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George Paul Wood

MANAGING EDITOR
Rick Knoth

ASSOCIATE EDITOR
Richard Schoonover

DESIGN DIRECTOR / ADVERTISING COORDINATOR
Steve Lopez

OFFICE COORDINATOR
Connie Cross

PREPARED UNDER THE DIRECTION OF THE EXECUTIVE PRESBYTERY
George O. Wood (general superintendent), C. Dan Betzer, James T. Bradford,
Warren B. Bultock, Douglas E. Clay, L. Alton Garrison, J. Don George,
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Seven Leadership Secrets for Ministry

Mention the words leader or leadership and images of individuals like Churchill and Eisenhower quickly emerge. Many people erroneously believe that leaders are born and others are destined to admire and follow them. The truth is, anyone can learn to lead. Here are seven leadership “secrets.”

1) Leaders take charge. In several places the Bible reminds us to be leadership oriented. One example is in Joshua 1:9, “Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go.”

2) Leaders are respectful. The Bible clearly reminds people who lead in churches to do so with justice and fairness for all. “Blessed are those who act justly, who always do what is right” (Psalm 106:3).

3) Leaders accept responsibility. “Judge me, O Lord, according to my ... integrity,” the Psalmist pleads.

4) Leaders motivate. “As iron sharpens iron, so one person sharpens another” (Proverbs 27:17).

5) Leaders exhibit enthusiasm. The Bible promotes an enthusiastic, passionate approach to life with the words, “all your heart.” Deuteronomy 6:5 says, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart.” Psalm 119:2 reads, “Blessed are those who keep his statutes and seek him with all their heart.”

6) Leaders persist. Leaders are not easily discouraged. Even when they are, leaders continue on. The apostle Paul wrote: “Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up” (Galatians 6:9).

7) Leaders face problems. Leaders know they cannot avoid problems. The apostle James noted: “Blessed is the one who perseveres under trial because, having stood the test, that person will receive the crown of life” (James 1:12).

VICTOR PARACHIN, Tulsa, Oklahoma

Facebook® Congregation

Want more teens and young adults under your pastoral influence? Social media is the key. A 2010 survey by Cisco Corporation revealed that Facebook updates interrupted 3 to 5 times per hour. This survey further revealed that 40 percent of these students would opt for a lower paying job if they could access social networking on the job.

If you are not on Facebook, sign up and login; make lots of friends and start ministering. A few posts a day with a Scripture verse, a positive thought, or a one-line preview of Sunday’s message will go a long way toward giving you access to more of those who are most likely missing from your Sunday attendance.

RANDY WALLS, D.Min., director of continuing education, Assemblies of God Theological Seminary, Springfield, Missouri

NOTE
Boundary problems are a main reason many today experience tremendous stress, anger, and fatigue. In the early years of ministry I felt guilty if I set boundaries. I thought I had to say yes to what people felt they needed from me, and I suffered burnout. But knowing our limitations and establishing Spirit-led boundaries gives us a greater capacity to offer love and service to others. One of the things that helped me was to look prayerfully at the humanity of Jesus in Scripture.

• Jesus needed the basic needs: food, sleep, relaxation, the support of others, and solitude.
• He daily focused on God’s wisdom and guidance to know what to do and not to do; letting the Holy Spirit give instruction about when and how to say no.
• Jesus said no to inappropriate, demanding behavior, manipulation, and entitlements.
• Jesus spoke the truth in love to those in bondage and those who were misguided.
• He taught boundary setting through His teachings on personal prayer time, obeying God, priorities, and pleasing God, not people.
• Jesus often did not do what others wanted; many times asking those He helped to do their part.

A boundary for our lives does not mean we build walls and live self-centered lives in isolation. It simply means we understand that without healthy boundaries, we will never successfully reflect the life of Jesus and accomplish what God has called us to do.

PATTI ANN THOMPSON, Kansas City, Missouri

COACHING

The Caring Side of Coaching

Much of pastoral life involves teaching and preaching, but pastors can get burned out on assuming that simply telling the gospel will automatically lead to spiritual maturity. While pastors may assume that counseling is the only alternative when spiritual maturity is not present and poor decisions create bad life situations, there are other skills pastors can use to address these conflicted circumstances. While counseling focuses on internal issues and includes discussion of past occurrences, coaching’s task is to facilitate discovery and action. A counselor may listen to diagnosis, but a coach is a thought partner who listens to help a person have a moment of discovery.

