forgiveness? Dr. Baker surmises, *"...commanding the Israelites to*

32. Sharon Baker. *Executing God* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press) p. 116.

33. *ibid.* p. 117.

34. *ibid.*

35. *ibid.* p. 118.

*sacrifice animals God may be using a bit of rhetorical hyperbole.*<sup>36</sup>  
[Dramatic flair?]

So the true meaning of sacrifice is [Baker completes the thought]: “...an inward surrender and obedience to God.”<sup>37</sup>

And blood? She answered, “Blood stands for life and represents the life given to God.”<sup>38</sup> She added, “Killing an animal and sprinkling the blood has nothing to do with punishment... it has everything to do with blood as the life force that cleanses and purifies the people.<sup>39</sup> ... To sprinkle blood, then, points to the act of God forgiving sin.”<sup>40</sup>

Let me attempt a summary: True sacrifice, then, is a life set apart for God with a heart devoted to God, a life cleanse of sin and appropriating God’s forgiveness. For Jesus, his sacrifice was God forgiving us of all sin. Jesus death was the ultimate human indignity, abuse, and suffering to endured on a roman cross to so totally and unreservedly forgive all sin.

So “*what is atonement?*”<sup>41</sup> A cleansing forgiveness proclaimed and provided by the God-man, Jesus, whose life was separated completely, given over totally, to the Father’s will for our salvation, the ultimate expression of love, compassion and mercy on Calvary’s cross.

## Chapter Eight

Let me ask my question using Dr. Baker’s words: *What exactly happened when Jesus died on the cross? What did He accomplish?*<sup>42</sup> But with Sharon Baker it is not just the death of Jesus but His life, resurrection and ascension that is the sum of His sacrificial service to God. Logically, if God had not come incarnate, He

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36. *ibid.*

37. *ibid.*

38. *ibid.*p. 123.

39. *ibid.*

40. *ibid.*

41. *ibid.*

42. *ibid.* p. 131.

wouldn't be here to die. His entire life was one plan and therefore, one sacrifice. And it was the divine expression of love and mercy—not vengeance.

The mistake made, hermeneutically speaking, is failing to appreciate the connection between the Savior's life and death, as if He were simply biding His time until that first Good Friday. Sharon Baker does not do this. What she does do is reiterate, restate, and remind us repeatedly throughout that the old more violent theories of atonement do not work anymore for witnessing. God's brand of justice is restorative, not retributive (chapter five). We need a new metaphor that will better serve this generation to show the mercy and love of a God who had Himself nailed to a roman cross. *"...it's time to reinterpret and to suggest alternative theories that reveal the God of Jesus, who desires the salvation of all people."*<sup>43</sup> Dr. Baker concludes.

Now, at last, she says it (we need to highlight this quote):

*"So instead of saying that God inflicted the pain of the cross on Jesus as a penalty for our sin, we can say that the horrific nature of the cross exposed and condemned the gravity of our sin. After all, human beings are the ones who put Jesus to death, not God."*<sup>44</sup>

*"We have built our doctrines of atonement around the idea of retribution,"* Dr. Baker explains, *"...pitting justice against love."*<sup>45</sup> This makes God appear ambivalently prone to unthinkable atrocities against peoples He chooses to call enemies. It leaves us with an unresolvable theological contradiction.

What Dr. Baker is pointing out is that His death on Calvary was a revelation of His mercy because it was at the time of His death that the Jewish Law [capital 'L'], which could only condemn and not save, was abolished—died along with Him. (I have not been listing the myriad of scripture references that

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43. *ibid.* p. 133.

44. *ibid.* p. 134.

45. *ibid.*

Sharon Baker uses and we are already very familiar with. In a review, it goes without saying.)

Her pithy outburst here is plaque worthy: *“Mercy and grace transcends the law of retribution in favor of forgiveness.”*<sup>46</sup> That says it all!

(Throughout her work, Dr. Baker, brings to the surface the ‘sub-theme’ that the life of Jesus, which was part of a sacrificial life and part of God’s atoning work [because it exemplified forgiveness] is our “greater works shall ye do” call to ministry. Atonement is forgiveness and an atoning life is one that knows the math—70 times 7). Jesus “bore our sins” in His body on the cross which has to be the ultimate revelation of a forgiving God. Jesus entered into our miniseries [oops, miseries. No, let’s keep it as a modern metaphor]. Jesus took on our sins, but not in a literal sense according to Baker. He suffered on account of our sin. Also He did not endure God’s wrath, but ours that we dished out. We, not the Father, executed God! He did not endure punishment meant for us but through His suffering and act of forgiveness, we are acquitted without prejudice. If Jesus had endured the penalty for our sins, the law of double jeopardy would apply meaning all would be eventually saved since He bore the sin of the world upon Himself. Baker argues.

In what sense is the death of Jesus vicarious, then? Baker brings this up in her final chapter.. What she does say here is *“Jesus died on account of sin—in our sinfulness we executed an innocent man. And Jesus died on our behalf so we could see the depth of our profound distance from God and turn away from our wrong doing.”*<sup>47</sup>

She seems to argue against the idea of a vicarious atonement which leaves all Christians defending a doctrine that had become the very definition of Christianity.

The encouraging note is that we all seem agreed that Jesus provided a complete salvation in His death and

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46. *ibid.* p. 135.

47. *ibid.* p. 139.

resurrection. It is substantially Pauline and Dr. Baker is totally on board with all of it.

What did Jesus do—exactly—on the Cross? Dr. Baker launches into sermonic tones of forgiveness, reconciliation, peace, redemption, purification, and love. She is clearly impassioned with what we all say amen to as divine truth. She is content in asserting that the New Testament speaks of the *fact* of our delivery from sin rather than the *means* of that delivery.<sup>48</sup>

Sharon Baker begins the final paragraph of this chapter with a summary worth memorizing: *“Jesus did not die in order to win God’s love for us, but to win us over with God’s love.”*<sup>49</sup>

“But how?” She asks. In the last chapter she tells us.

### Chapter Nine

*“..We’ve yet to undertake a complete theory of atonement that incorporates all [scripture] into a unified whole. ... Well, I can’t promise that. ... The rigid dogma of absolute certainty ...eliminates the need for faith.”*<sup>50</sup>

Baker speaks now of a substitutionary atonement but not a penal one—not as a payment of debt or punishment for sin. *“Vicarious suffering is ..suffering with rather than suffering instead of,”*<sup>51</sup> she explains.

Atonement now to Dr. Baker recognizes Jesus’ humanity and His suffering as God coming down to our level while our being made into the image of Christ is our being raised to His — at-one-ment. *“The true sacrifice of Jesus lies not in the literal shedding of blood but the inward condition of his heart of love revealed by the outward giving of his life, symbolized by his blood.”*<sup>52</sup>

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48. *ibid.* p. 144.