The pastoral question for coaching toward spiritual maturity is, “Where would God have you be in 1 year, 2 years, 5 years?” The task of the pastor who coaches toward spiritual maturity is helping that person discover an appropriate pathway to maturity. For example, with water, the most efficient route between two points is not necessarily a straight line, but rather the path of least resistance. We may have answers for the person we are attempting to help, but we need to work with that person to discover the path.

The caring side of coaching is not merely applying technique to provide solutions for tough situations. Eugene Peterson says, the primary language for the cure of souls is conversation and prayer. Being pastoral (coaching toward spiritual maturity) means learning to use language in which you enhance personal uniqueness and recognize and respect individual sanctity. It is a language that is unhurried, unforced, and unexcited. It is a leisurely language of a friend who is also the language of prayer.

BYRON KLAUS, D.Min., president, Assemblies of God Theological Seminary, Springfield, Missouri
Between 2005 and 2011, the proportion of young adults living in their parents’ home increased, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. The percentage of men age 25 to 34 living in their parents’ home rose from 14 percent in 2005 to 19 percent in 2011, and from 8 percent to 10 percent over the period for women. These statistics come from “America’s Families and Living Arrangements: 2011,” a series of tables from the 2011 Current Population Survey providing a look at the socioeconomic characteristics of families and households at the national level.

“The increase in 25- to-34-year-olds living in their parents’ home began before the recent recession, and has continued beyond it,” said the author, Rose Kreider, a family demographer with the Fertility and Family Statistics Branch.

Similarly, 59 percent of men age 18 to 24 and 50 percent of women that age resided in their parents’ home in 2011, up from 53 percent and 46 percent, respectively, in 2005. It should be noted that college students living in a dormitory are counted in their parents’ home, so they are included in these percentages.

Cohabitation

In 2011, there were approximately 7.6 million unmarried couples living together. In 2011, married couples with children made up 20 percent of all households, half what they were in 1970 (40 percent). In 2011, 23 percent of married-couple-family groups with children younger than age 15 had a stay-at-home mother. This proportion has decreased during the recession. In 2007, before the recession began, the corresponding figure was 24 percent.

NOTES
1. Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, 1983 to 2011 Annual Social and Economic Supplements. In CPS data, unmarried college students living in dormitories are counted as living in their parent(s)’ home.
**Microgiving**

In a difficult economy when people are losing jobs and houses, sometimes the last thing they want to think about is giving money. But many are reacting to the economic crisis not only by avoiding shopping, but also by rediscovering compassion for those who are suffering both locally and globally. While Americans are purposefully downsizing their purchases and homes, they also seem to be more interested than ever before in small-scale donations earmarked for a specific cause.

Offering hope to others can come in the form of microdonations. For example, the catastrophic earthquake in Haiti prompted an avalanche of $5 and $10 text message donations, adding up to more than $22 million in emergency aid. Another form of microgiving is financing promising new businesses in small, easy steps through providing small loans through sites, such as Kiva.org, which provide “loans that change lives.” Kiva, which means “unity” or “agreement” in Swahili, is the world’s first microlending platform, putting small-scale entrepreneurs across the globe together with individuals willing to lend them money for their businesses. Although the minimum amount a lender can allocate is just $25, to date the nonprofit organization has loaned over $120 million to 312,000 entrepreneurs in 52 countries.

Kiva works like this: Field offices locate entrepreneurs and post their photo and story to the website. Potential lenders browse the site and choose someone to lend to. Kiva makes sure the funds get to the right place and then collects repayment. Lenders reap satisfaction by funding entrepreneurial dreams and are discovering that giving, in small steps, comes easier.

SUSY FLORY, Castro Valley, California

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**ACT ONE: Training Missionaries to Hollywood**

Have you seen anything objectionable come out of Hollywood recently? It is one thing to complain about the entertainment industry. But what if you could do something about it?

The Act One Program began in 2000 when several Christians working in Hollywood, concerned about what was coming out of Hollywood, wanted to do something. Their idea: Recruit and train Christians to work in Hollywood as writers, directors, and producers. The goal: not only to produce moral TV shows and movies, but to work among those in Hollywood to be witnesses for Christ.

What Hollywood produces is seen around the world. Jim and Karen Covell, authors of How to Talk About Jesus Without Freaking Out (Multnomah, 2000), call Hollywood “the world’s most influential mission field.”

I was one of 20 students accepted to attend Act One’s 2-week Summer 2010 writing class in Hollywood. Faculty included Cheryl McKay (The Ultimate Gift), Andrea Nasfell (Christmas with a Capital C and What If . . .), and Melissa Glenn and Jessica Reider (Leverage, Hawaii Five-O). Not only did they encourage us to write God-honoring projects, but the bigger point was to influence others for Christ along the way.

Visit www.ActOneProgram.com. View their “Accomplishments” and “Alumni” pages and recommended reading lists. (Some contain adult language and content.)

Pray for Hollywood — for those who do not know Christ and for Christians who are working there as missionaries to the most influential mission field on earth.

DIANNE E. BUTTS, Pueblo, Colorado

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**Wealth and Wisdom**

Did you know Proverbs talks about wealth in over half its chapters? This practical manual for biblical living describes how to obtain wealth, how not to squander it, its benefits and dangers, and how to use it to advance Kingdom goals.

Proverbs 3:9,10 — the first verses in the book regarding wealth — says, “Honor the Lord with your wealth, with the firstfruits of all your crops; then your barns will be filled to overflowing, and your vats will brim over with new wine.”

In an agricultural society, readers quickly understood the concept of firstfruits, crops, barns, and vats. In our technological and manufacturing culture, we need a little translation. The author tells us to honor the Lord with our wealth — to give Him the first part of our income. For farmers, that would be the firstfruits they picked from the field. For us, it’s the first part of our income.

The idea is simple — if you do not give God the first part of your wealth, you will not give Him the leftovers. In fact, there probably will not be leftovers.

Giving God the first part of your wealth — the first 10 percent of your income — honors Him. The promise is clear — give God the first portion, and He will take care of the rest. Your vats and barns will be full. In other words, He will honor you when you honor Him. Let us honor Him today with our giving, expecting that He will honor us in return.

GLENN REYNOLDS, Hampton, Virginia
Holy Family Vacation!

During the summer, thoughts and plans turn to family vacation. Wouldn’t it be great if families could take a vacation that honored God and taught the kids (and parents) more about God? Check out these possibilities for your next family vacation:

The Holy Land Experience in Orlando, Florida, features live dramas and movies held daily. Exhibits include the Great Temple, Wilderness Tabernacle, a Jerusalem Street Market, Shofar Auditorium, Dead Sea Qumran Caves, prayer gardens, Calvary’s Garden Tomb, special exhibits for children, plus much more. Not traveling in summer? Seasonal exhibits also run such as “The Great American Christmas,” “Bethlehem’s Miracle Night,” and “The True Story of St. Nicholas” during the Christmas season. Visit http://www.holylandexperience.com for more information.

Creation Museum in Petersburg, Kentucky, includes a petting zoo and botanical gardens. Other exhibits offer a Walk through Biblical History, Dinosaur Den, Natural Selection is Not Evolution, and Noah’s Ark Construction Site. Theater presentations include the Stargazer’s Planetarium, Dragon Theater, and Last Adam Theater. The special effects theater offers Men in White. Enjoy a live Nativity if you are traveling at Christmas time. Visit http://creationmuseum.org/ for more information.

Alpha Omega Institute in Grand Junction, Colorado, holds annual Creation Vacations and Discover Creation Tours to sites including Colorado National Monument and a Dinosaur Museum. Visit http://www.discovercreation.org/ for more information.

Ark Encounter in Williamsburg, Kentucky, is a Noah’s Ark theme park scheduled to open spring 2014. It will include a Walled City, the Tower of Babel, and a first-century Middle Eastern village. Plans also include daily live mammal and bird shows, restaurants, and shopping. Visit http://arkencounter.com for more information.

DIANNE E. BUTTS, Pueblo, Colorado

THE HIM BEHIND THE HYMN

A Song for Suffering Saints

On September 10, 2001, Matt Redman, British songwriter and worship leader, and his wife were packing their bags for a 3-month sabbatical in the United States. They were to fly out 2 days later. But the terrorist attacks of 9/11 delayed their long-anticipated trip.

When international flights to the U.S. resumed the next week, Redman and his wife found themselves enveloped in the corporate grief of a nation reeling from the deaths of nearly 3,000 Americans. Attending spontaneous prayer rallies and worship services, they were impressed with how many Americans sought spiritual refuge in tragedy. The messages of hope and reminders of God’s sovereignty from countless pulpits likewise encouraged them. But there seemed to be something missing.

Redman, who is best known for his chorus The Heart of Worship, began to wonder about the reservoir of praise songs for such times of heartache. He conjectured that evangelical Christianity lacked appropriate lyrics for times of struggle and tragedy.

In the aftermath of 9/11, Redman celebrated the believer’s privilege to trust God in the midst of joy and sorrow. He wrote Blessed Be Your Name. It is an honest expression of faith based on the words of Job, “The Lord gives and the Lord takes away. Blessed be the name of the Lord.”