49. *ibid.* p. 147.

50. *ibid.* p. 148.

51. *ibid.* p. 153.

52. *ibid.* p. 160.

### A Personal Thought

Dr. Baker's conclusions have earned some attention but there is room for continued discussion. Perhaps with good reason our understanding of "Atonement" is called a theory. Sharon Baker's understanding of the vicarious death of the Savior is weakened while she seems to view Jesus' death on Calvary primarily as an expression of love and not a legal requirement—in terms of the holiness of God (A point with an unmistakable scriptural emphasis). In what sense did Jesus' death preclude ours?

It is basic to Christian thought to herald the Savior's death as a substitute for ours. He died in our stead. Had He not died, there would have been no spiritual life for you and I.

I remember my very first bible and reading the very first verse: "*In the beginning, God...*" Not a bad idea to imagine myself there again with a refreshed enthusiasm to discover all I can about Calvary.

Let your faith take you on that journey.

## The Suffering Servant

This essay is a look at the “*Suffering Servant*” in Isaiah’s prophecy. My primary interest is centered on a couple verses in his 53rd chapter which for me provides irrefutable proof in the revelatory content of Isaiah’s prophecy and therefore an additional support for a christian’s faith in God. For centuries there has been a scholastic or academic effort to refute this simple faith in the inspiration of Scripture. Christian faith has been incorrectly lumped in with all religious “faiths” [and, no doubt, other religions would on their own terms disassociate from this “group-all” view] as a cognitive dissonance or escape from the present real world, a use of ritual and fable to explain life in unscientific terms or, at best, only self-revealing—not God. The sciences of linguistics and archeology as well as evolutionary theory have been used to discredit the simple belief in the inspiration of Scripture and a humble love for the Bible as God’s Word. A revisiting of these arguments exposes their weaknesses and uncovers much support for a return to faith in the Word as God’s revelation. And in this regard Isaiah’s “*Suffering Servant*” and his 53rd chapter in particular is worth another, closer, look.

According to F.W.Albright, the father of Biblical Archeology, the prophecy of Isaiah “*may more correctly be styled*” as an anthology of “*oracles and sermons*”<sup>1</sup> since the chapters are not ordered chronologically. This supports the conservative view that the text is the work of a single author, the son of Amoz.<sup>2</sup> Other views, however, suggest 1 or even 2 separate unknown writers

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1. R. K. Harrison, “Introduction to the Old Testament,” Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2004) p. 777

2. The vision concerning Judah and Jerusalem that Isaiah son of Amoz saw during the reigns of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah, kings of Judah.

for the chapters 40-66 of Isaiah's prophecy. There is a history behind this change that is worth a review since as Christians it has always been important to us to include Isaiah's prophecy in the Canon of Scripture as "*God breathed*,"<sup>3</sup> If Isaiah deserves to be a part of the Canon it is because it is part of the revelation of God. It defies sound reason to assign it a place in the Canon if chapters 40-66 are of unknown authorship. As R. K. Harrison in his "*Introduction to the Old Testament*" reasons, a prophetic message or oracle considered a divine revelation would not likely be anonymous or of unknown authorship.

A "Deutero-Isaiah," or second and unknown author, for chapters 40 thru 66, was theorized on the basis of alleged form or linguistic differences. But as Harrison, from whom most of this study is taken, points out, "*Conservative scholars generally met the arguments relating to differences in theological standpoint by demonstrating the ideas in later chapters of the prophecy [40-66] were broader and more extended than their counterparts in chapters 1-39.*"<sup>4</sup>

Harrison will argue that the alleged style differences between chapters 1 thru 39 and chapters 40 thru 66 (and in this second half we find our 53<sup>rd</sup> chapter) can be accredited to changes that are natural over the span of a writer's career. This is clear in my poetry: how I wrote at age 25 and at 75. I am not 2 different authors!

## Scholasticism

I have less interest in revisiting the countless theories that claim multiple authors, than you have in reading it; so, it should suffice to offer only a synopsis of the hermeneutic of the last few centuries of Biblical study that affected not just an understanding of Isaiah but the Old Testament as a whole. Put simply, since the Reformation of the 16<sup>th</sup> Century of the present

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3. 2 Timothy 3:16 θεόπνευστος. Proof the Bible is Genuine, Authentic, Inspired Revelation of God <http://www.gotchoices.net/authenticity/>

4. R. K. Harrison, "Introduction to the Old Testament, Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2004) p. 777

era, scholarship has been more interested in the literary value of scripture and not its inspirational value. Scholars have been concerned with *when* the scriptures were compiled and less with the message or content. Scholarship, I maintain, lost its way for 3 reasons:

1. The theory of evolution: Since Darwinism, scholarship has been obsessed with a religious theory of evolution. Did the stories in the Bible and the Torah and Targums [commentary on the Torah] evolve from ancient religious myths?
2. The popularity of Hegel's philosophy of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis.<sup>5</sup> Hegelian philosophy [though actually it was popularized by Johann Gottlieb Fichte (1762–1814)] said that social/cultural change (which included religious practices) is the result of a new practice/norm (antithesis) coming into conflict with an existing one (thesis) and the resulting religious, social, or cultural form or expression is a compromised (synthesis) form. It was theorized that Old Testament sacrifices and other religious forms as well as a belief in one God (monotheism) were the result of culturally conflicting concepts from other ancient cultures. Monotheism was thought to be born out of monolatry [one god among many] which itself was born out of polytheism.
3. Inevitably, scholarship would look at the narrative of Scripture as a pseudo-history, a compilation of mythologies. Through the use of scientific tools of

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5. According to Wiki: "Hegelian dialectic, usually presented in a threefold manner, was stated by Heinrich Moritz Chalybäus as comprising three dialectical stages of development: a thesis, giving rise to its reaction; an antithesis, which contradicts or negates the thesis; and the tension between the two being resolved by means of a synthesis. In more simplistic terms, one can consider it thus: problem → reaction → solution. Although this model is often named after Hegel, he himself never used that specific formulation. Hegel ascribed that terminology to Kant. Carrying on Kant's work, upcest greatly elaborated on the synthesis model and popularized it."

linguistics, anthropology, archeology, geology, paleontology, etc. a new modern approach to interpreting the Bible was developed. It is called the historical-critical method of interpreting Scripture which has discarded completely the belief that the Bible is—or even contains—a divine revelation.