“Blessed be Your name on the road marked with suffering, though there’s pain in the offering, blessed be Your name. You give and take away.”

GREG ASIMAKOPOULOS, Mercer Island, Washington

ON PREACHING

What Gospel Will You Preach?

Decades of cultural messages that not only affirm the individuality of each person, but have affirmed the radical uniqueness of every person regardless of ethnicity, beliefs, or social background has shaped merging adults (ages 18–30). The years in Mr. Rogers’s neighborhood and playing on Sesame Street have created a “self in a castle.” Emerging adults are not only in tune with the self, but very protective of the self.

One of the significant results of this gospel of self-esteem is this: Preaching that attempts to stimulate a cry for salvation out of a sense of guilt is decreasing in effectiveness. In his book Atonement for a Sinless Society, Alan Mann offers insight into how preaching may continue its effectiveness. He observes that our culture does not provide people with a profound grasp of what is wrong and right apart from the conviction that assaulting the self is clearly wrong. Mann suggests that people are increasingly premal and do not feel guilt so much as shame for not achieving what they are designed to accomplish.

Theologian Scot McKnight sees the clear preaching of Jesus and His kingdom vision as central to an effective strategy of gospel preaching. The Gospel of Luke is effective as a focus on the expectations of various people as to what they longed for in a Messiah. The subsequent Kingdom declarations of Jesus are the place to start (Luke 1–4). But Jesus knew the Cross was the only way to enter that Kingdom (Luke 9). Jesus emerged on the other side of Easter, and with the coming of the Spirit, empowered an apostolic church community as new creation (Luke 23,24; Acts 1,2). Preaching that challenges the hearer to join this remarkable story of redemption conveys the power of the gospel.

BYRON KLAUS, D.Min., president, Assemblies of God Theological Seminary, Springfield, Missouri

NOTE:
Every Christian often repeats what appears to be the same problem. We make a serious mistake when we assume previous experiences always provide reliable guidance for current situations.

The Colorado River, as it rushes down the canyon, passes over 200 sets of rapids. Each set of rapids is different and requires a slightly different approach to assure safe passage. Many of the rapids are relatively minor, and the guide can read the current and make the necessary course adjustments as the raft floats along. Guides cannot approach larger rapids this way. In larger rapids, the currents are so strong they frequently alter the river's bottom. To the casual observer, the rapids may seem unchanging, but the experienced guide knows better than to trust his past experience in plotting a course for the current passage.

When approaching one of these major rapids, the experienced guide always beaches the raft and climbs to a high point from which he can “read the river.” To his expert eyes, the pattern of turbulence at the surface reveals the ever-changing locations of hidden hazards and allows him to direct the ones steering the boat to a successful passage.

The Holy Spirit is our Guide. The safest course of action for the Christian is to approach every troubling situation as if it were a major rapid that our Guide has already “read.” If we will take the time to ask and listen, He will point out the safe route for us to follow through every turbulent situation. He recognizes and reveals the hidden circumstances for which our previous experience has left us unprepared.

JACK AIKEN, Eagle River, Alaska

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**Beautiful Outlaw**

John Eldridge is probably best known for his book *Wild at Heart*. So with the word *outlaw* highlighted in the title of his latest offering, we might assume this book would be in a similar vein. But this book, for men and women of all ages, is all about Jesus.

Usually we would not describe a nonfiction work as a “page-turner,” but that is what this book is — hard to put down because of the skillful and engaging writing. Eldridge highlights the humanity of Jesus and offers a fresh and entertaining look at the Savior. Obviously, many others feel the same because at this writing, after 196 reviews on Amazon, the average rating is five stars. Here is what one reviewer said: “I read the book and want to know THIS Jesus! THIS Jesus that I have missed for a huge portion of my life!”

You will enjoy *Beautiful Outlaw* (FaithWords) for personal reading and for sermon illustrations. But it would also be a powerful addition for an adult Sunday School class or small group.

DAVE VEERMAN, Naperville, Illinois

---

**Top 10 Signs Your Staff Is Stressed Out**

1. Staff too busy to write number 6.
2. The number of the local mental health hospital is on the office phone’s “speed dial.”
4. Rather than Bill Gaither Homecoming music coming out of senior adult pastor’s office, it is now “Pillar.”
5. Youth pastor is swimming in the baptistry — more than usual.
6. The communications pastor is writing his *Enrichment* column on stress.

JAMES N. WATKINS, Upland, Indiana
**REPORT SHOWS CHANGING PATTERNS IN WORSHIP**

Changes in worship style in U.S. Assemblies of God churches in recent years are evident in the shifting types of instruments that dominate services.