The message of Isaiah's *Suffering Servant* became just a story line. The message and inspiration it conveyed was of little further interpretative value. In an attempt at getting back to the message, a neo-orthodox movement was born but proposed a compromise by conceding that the narrative of Scripture was not historical but still with theological value. Neo-orthodoxy interpreted the Biblical narrative as metaphor and parable—not history—and proposed a systematic theology, in effect, “the moral of the story.”

Reaching back: During the Reformation of the 16<sup>th</sup> century John Calvin proposed that “*the scriptures are their own interpreter,*” and Martin Luther maintained that “*a sympathetic experience is necessary to interpret any Biblical revelation,*” [you have to experience the Bible truth to understand it]. But a liberal humanism arose in the seventeenth century disowning revelation as unscientific. Reason became “*the sole standard of judgment and the final authority for faith.*”<sup>6</sup> The scientific approach to natural truth was now applied to the interpretation of scripture which concluded most of the historical narrative in the text as myth or legend.

Some scholars<sup>7</sup> attempted to rescue biblical interpretation by calling the less rational portions as metaphorical or mystical. They consented to the scientific mind and saw only *spiritual* lessons in the Bible stories, not historical narrative. Most of the Old Testament account took on a parabolic mantle. Thus Jonah wasn't swallowed by a fish; the account is a fabled story of his

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6. R. K. Harrison, “Introduction to the Old Testament, Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2004) p. 464

7. Scheiermacher introduced “mystical subjectivism which was limited to the examination of certain human feelings or emotional reactions involving religious phenomena.” *ibid.*

rebellion. Theology became the study of religious phenomena and how religious scholars might interpret the stories in doctrinal or denominational terms. Thus Adam, Eve, and the Fall became simply a “once upon a time” comparable to an Aesop fable replete with a moral theology about the entrance of sin. The biblical story of creation was thought to be borrowed from Babylonian mythology [now proven erroneous].

In another sense: the *genuineness* of scripture was soon to become a major area of study replacing a concern about the *authenticity* of the Word.<sup>8</sup> Put another way, “revelation” as a divine truth, accepted as God’s Word, ceased to be of any concern to the scholar. In its place, scholarship focused on an evolutionary approach to the compilation of the scriptures or when each book might have been compiled based on its style and language. The Hegelian concept mentioned already was accepted as explanatory of the variations or changes intentionally made in copying the script. The stories of scripture were thought to be borrowed from more ancient sources and modified through tradition. So much for the miraculous! By definition, miracles can not be scientifically confirmed.

As theology and culture changed, the text was brought along to reflect the changing theologies, morals and ethics of the day. Perhaps, one of the most notable is the all but disappearance of the Mosaic Law during the years of the Judges. Israel was monolatrous [a belief in one god among many]. It wasn’t until after their return from Babylonian exile that the *Shima*, Deuteronomy 6:4,<sup>9</sup> and the Mosaic law, the Torah, became foundational to Judean religious life. This led scholarship to assume Moses was either not an historical figure or a person of antiquity whose ideas were kept alive through centuries of oral

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8. By genuineness we mean that the books were actually written in the age to which they in assigned and by the men to whom they are ascribed. By authenticity we mean that the Bible relates truthfully the matters of which it treats, and its contents are the same today as written originally. see Authenticity. <http://www.gotchoices.net/authenticity/>

9. The LORD our God is one LORD; or The LORD is our God, the LORD is one; or The LORD is our God, the LORD alone

traditions which needed to be edited as they were written down and applied after the Babylonian exile. In Hegelian fashion: as older grammatical forms, linguistic styles, and religious rituals (the thesis) came in conflict with changing forms, styles and rituals ( the antithesis), new religious practices and linguistic forms evolved (the synthesis) reflected now in the compilation or editing of the biblical text.<sup>10</sup> (This has all been successfully refuted by Harrison and others.)<sup>11</sup>

During the 1800's biblical scholarship became fascinated with Darwinian evolution. Scholars thought to apply the evolutionary process to biblical interpretation as well. Scholars wrangled over *authorship* [higher criticism] instead of provenance [ordering variations in the text chronologically to ascertain the earliest writings, which is known as "lower" or "textual" criticism] and using a Hegelian dialectic as a guide proceeded to rearrange the biblical text, reordering the various sections according to a theorized evolutionary process. [Our Bible evolved!?] Five authors, scholars theorized, wrote the books of Moses—and Moses was *not* one of them. They concluded the Pentateuch was compiled by a contemporary of Ezra. Isaiah also was theorized to be a product of a post-exilic writer. Isaiah as a prophecy saw three separate writers. Isaiah's account of the "*Suffering Servant*," of which chapter 53 is a major contribution, was accredited to an *unknown* author.

After World War One, a spiritual vacuum resulted because the evolutionary approach to biblical study offered no hope for a world turned existentialistic and nihilistic [the rejection of all religious and moral principles, in the belief that life is meaningless]. No interpretation of Scripture seemed of any value. The preacher lost his inspiring message and the world its hope.

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10. The historical-critical method of biblical criticism (higher criticism) of which I wrote in "Challenged: Living Our Faith in a Postmodern Age" replaced a study in lower biblical criticism or a study of the authorship of each book comprising the Canon.

11. It has now been shown that oral traditions were never maintain in the place of the written forms. Oral recitation was as now a form of learning. See Harrison. p. 35ff.

In an attempt to retrieve the meaning of biblical revelation a neo-orthodox movement was born. This was an attempt at rescuing the civilized religious mind by “reasserting the priority of revelation over reason in theology.”<sup>12</sup> But this was in a modern era that could not consciously equate the scripture with the Word of God. The Bible was thought of as a “failed human response to revelation.”<sup>13</sup>

Biblical history (more correctly, the biblical narrative or story line) was studied separate from Biblical theology.<sup>14</sup> This way the theologian could find “truth” in the stories. Scholars also could still deny that the Scripture *as such* constituted revealed truth.<sup>15</sup> [The verbal-plenary theory of inspiration, every word inspired, was discarded.] The alleged errors found in the text (some of them, no doubt scribal missteps) were troublesome to the occidental mind [scholars thinking like Greek logicians instead of Hebrews with an appreciation for the oriental mindset].

(The Old Testament Scripture, we still affirm, from a Semitic or Hebrew perspective makes perfect sense and the revelatory message [from God] is clear and emphatic.)