According to the recently released 2010 Faith Communities Today survey of AG congregations, nearly seven in 10 never use an organ during worship and only 15 percent always do. In the 2000 FACT survey, almost 73 percent of AG churches always used an organ or piano. The new survey did not include a piano question.

However, 64 percent of AG churches now report that drums or other percussion instruments are always used during worship, up from 55 percent a decade earlier. Only 13 percent of churches in the AG report never using drums or other percussion instruments (compared to 18 percent in 2000). Likewise, electric guitar or bass are played every week in 69 percent of AG services, up from 59 percent 10 years before. One in 10 AG churches never use electric guitar or bass, compared to 13 percent previously.

Around 59 percent of churches reported that worship style had changed little or not at all in the past 5 years, signifying that struggles may be winding down from a tumultuous time in the 1990s. In 2000, just 36 percent of AG churches said there had been no or a minor switch in worship styles within the previous 5 years. In addition, in 2010 only 11 percent of churches noted that worship services had changed a lot in the past 5 years — much lower than the 36 percent who said so in 2000.

The 2010 report shows that more than 15.5 percent of churches had a conflict over worship that resulted in attendees leaving, members withholding funds, or staff members being dismissed or resigning. The 2000 survey said 17 percent of churches had experienced very or moderately serious disagreements over how worship was conducted.

The FACT report shows that 52 percent of AG churches spend “quite a bit” or “a great deal” of time planning and leading worship. About 57 percent of AG congregations now agree that worship is innovative, 83 percent consider it thought-provoking, 88 percent call it inspirational, and 89 percent believe it is joyful. Choir is always an element of worship in 15 percent of AG churches, but never in 52 percent of congregations.

According to current figures compiled by Statistics Department Supervisor Sherri L. Doty, 2,400 of the 9,240 AG churches with a music ministry reported having a paid worship director.

The AG is not alone in the surge to more contemporary worship. According to the 2010 FACT report, almost half of all Protestant churches now use electric guitars or drums in worship, compared to slightly more than one-third a decade earlier.

**Ethnic Minority Churches Continue to Gain**

Although predominantly white congregations still comprise slightly more than two-thirds (67.9 percent) of all U.S. Assemblies of God congregations, growth in the AG during this century has resulted largely from various minority ethnic groups.

Figures compiled by Statistics Department Supervisor Sherri L. Doty shows that the Assemblies of God are racially and culturally diverse.

According to the recently released 2010 FACT report, almost half of all Protestant churches now use electric guitars or drums in worship, compared to slightly more than one-third a decade earlier.

Predominantly Black congregations rose to 335 from 213 (or 2.7 percent of the Fellowship). Native American congregations grew to 187 from 178 (1.5 percent of entire body).

Black churches have an average attendance at 166, followed by whites at 155. The average attendance is 135 in Hispanic churches, 97 in Asian and Pacific Islander congregations, and 52 in Native American churches.

Overall, statistics show that the largest subgroup attendance occurs among Belarusian churches, with 630 average attendees. Average attendance among other ethnic minority fellowships include Bulgarian (622), Ethiopian/Falasha (483), Russian (354), and Romanian (272).

According to the 2010 Faith Communities Today survey, ministry leaders at four out of five AG churches indicated they wanted the body they lead to be racially and culturally diverse.

Scott Temple, director of the Assemblies of God Office of Ethnic Relations, notes that overall ethnic minorities comprise 40 percent of the Fellowship’s attendees, compared to an overall minority population in the United States of 36 percent.

“We are at the head in this dramatic demographic shift,” Temple told *Enrichment*. “We thank God for that.” There are 2,254 language district churches in the Assemblies of God.
A recent study paints a bleak picture of the nation’s Christian landscape, indicating that Americans have grown significantly less spiritual in the past two decades, particularly in the Midwest and West.

Barna Research Group in Ventura, Calif., examined trends and found that average weekly church attendance in the Midwest dipped to 40 percent in 2011 compared to 55 percent in 1991. In the same period, the ratio of adults who are unchurched has increased to 36 percent from 24 percent. A total of 81 percent of Midwestern adults describe themselves as Christian, a drop from 88 percent.

In the West, where weekly church attendance has declined to 36 percent from 47 percent in the 20-year span, the proportion of the unchurched has shot up to 46 percent from 29 percent. Less than half of those living in the West — 49 percent — say that their religious faith is very important in their life, compared to 57 percent in 1991. Just 58 percent of West residents hold an orthodox view of Scripture, Barna found, in contrast to 71 percent earlier. Research showed that just more than one in four in the West (26 percent) believe the Bible is accurate, compared to nearly four out of 10 (39 percent) before.

While residents of the South still might be considered the most religious, there have been some noticeable declines there. Half of Southerners currently think Scripture is totally accurate, compared to 60 percent 20 years ago. Southerners who never attend a church service have risen to 31 percent, up from 20 percent. Sunday School attendance in the past couple of decades has dropped to 21 percent in the South, down 10 points.

Since the early 1990s there has been little change in the spiritual climate of the Northeast, long considered the least religious region of the nation. Still, the proportion of Northeasters who do not ever go to church has jumped to 41 percent from 26 percent over the period.

Nationwide, church attendance has dropped to 40 percent from 49 percent since 1991. Likewise, adult Sunday School participation has dipped to 15 percent of all Americans, down 8 percent. And those who believe the Bible is completely truthful has dropped to 21 percent in the South, down 10 points.

According to the research, 27 percent of Americans do not believe God has a plan for their lives. Among those earning $100,000 or more a year, the rate doubles to 54 percent. For the college educated, the proportion is a whopping 78 percent.

Liberals are more likely than conservatives to be cynical about American society, to think certain people are born lucky, and that it is useless to try to find life’s purpose. By contrast, conservatives are more optimistic about life and more confident that there is ultimate Truth. More than 84 percent of conservatives see an ultimate meaning to life compared to 72 percent of liberals.

Those who do not attend religious services regularly or read Scripture are more prone to be chronic worriers. The sad and depressed are less likely to attend worship services, pray, or read the Bible, the research shows.

While only 16 percent of conservatives believe that all religions are true, 46 percent of liberals do. In addition, 28 percent of conservatives and 48 percent of liberals claim that all religions worship the same God. Only 3 percent of conservatives do not believe in the afterlife; for liberals the figure jumps to 22 percent.

The Baylor study found that respondents’ mental health has a correlation with their view of God. Those who are convinced that God is impersonal, inconsistent, and at times unresponsive report more mental health issues; people who sense a strong, loving relationship with God report 31 percent fewer mental health issues.

Regular churchgoers are most likely to attribute religious significance to their work. Among people who go to church at least once a week, 51 percent say they view their work as a mission from God and 72 percent say they pursue excellence in their work because of faith, the Baylor/Gallup survey says.
LEADERSHIP LESSONS FOR CLERGY FROM U.S. PRESIDENTS

BY VICTOR M. PARACHIN

U.S. presidents have guided the nation to wartime victory, steered the country through a major depression, ended the institution of slavery, and unified the country after a civil war. Although not every president has been an outstanding leader, many have been. Their lives and presidencies offer lessons in leadership for clergy.

Web-only articles

WHO DO YOU SAY I AM?
A Dilemma in 21st-Century Christology

BY JOEL T. PERTULA

Who is Jesus? A “ticket to heaven” or “get-out-of-hell-free card?” Many in the world and church today do not have a biblical understanding of who Jesus is. Using Peter’s response to Jesus’ question, “Who do you say I am?” (Luke 9:20), Joel Pertula challenges readers to discover the true Christ is. Answering this question correctly puts an end to our narcissism and forces us to change our values and priorities.

Are You an Empowered, Empowering Leader?

BY SHANE M. SOKOLL

Empowerment is a popular word and concept in today’s business world, even the church. But what does it take to be an empowering leader? Before individuals can become empowering leaders, they must first be empowered. While there is a natural power that is available to all, the empowering leader must tap into the supernatural power of the Holy Spirit. Shane Sokoll challenges pastors to become that empowered leader.

Preachers, Prepositions, and Pronouns: An English Lesson From the Pew

BY KARA BETH HUDDLESTON

Are you setting your listeners’ teeth on edge when you speak? Bible college students often complain about English as a degree requirement. After all, they are called to preach the gospel. What does English have to do with that? Kara Beth Huddleston says, “Everything.” Huddleston, the wife of an English teacher, gives pointers on the correct usage for common mistakes speakers make. This article will help you improve your speech and endear you to the English teachers in your congregation.

Spiritual Peacebuilding

BY TERRY W. PETTY

Conflict is not the enemy of the church; poorly handled conflict is. Many churches teach on spiritual warfare, but do not teach on peacebuilding. Jesus promised peace to His followers. While this includes personal peace, this does flow over into corporate peace. Peace is more than the absence of conflict. Peace includes the process of resolving conflict to produce tranquility, safety, and harmony. Learn how your church can be a place of peace through biblical peacebuilding.
I learned this verse as a child, as did my wife. We teach it to our 3-year-old son. We understood its meaning when we were young, and so will he. Doing so does not require a graduate degree in theology, let alone a high school education, let alone literacy. It only requires the ability to understand the words, “I love you” as they come to us from God through Christ.