It is against this backdrop, however, of developing theologies that Isaiah 53 was re-re- and-re-interpreted. Inevitably a theory that viewed the variations in the biblical text as an evolving document (The documentary hypothesis of Julius Wellhausen)<sup>16</sup>

12. R. K. Harrison, “Introduction to the Old Testament, Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2004) p. 464. compare Karl Barth’s dialectical theology of crisis

13. *ibid.*

14. Any imposed dichotomy between historical investigation and theological interpretation is basically false, if for no other reason than that it would remove Faith from the immanent historical situation in a manner completely foreign to the Old Testament Heilgeschichte. *Ibid.* Page 429

15. *ibid.* p. 465

16. Subsequent adherence of the Graf-Wellhausen theory Pentateuchal origins stood firmly in the tradition establish by the great master. For them the Old Testament narratives were replete with confused repetition of events, characterized by gross historical, typographical, and other errors in the text, and overlaid with a tissue of pagan mythology of such a sort as to require the attention of highly skilled analytical minds before the real trend of events could be

would be recognized as a new hermeneutic called The Historical-Critical method of biblical research. The Bible becomes a mere literary work and the inspiration was gone though once cherished as part of a devotional approach to learning God's Word.

Isaiah is known as "The Fifth Gospel" for good reason. Isaiah's prophecy profiles in ministry the *Suffering Servant* which modern scholarship had been unable to identify since the historical-critical method of interpreting the Bible does not see Scripture as prophecy, divine revelation, or divinely inspired truth.

Who was this servant in Isaiah's record that was so abused, mocked, and finally killed? Higher Criticism<sup>17</sup>—or the attempt through the historical-critical method of interpretation to identify a religious meme with other ancient religious cults and mythologies—presupposed that this suffering and dying servant came from "pagan" or a non-Israelite source. Harrison repudiates this conclusion. "*Any attempt*", Harrison argues, "*to derive the servant concept from Pagan Canaanite or Babylonian religious sources is open to the serious objection that the servant of the Lord as envisaged in Isaiah was a strictly Israelite development for*

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outlined at all satisfactorily. Later research, however, has revealed that a great many of these objections were more artificial than real, and depended for their veracity upon the basic assumptions of the liberal school, which, as has been mentioned above, or gravely deficient from the very outset. [Harrison, p 510]

17. Without laboring over the details of this controversy, suffice it to say that Rabbi Cassuto refutes all five points used to support it. The pillars supporting the entire structure of the documentary theory, are five, to wit:

- a) the use of different names for the Deity;
- b) variations of language and style;
- c) contradictions and divergences of view;
- d) duplications and repetitions;
- e) signs of composite structure in the sections.

— Rabbi Umberto Moshe David Cassuto. *The Documentary Hypothesis* (Jerusalem: Central Press, 2011.), 14.

*which there can be no proper points of connection with the [ancient and pagan] cult of a dying and rising deity.”<sup>18</sup>*

What is remarkable here, and it bears repeating often, is that Isaiah’s “Suffering Servant” has no parallel account in any other literary source. The conservative view is that this is a prophecy of Christ on Calvary. The death and resurrection of Jesus Christ as a vicarious atonement for sin is indisputably “*God-breathed.*” Dr. Gregory Boyd, a professor at Bethel College, St. Paul, Minnesota, said it in plain language: “*There is no other belief which does this... Only the Gospel dares to proclaim that God enters smack-dab into the middle of the hell we created. Only the Gospel dares to proclaim that God was born a baby in a bloody, crap-filled stable, that He lived a life befriendng the prostitutes and lepers no one else would befriend, and that He suffered firsthand, the hellish depth of all that is nightmarish in human existence.*”<sup>19</sup>

We see Jesus in Isaiah’s Suffering Servant narrative. “*On all hands,*” says North, “*it is agreed that whoever was the original of the servant, none except Christ was its fulfillment.*”<sup>20</sup>

There are four oracles profiling the servant of God prophesied in Isaiah<sup>21</sup> chapters 40 thru 66 (Isaiah 53 is part of the fourth oracle which will draw special attention.)

- In the first of these (Isaiah 42:1-4)<sup>22</sup> God’s Servant was divinely chosen and empowered by the Spirit to bring

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18. *ibid.* p. 487

19. Gregory Boyd *Letters From A Skeptic* (Colorado Springs, CO: Cook Communication Ministries, 2004), 151.

20. C R North *The Interpreters Dictionary of the Bible*, IV. p. 294

21. R. K. Harrison, “Introduction to the Old Testament, Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2004) p. 488

22. Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen one in whom I delight; I will put my Spirit on him, and he will bring justice to the nations. He will not shout or cry out, or raise his voice in the streets. A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out. In faithfulness he will bring forth justice; he will not falter or be discouraged

till he establishes justice on earth. In his teaching the islands will put their hope.

justice to the nations of the world. He is the faithful and merciful Servant who has come to rescue not destroy.

Matthew humbly recognizes the similarities between the Suffering Servant of Isaiah and Jesus.<sup>23</sup> (A point worth noting. There are 21 references to Isaiah's prophecy in the New Testament. 6 of these are in Matthew's gospel referencing Isaiah's "Suffering Servant.")

- The second Oracle (Isaiah 49:1-6)<sup>24</sup> portrayed His Servant as divinely called not just to bring salvation to Israel but to the nations.

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23. Mt. 12:17-21 This was to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet Isaiah: "Here is my servant whom I have chosen, the one I love, in whom I delight; I will put my Spirit on him, and he will proclaim justice to the nations. He will not quarrel or cry out; no one will hear his voice in the streets. A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out, till he has brought justice through to victory. In his name the nations will put their hope."

24. Listen to me, you islands; hear this, you distant nations: Before I was born the Lord called me; from my mother's womb he has spoken my name. He made my mouth like a sharpened sword, in the shadow of his hand he hid me; he made me into a polished arrow and concealed me in his quiver. He said to me, "You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will display my splendor." But I said, "I have labored in vain; I have spent my strength for nothing at all. Yet what is due me is in the Lord's hand, and my reward is with my God." And now the Lord says—he who formed me in the womb to be his servant to bring Jacob back to him and gather Israel to himself,

for I am[a] honored in the eyes of the Lord and my God has been my strength—he says:

"It is too small a thing for you to be my servant to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back those of Israel I have kept. I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth."

- In the third Oracle (Isaiah 50:4-9<sup>25</sup>) the Suffering Servant, described his daily contact with God, his confidence is in God's deliverance while he endures mocking and abuse.<sup>26</sup>
- The final Oracle (Isaiah 52:13-15)<sup>27</sup> describes the promised exaltation of the Servant, which, however, would be preceded by violence culminating in the death of the Servant and his burial with the wicked.