Behind these simple words are profound:

Gregory the Great once wrote, “Scripture is like a river again, broad and deep, shallow enough here for the lamb to go wading, but deep enough there for the elephant to swim.” What Gregory said of Scripture generally can be said of John 3:16 particularly. Few verses in Scripture state the gospel with such simplicity and profundity as it does: “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.”
truths, however. We can analyze John 3:16 in terms of the gospel’s ground, object, means, and end. The love of God is the ground of the gospel. The world is its object. (God is saving both planet and people, according to Romans 8:21, though only personal salvation is in sight in John 3:16.) The gift of His Son is the objective means of accomplishing the gospel, while belief in Him is the subjective means of appropriating it. And the end of the gospel is eternal life for those who believe. Or we can analyze John 3:16 in terms of doctrines it touches on: the existence and attributes of God; the Creator-creature relationship, Trinity, Incarnation, and Atonement; justification by faith; and eschatology, among others.

Whether we view it from the perspective of the lamb or the elephant, John 3:16 is a river of life.

In the early 21st century, a variety of challenges to this simple, yet profound, gospel present themselves. This issue of Enrichment seeks to address some of the prominent ones:

• atheism, which challenges the ground of the gospel.
• the Calvinist doctrine of limited atonement, which challenges its scope.
• distorted views of the atonement and the Muslim denial of Jesus’ divine Sonship, which challenge the objective means of accomplishing the gospel.
• religious pluralism, eternal security, and Buddhist merit, which challenge the subjective means of appropriating the gospel by downplaying the need for or distorting the nature of faith in Jesus.
• annihilationism/conditional immortality and universalism, which challenge the end of the gospel, or at least traditional understandings of it.
• nonevangelism, which challenges people’s access to the gospel.

The list of challenges this issue addresses does not pretend to be either exhaustive or global. It focuses on largely theological challenges that North American Pentecostals often face. Elsewhere, our brothers and sisters face other challenges, both intellectual (e.g., animism, ancestor worship, pantheism) and practical (e.g., poverty, oppression). Given that our readers overwhelmingly minister in a North American context, however, we chose to narrow our list to their concerns, without thereby downplaying the concerns of others in different social contexts.

Moreover, not all challenges we do address are created equal. If the gospel is a river, then some of the challenges to it are like dams that block it at its source. We can consider atheism, Islam, pluralism, Buddhism, and nonevangelism dam-type challenges. (Isn’t nonevangelism just a form of practical atheism, after all?) Other challenges are like debris that muddy the clarity and purity of the river. We can consider aspects of Calvinism, mistakenly views of the Atonement, eternal security, and nontraditional eschatologies debris-type challenges.

Dam-type challenges to the gospel are usually the work of nonbelievers (with the exception of nonevangelism), while debris-type challenges are often the work of Christians who are well-intentioned but theologically misguided. Whatever their source, all challenges need a response, if the river of life is to flow with clean water.

The church’s mission is to channel clear water to all who are thirsty. That is our privilege and responsibility as ministers of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Sometimes, this requires the hard and dirty work of dam busting and debris cleaning. But isn’t such work worth the effort? Of course it is.

Let us work, then, that lambs can wade and elephants swim in the waters of John 3:16.

NOTES
1. Gregory the Great, Moralia, or a Commentary on Job, para. 4. http://www9.georgetown.edu/faculty/jod/texts/moralia1.html

GEORGE PAUL WOOD is executive editor of Enrichment Journal and director of Ministerial Resourcing, Springfield, Missouri.
The Spiritual and Practical Importance of Sound Theology

Interview with George O. Wood
Ministers face many challenges to the gospel in today’s secular society. New Atheists are vocal in their attack on Christianity. Others are proclaiming a distorted view of the gospel. People in your church may be facing questions by their friends and coworkers. George Paul Wood, executive editor of Enrichment journal and director of Ministerial Resourcing, interviewed George O. Wood, D.Th.P., general superintendent of the Assemblies of God, to get his thoughts about 21st-century challenges to the gospel and how Assemblies of God ministers can best prepare themselves and their congregations to meet those challenges.

What 21st-century challenges to the gospel do you see the Assemblies of God facing in the coming decade?

**WOOD:** One benefit of being older is realizing that the more things change, the more they stay the same. The challenges members of my generation faced when we started our ministries in the early 1960s are different from the challenges this generation faces. Back then, *Time* magazine asked, “Is God Dead?” Now, however, two editors at *The Economist* have written a book called *God Is Back.* My generation struggled with secularism and the notion that modern culture would banish religion from the public square. This generation struggles with pluralism, in which both religious and nonreligious voices compete for influence.