Harrison points out that "*Both liberal<sup>28</sup> and conservative scholars were unanimous in their view that [Isaiah] chapters 40 through 66 were the most exalted and remarkable literary achievements of any of*

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25. The Sovereign Lord has given me a well-instructed tongue, to know the word that sustains the weary. He wakens me morning by morning, wakens my ear to listen like one being instructed. The Sovereign Lord has opened my ears; I have not been rebellious,

I have not turned away. I offered my back to those who beat me, my cheeks to those who pulled out my beard; I did not hide my face

from mocking and spitting. Because the Sovereign Lord helps me, I will not be disgraced. Therefore have I set my face like flint, and I know I will not be put to shame.

He who vindicates me is near. Who then will bring charges against me? Let us face each other! Who is my accuser? Let him confront me! It is the Sovereign Lord who helps me.

Who will condemn me? They will all wear out like a garment; the moths will eat them up.

26. Mark 10:34 ... who will mock him and spit on him, flog him and kill him. Three days later he will rise.

27. See, my servant will act wisely; he will be raised and lifted up and highly exalted. Just as there were many who were appalled at him—his appearance was so disfigured beyond that of any human being and his form marred beyond human likeness—so he will sprinkle many nations, and kings will shut their mouths because of him. For what they were not told, they will see, and what they have not heard, they will understand.

28. By "liberal" Harrison is probably referencing the neo-orthodox view. Higher criticism [The historical-critical method] would assume a loftier language for a Deutero-Isaiah, someone whose natural writing talent would account for this style ...and thus, discrediting the inspirational or revelatory value of the text.

*the Hebrew prophets.*"<sup>29</sup> Said differently, Isaiah's prophecies of the *Suffering Servant* are unparalleled in prophetic thought.

In Isaiah's reference to the guilt/sin offering in 53:10 it is the "soul" of the Suffering Servant that has become the offering. In 45 other references to this type of offering, this verse stands alone where the offering is a *person*. Our thoughts immediately go to Paul explaining,<sup>30</sup> "*For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed.*"

Unlike Jeremiah and Ezekiel who wrote of the Covenant, Isaiah spoke of this suffering servant that secular scholarship failed to identify in two millennia of theological, historical, exegetical, hermeneutical and linguistic research. [They didn't ask my grandmother!] Admittedly, during the centuries of evolutionary inquiry into the Scriptural forms and their authorship along with a disavowing of the revelatory content of Scripture, no one was looking at Isaiah with an eye to interpret its inspirational prophetic value.

This deficiency is illustrated in the work of Samuel Sandmel, *The Hebrew Scriptures: An Introduction to Their Literature and Religious Ideas*, 1963, page 193, who rather helplessly concluded that the "*suffering servant*" was a "*stray poem that quite unaccountably came to be included in the book of Isaiah.*"<sup>31</sup>

In addition we must note a few other problems associated with an honest interest in the oracles and sermons attributed to Isaiah:

1. A theological study of the Old Testament requires an appreciation for the historical narrative it is clothed in. The revelation is in God's *relationship* with Ancient Israel, and therefore, their history. After the Reformation

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29. R. K. Harrison, "Introduction to the Old Testament, Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2004) p. 791

30. 1 Corinthians 5:7

John 1:36 When he saw Jesus passing by, he said, "Look, **the Lamb of God!**"

1 Peter 1:19 but with the precious blood of **Christ, a lamb** without blemish or defect.

31. *ibid.* p. 449 footnote

there was an academic disinterest in and disconnected from scripture as revelatory. Historical research (called the historical form) attempted to separate realism from myth. The problem with this method is that scripture came to be viewed only in a literary sense. Any divine presence had become invisible in the text and to quote the mantra, "the absence of evidence is the evidence of absence." When scholarship is not looking for the divine, it is no mystery that they do not find it! Biblical revelation became the play word of preachers who used it to sway parishioners to their cause and not as a means to discovering God among us.

2. As noted already, the occidental mind [logic] is not sufficient to appreciate the semitic writing style. Much that was considered error was simply a style of writing unfamiliar to the modern mind.<sup>32</sup>
3. Old Testament theology cannot be viewed systematically. Harrison points out that "*...the theological concepts of the old testament do not lend themselves with particular readiness to any attempt at systematization....*"<sup>33</sup> Although, Harrison was particularly referencing the Covenant of God as a major Old Testament theme, the principle is equally applicable to the Messianic passages and Isaiah's account of the *Suffering Servant*.

Scriptural unity, therefore, hinges on a recognition of Old Testament prophecies and ceremonial types referencing Christ.

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32. Harrison clarifies, "Because of the far-reaching differences between the oriental somatic mind and the culture of the Hellenistic world, the early Christians recognize that not all the concepts expressed in the Old Testament where in absolute harmony with the outlook of the nascent Christian era. This divergence of standpoint receive fresh emphasis when the works of the law ... sit in contradistinction to the character of divine grace, as in the theology of Paul." Harrison p 417

33. *ibid.* p. 479

There is only one Isaiah.<sup>34</sup> Deutero-Isaiah and a Trito-Isaiah, it can be argued, do not support the linguistic and archeological evidence. The simplest (Ockham's Razor) view is to recognize that the style of chapters 40-66 is similar to the first 39 chapters including references to the Suffering Servant.<sup>35</sup>

Additionally, there are parallelisms that strongly support a single author, Isaiah, son of Amoz. There are corresponding sections in Isaiah 1-39 that are, according to Harrison, easily related to corresponding sections in the later chapters.<sup>36</sup> Our interest here does not require us to detail this comparison but conservative scholarship has studied the alleged differences between Isaiah and Deutero-Isaiah and found that a theory of a single author, Isaiah, is supportable. Harrison informs that "*there are remarkable similarities between chapters 1-39 and 40-66 in questions of both language and style.*"<sup>37</sup>

Proceeding on the theory that Isaiah 1:1 is correct and his eponymous work is a single work<sup>38</sup> written over the span of some 40 years of prophecy about 675 years *before* the Savior

34. It will appear from the comparison that chapters 40-66, do indeed differ considerably in language from the passages of Isaiah that are recognized as genuine [1 - 39]; but ... still ... there is so much that is common to both that these differences afford no satisfactory reasons for denying Isaiah's authorship of the chapters in question. - Lange p. 21

35. For a more thorough and detailed discussion of this topic, see Harrison, p. 774. #2 Arguments for Division of Authorship.

36. Chapters 1-5 parallel 34-35

Chapters 6-8 parallel 36-40

Chapters 9-12 parallel 41-45

Chapters 13-23 parallel 46-48

Chapters 24-27 parallel 49-55

Chapters 28-31 parallel 56-59

Chapters 32-33 parallel 60-66

37. R. K. Harrison, "Introduction to the Old Testament, Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2004) p. 778

38. Gattungsforschung or generic research, type-analysis, form criticism, or categories of styles: denunciations, hymns, oracles, etc. proved insufficient in showing multiple authorships.

came, we may lay aside the scientific endeavors that have wasted the scholar's time over the last 400 years and focus on the text itself. Contextual considerations may still need the archeologist or the linguist, granted, but reviving the tenet of our faith that believes in the text to be revelational and now considering the choice of language and words as important—if not to Isaiah—to *God*, we can begin to seek the meaning of the prophecy—and especially chapter 53.

Admittedly, Jewish thought here is credited with a text that the Jewish Targums (interpretations) could not interpret. Isaiah 53 became a puzzle, a riddle, about either the nation, itself, or Isaiah or one of the prophets. Who was this "*Suffering Servant*"? Isaiah began his description of a vicarious suffering that some would argue can have no solution, since it followed no ancient pattern of thought. No wonder the prophet began: *Who has believed our message and to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed?*<sup>39</sup>

Consider the scope of the calling of the *Suffering Servant*:<sup>40</sup>

- He was commissioned with delivering "*a covenant people in bondage*" (Isaiah 42:18ff),
- He was sent also for the Gentiles (Isaiah 42:1ff).
- Cyrus released Ezra, Nehemiah, and company to return to Jerusalem but "*it was the servant who would bring that remnant back to God.*" (Isaiah 49:1ff).
- He is given a new name: Israel, a prince with God. (Isaiah 49:3). "*...the nation as a whole had forgone any right to the use of that exalted title.*" A new Israel begins with him. (Isaiah 49:14ff), "*...the faithful Israelites were urged to adopt his piety and dedication as their model for living.*"
- His salvation is universal (Isaiah 51:1ff), through his substitutionary death (Isaiah 53:1ff).
- "*On the basis,*" Harrison concludes, "*of this accomplishment Israel would be called to enter the new*

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39. Isaiah 53:1

40. The following bullet points contain a single quote from R. K. Harrison, "Introduction to the Old Testament, Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2004) p. 484

*covenant (Isaiah 54:1ff), and the salvation wrought by the work of the servant would be made available to all those in need (Isaiah 55:1ff)."*

It is difficult to see, in an open-mindedness, how Isaiah 53 especially verses 10-12 could have been referencing anyone other than Jesus, for a few reasons:

- No nation, person or persons metaphorically or literally is described in this chapter. He is the suffering servant who sustained tortuous mistreatment perpetrated by "our" hands, Isaiah's fellow-countrymen, and he became according to this account, a vicarious sacrifice offered to God for their "our" sins.
- The New Testament narrative assumes it is obvious to us about whom Isaiah is prophesying .
  - Isaiah 53:7 *"He was oppressed [treated harshly] ... [while he willingly submitted himself], ... **he did not open his mouth**; he was led like a lamb to the slaughter, ... he did not open his mouth."* Compared with
  - Mark 14:61 *"But Jesus remained silent and gave no answer. "*
  - Isaiah 53:4 *Surely he hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows: yet we did esteem him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted.*
  - Matthew 8:17 *This was to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet Isaiah: "He took up our infirmities and bore our diseases."*
  - Acts 8:33 *In his humiliation he was deprived of justice. Who can speak of his descendants? For his life was taken from the earth.*
  - Isaiah 53:8 in the Septuagint. *In his humiliation his judgment was taken away: who shall declare his generation? for his life is taken away from the earth:*

*because of the iniquities of my people he was led to death.*

- The reference to a sacrificial and vicarious death of an individual is uniquely Isaiahic linking this narrative to Paul's understanding and to the Gospel narrative.
  - Isaiah 53:10 *the LORD makes his life an offering for sin*
  - I Corinthians 5:7 *For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed.*
  - John 1:36 *When he saw Jesus passing by, he said, "Look, the Lamb of God!"*
- The earliest extant manuscripts of Isaiah 53 come from Qumran, the Dead Sea scrolls, and from the Greek translation of the Old Testament, the Septuagint, dated over one hundred years *before* Jesus which shows that *this could not have been a christian emendation* or redaction. Although the Ben-Ashur Hebrew Old Testament dates back only to 800 years *after* Jesus and in itself could not verify the prophetic tenor of this amazingly detailed account of God's suffering servant, the Septuagint which follows the Isaiah manuscript from Qumran supports its authenticity.

Isaiah 53 is an incredible prophecy—by his own admission in verse 1—which cannot be discarded as uninspired or not revelatory without at the same time a total disregard for the honest and reasonable explanation a simple reading of the text offers. It is prophetic insight into a divine plan to offer Jesus for the sins of mankind. It is a prophecy that could not be explained until we were able to look back in history and see for ourselves that it happened as Isaiah described.<sup>41</sup> One is disingenuous who expresses a disinterest in this chapter because it fails to support a

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41. Luke 9:44-45 "Listen carefully to what I am about to tell you: The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men." But they did not understand what this meant. It was hidden from them, so that they did not grasp it, and they were afraid to ask him about it.

hoped for corroboration with evolutionary or new-orthodox theory. To conclude, therefore, that Isaiah's "Suffering Servant" cannot be Jesus, or that chapter 53 does not specifically reference his vicarious and sacrificial death, is to shut the mind's eye to an obvious truth that like a blinding sun outshines the logic of other interpretations.

Verses 10 thru 12 provide some of these remarkable details. Verse 10 says "*The Lord was pleased [inclined, willing] to beat him painfully.*" We must not misrepresent the heart of God in this matter. The language here—to me—does not depict a divine rage or wrath but clearly a divine resolve.

- "Pleased" The language of this prophecy suggests God was as motivated, as passionate, as He was on creation day; only here. there is a solemn tone to His thoughts.
- "Pleased" It is safe to say what Isaiah is *not* saying. God took no sadistic pleasure in Jesus's pain.
- "Pleased" Could this speak of desire or the acceptance of good counsel? If I may: Is God's heart or head driving this event? The Greek translation reads "The Lord also is pleased to purge him."<sup>42</sup> If this is a disciplinary action to purify the soul, it is our souls being purged of sin vicariously. But the question is: is this God's *desire* (how He feels at the moment) or just the wisdom of His counsel that Isaiah is reporting? In the Greek language (and therefore the Septuagint) the nuance for the word "willed"<sup>43</sup> or "counseled" is sadly lost. Both meanings are interchangeable with this word "pleased" "*The Septuagint belongs to the age when the distinctions were being obliterated.*"<sup>44</sup> And maybe that's a good thing lest we think that somehow in His heart God repented of actions His wisdom required for our salvation. And

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42. κύριος βούλεται καθαρῖσαι αὐτὸν

43. θελεῖν

44. G Johannes Botterweck & Helmer Ringgren. Transl: John T. Willis Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1974. Vol I. P 629f

what was Jesus thinking or feeling according to Hebrews 12:2 "*For the joy set before him he endured the cross*" The word "for" can also mean "instead of" (suggesting Jesus set aside any thought of more joyous or happier times with His Father to endure this moment) though no English translation supports this rendering. The translators all seem to support the idea that Jesus knew that *this* was the path to ultimate joy! The Message Bible freely interprets, "*Because he never lost sight of where he was headed—that exhilarating finish in and with God—he could put up with anything along the way: Cross, shame, whatever.*" Does this also describe God when Isaiah cried, "It pleased God to beat him"?

- "Pleased" But was the Father only accepting of his pain out of the necessity to provide salvation for us [the *counsel* of His will and wisdom]? Did He look beyond the moment deeming this pain necessary to achieve a greater joy of or pleasure in our pending reconciliation with Him? God was not just adhering to sound counsel, staying with the plan drawn up before the foundation of the earth was laid. God shows no reluctance in this prophetic utterance to go through with it. We might rightly say that His love for us drove His interest and intent.
- "Pleased" Whatever else we conclude: the Divine will played a vital role, actively participating, in His plan for His Suffering Servant. "*For God so loved the world....*" John 3:16
- An interesting note: What was Jesus asking in the garden when He used this word? Luke 22:42 "*Father, if you are **willing**, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done.*" Was He asking, "*Can we not revisit the plan for the Salvation of souls? How necessary is this plan? If you want, your wisdom could find another way!?*" There was no other way! How do we know? God was *pleased* with this one. "*Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved.*" Acts 4:12

Verses 6 reads: *"We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to our own way; and the LORD has **laid** on him [caused him to suffer because of] the iniquity of us all."* God's servant *"met up with"* punishment. Is this the Suffering Servant becoming God's sacrifice for our sins? Did God punish him for our sinfulness? *"Israel ... has sinned, and the Servant of God is punished."<sup>45</sup> ... "*

The use of the word "laid" which means *"to meet up with or fall upon"* in the context of the guilt offering in verse 10 best translates: *"The Lord caused our guilt [our punishment] to fall on him."*

The biblical scholar and commentator, J. P. Lange, with dogmatic emphasis maintains that there can be no other meaning! *"Now if the object of this ...was not to make the.. punishment strike the Servant ...with the same ... necessity with which it would have struck the actual guilty ...and these guilty ones ...might be free from punishment,"* he affirms [if this is not the meaning], *"then, I see not how the prophet would say "Jehovah laid on him the iniquity of us all."<sup>46</sup> As Lange translated the Hebrew thought: The Lord *"gave up his servant that he might take on himself the **guilt and punishment** of the sinful people."<sup>47</sup>**

Verse 8 adds: God smiting the Servant was to death. For the people's sins. *"for he was cut off out of the land of the living; for the transgression of my people was he stricken."* Which translated from the Greek reads: *"...because of the iniquities of my people he was led to death."<sup>48</sup>*

Verse 10 makes this undeniably clear: *".... the LORD makes his life an **offering** for sin"* The offering spoken of here is the **guilt** offering.

45. Lange, John Peter. Commentary of the Holy Scriptures Vol 6, page 576

46. *ibid.*

47. *ibid.* page 581

48. ἀπὸ τῶν ἀνομιῶν τοῦ λαοῦ μου ἤχθη εἰς θάνατον

*“Certainly the prophet does not speak here according to the rules of the theory of sacrifices,”*<sup>49</sup> Lange admits. We see this prophecy now in the light of John 3:16 and 2 Corinthians 5:21 *“God made him who had no sin to be sin [the NEW INT. adds “offering”] for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.”* But what did Isaiah make of his own prophecy? This is atonement theory in its purest form.

Yet, Atonement theory is not the purpose for this essay. The purpose for writing this short review of Isaiah’s Suffering Servant is to underscore the significance of a prophecy that is unmistakably the story of Calvary and this confirms its inspiration as a revelation from God. If the Bible were merely the literary thoughts of various writers in prose and poetic form, this chapter would not exist. But it does, and it is the centerpiece, the keystone, the cornerstone, the lodestar, the theme of all christian theology!

The accent on this amazing account is Isaiah’s choice of words for an offering. He speaks in verse 10 of the guilt offering. This begs the question, why not the burnt offering or sin offering or peace offering? All these are visible in Christ but Isaiah wanted us to know that the guilt offering should be particularly noted. Christ was our guilt offering. Many scholars equate this to the sin offering because verse 10 in the Septuagint says *“an offering for sin.”*<sup>50</sup> And in verse 12 clearly, *“he bore the sin of many.”* Also one clear meaning of the word “to be guilty” is “to be culpable” which does not presuppose any penitence or sense of guilt. But for 3 additional reasons the “guilt” offering correctly describes what Jesus provided on Calvary. For this we look more closely at the guilt offering itself in Leviticus:

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49. Lange, John Peter. *Commentary of the Holy Scriptures Vol 6*, page 581

50. δῶτε περὶ ἁμαρτίας. The NEW INT. reads his life an offering for sin

## Restitution

The guilt offering was a means by which restitution could be made for damaged and broken relationships. Did this mean: *I owed a debt I could not pay, He paid a debt He did not owe?* Leviticus 5:16 introduces the guilt offering as a restitution for injury or destruction of property, breaking Torah law, or ..sin against God.<sup>51</sup> Forgiveness was conditioned on this offering. Jesus restored our relationship to God and God to us. And he gave forgiveness a divine power to erase the pain of sin as well as the sin, itself.

## A Lamb

Poor people could substitute less expensive offerings for the burnt and sin offerings but not the guilt offering. It had to be a lamb.<sup>52</sup> Verse 7: *“he was led like a lamb to the slaughter,”* It was important to specify here that a lamb would be sacrificed. Paul links this account with Calvary: *“For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed.”*<sup>53</sup>

## No Festivals

The guilt offering was never offered as part of one of the great Festivals, unlike the burnt offering and the sin offering.<sup>54</sup> The guilt offering was not a celebration of Calvary. It was a personal encounter for the sinner with Calvary. If the Law could describe

51. They must make restitution for what they have failed to do in regard to the holy things, pay an additional penalty of a fifth of its value and give it all to the priest. The priest will make atonement for them with the ram as a guilt offering, and they will be forgiven.

52. Lev 14:21-22 "If, however, they are poor and cannot afford these, they must take one male lamb as a guilt offering to be waved to make atonement for them, together with a tenth of an ephah of the finest flour mixed with olive oil for a grain offering, a log of oil, and two doves or two young pigeons, such as they can afford, one for a sin offering and the other for a burnt offering.

53. I Corinthians 5:7

54. See Numbers 28. The Sabbath Offerings, The Monthly Offerings, Passover, The Festival of Weeks.

the moment of salvation, a moment at the mourner's bench where the sinner experiences the Savior's gentle healing touch upon the soul, where God, in the person of the Savior, pours in the oil and wine and heals the soul, restores our joy, forgives our sin, and quickens us to newness of life, it is here in the guilt offering.

The dead sea scroll of Isaiah which dates no later than 100 BCE. (Before Christ) differs from the Masoretic Text (Our Hebrew Bible) in only one verse in Isaiah 53 (verse 11)<sup>55</sup> by adding the word "light": "*After the travail of his soul he will see **light**, and he will be satisfied.*" The Hebrew translates: "*He shall see of the travail of his soul, He shall be satisfied...*" Should this be of interest to us?

The Septuagint follows the Dead Sea Scroll of Isaiah: "*the Lord also is pleased to take away from the travail of his soul, to shew him **light**,...*" If you read the NEW INT., it will follow the Qumran text: "*After he has suffered, he will see the **light of life** and be satisfied*" Is not this the resurrection followed by Christ's high-priestly ministry at the Father's right hand (Hebrews 8)? All summed in one prophetic word: *light*?

The text speaks for itself for Christians! We believe that we see what Philip saw when he expounded the text to an Ethiopian eunuch. There is a natural flow of thought from chapter 53 as the fulfillment of the old covenant—as Hebrews 8 is of the new.<sup>56</sup> The best interpretation of Isaiah's use of language and nuance in chapter 53 written centuries *before* Christ, suggests to us—if not outright expounds it—that the divine plan for saving the souls of men, detailed in the New Testament by the apostles, was prophesied here as an amazing impassioned revealing of that divine genius that, through Calvary, brought it to pass.

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55. Isa 21:8 which unexplainably references a "lion" in the MT in the Qumran text reads without such a reference: "Then he who saw cried: "Upon a watchtower I stand, O Lord," [RSV]

56. See Hebrews 8 in the "Additional Scripture" section.

## A Victorious Conclusion

Now suddenly the prophecy goes from a sacrificial death to a victorious outcome.

Verse 12, *"Therefore I will give him a portion among the great, and he will divide the spoils with the strong."* This seems to envision the now victorious servant sharing in the victory with someone or ones unknown unless ...there is a different meaning.

Lange interprets: *"...not that others shall be sharers of his victory, but that he shall be as gloriously successful in his enterprise as other victors were in theirs."*<sup>57</sup> He shall be numbered among the victors or as Paul explained to the Colossians: *"And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them in him"*<sup>58</sup> The writer to the Hebrews paraphrases, *"so Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many; and he will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him."*<sup>59</sup>

But what does the last statement of Isaiah 53 mean? What did Isaiah write? The NEW INT. translated the Hebrew *"He made intercession for the transgressors"* which strongly suggests Hebrews 8. The Septuagint translated *"He was delivered because of their iniquities.."* This translation merely repeats the vicarious refrain of God's servant suffering for the sins of others. But the idea of Christ's intercession for sinners extends beyond Calvary into His High Priestly ministry after His resurrection as we read in Hebrews 8.

Verse 10, 11 and 12 repeat the refrain (*an offering for sin, ... he will bear their iniquities...he bore the sin of many,...*) which interprets Isaiah's repeated references to pain, suffering, punishment, and guilt. How could this refer to anyone other than Christ!

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57. Lange, John Peter. Commentary of the Holy Scriptures Vol 6, page 582.

58. Colossians 2:15

59. Hebrews 9:28

## Philip and the Ethiopian

Philip didn't have John 3:16 or Acts 16:4 or Romans 3:23-25 to discuss God's salvation through Christ ...but he had Isaiah. And he had a translation not any original Hebrew. Ethiopians were fluent in Greek not Hebrew and they had the Septuagint version, the Greek translation, of Isaiah's "Gospel." The Ethiopian eunuch, whom Philip met in the wilderness, was reading it which was Philip's opportunity to explain Calvary. Should we need any more to convince us of the providential hand of God, the irrefutable evidence, that confirms and validates a christian faith in Isaiah's work as the Word of God!?

And if it is God's Word, we have been given one more miracle of the visible reality of an immanent God of Love. Here in this simple account of 2 men in a chariot discussing the message of the Suffering Servant are seen the two biggest miracles: Salvation has come to this Eunuch who was a Gentile, not a Jew, and the miracle of that book that he held in his hand over half a millenium after the prophet first transcribed it.

If there is an explanation for: Why Calvary? The answer will be here. Jesus's death for sinful man was made intelligent and legitimized to the Judean mindset whose entire religious ritual pointed to this moment. Occidental thinking employed a line of reasoning that veered away from the spiritual realm to the natural leaving modern thought without a clarification or justification. So, our theories, as to why an atonement, splintered Christendom into countless denominational theologies.

Did the guilt offering represent a debt payment to God. A retribution, vengeance for a wrong done, for the crime of idolatry or unfaithfulness, or perhaps, the ultimate indulgence in which all punishment was experienced by a vicarious act of God in Christ?

Did forgiveness require punishment? Was the guilt offering for unintended sin or sin in ignorance? Jesus cried from the cross. *"Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing."*<sup>60</sup>

Was God angry with mankind? Or man's sin? Was His unrequited love for His creation jealous? But how do we interpret the apostolic contention that He is love? What sent Jesus to the Cross?

The story of Calvary in theological terms is beautifully explained—at least to the Jewish mind—in the letter to the Hebrews, chapter 8. Even the tabernacle in the Wilderness, the pattern of which will be thoroughly explained in heaven, somehow had something to do with the risen Savior as our high priest. The Torah will no longer need to be spelled out. We'll all have it memorized—more than that—its meaning in terms of God's holiness will be a part of us, written on the heart and life. The writer correctly calls it a new covenant, not a testament. This is not just an inheritance through Christ but a new relationship. And here is the part that references our Lord's sacrificial death as the guilt offering; Hebrews 8:12 *"For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more."*

And the Old Covenant, the sacrificial system of animals and other offerings? It is now obsolete and although it is still cherished as a lesson in types and still cherished because the ritual still speaks to us, it will [verse 13] *"soon disappear."*

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60. Luke 23:34. This utterance of our Lord on the cross is not clearly historical. Some earlier manuscripts do not have it, although it may have been expunged after the fall of Jerusalem in 70AD as proof God had not forgiven Jewry for the Savior's death. This logion, however, is "self-evident" according to Bruce Metzger in "A Textual Commentary of the Greek New Testament" and was given a 'C' rating out of A - D.

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