While the specific nature of the challenges the gospel faces changes from generation to generation, the fact there are challenges and the need for spiritual discernment stay the same. In the New Testament Jesus warned us about “false messiahs and false prophets” (Matthew 24:24). Paul warned us about “false believers” (Galatians 2:4) and “false apostles” (2 Corinthians 11:13). Peter warned us about “false teachers” (2 Peter 2:1), and John warned us about “false prophets” (1 John 4:1). In light of these warnings, every generation of Christians must learn to distinguish between “heterodox teaching” (Gr., *heterodoxía*) and “sound instruction” or “godly teaching” (1 Timothy 6:3). John instructs: “Do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God” (1 John 4:1).

What kinds of ‘spirits’ must we test today?

Some challenges come from outside the church. I am thinking particularly of Islam, atheism, and pluralism. Islam respects Jesus as a virgin-born prophet who will return to earth, but denies that He is God incarnate or that He died and rose again to save us from our sins. Atheism denies that God exists and that we have any need of a Savior. Pluralism teaches that every religion is equally salvific.

Other challenges come from inside the church. In the last decade, there has been a remarkable resurgence of Calvinism among young Christians — the so-called “young, restless, and Reformed.” Calvinism denies that Christ died to save all. At the other end of the spectrum, Rob Bell’s book, *Love Wins,* teaches a hopeful universalism, denying that Christ will leave anyone in hell. The gospel, as we understand it, teaches that Christ died to save all, but that some will go to hell through their own disobedience and lack of faith. Calvinism and universalism are both teachings that distort the gospel by limiting the scope of grace or denying the eternal consequences of unbelief.

Whether the challenges come from outside or inside, Christians have a duty to “contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to God’s holy people” (Jude 3).

**Why is it important for Assemblies of God ministers to be able to respond to the challenges posed by these ideas? Should their response be defensive or missional? What lessons can they learn from missionaries about how to effectively preach the gospel and disciple believers?**

**WOOD:** Look at 1 Peter 3:15,16: “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, keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander.”
In this passage, Peter talks about “questions” and “slander.”

Some people have honest questions about Christ and the church. Maybe they were raised in a non-Christian home. Maybe they emigrated from a country where Christianity was not the majority religion. Maybe they were raised in a Christian home, but their education at a public university cast doubts on the faith of their childhood. Whatever the case, they have honest questions.

Peter tells us “to give the reason for the hope that you have.” Peter uses two Greek words in verse 15: *apologia* and *logos*. The NIV translates the first word as “answer.” We get the English word *apologist* from it. The translation of the second word is *reason*; it’s the word from which we get *logic*.

In my pastoral experience, I have found that Christians with an interest in apologetics and logic are far too often more interested in winning arguments than winning people. This is why it is important that we answer questioners “with gentleness and respect.” Answer them with a good, logical apologetic to be sure, but answer them in a kindly way too. Our posture should always be missional, never defensive.

We always need to have good answers to tough questions, but we also need to be the right kind of answer-givers. Both the content and the tone of our apologetic are very important. And our answers — both what we say and how we say it — need to be consistent. All too often Christians, especially some high-profile ones, do not represent the gospel well in the American court of public opinion. And to a certain degree — to the degree that we do not deal with people gently or respectfully — we deserve it. But as we develop a logical, gentle, and respectful apologetic, our fellow citizens will take notice. They will see that we have good answers to their questions.

We stateside pastors can learn a lot from our colleagues who are missionaries in countries that either do not have a Christian heritage or are post-Christian. When missionaries enter countries that do not have a Christian heritage, they cannot assume anyone knows or cares about Jesus Christ. They must earn the right to be heard. How they act toward others earns them the platform from which they can share the gospel. Even though America has a Christian heritage, pastors would do themselves a lot of good if they thought of themselves as missionaries to a culture that neither knows nor cares about Jesus Christ.

What concerns you about the religious knowledge of Christians today? How does the Assemblies of God fit within that concern?

**WOOD:** On September 28, 2010, the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life released its "U.S. Religious Knowledge Survey." The survey asked 3,412 people “32 questions about various aspects of religion: the Bible, Christianity, Judaism, Mormonism, world religions, religion in public life, and atheism and agnosticism.”

The findings left me ambivalent. According to the report, “the three groups that perform best in this survey are atheists and agnostics (who get an average of 20.9 out of 32 questions right), Jews (20.5 questions right on average), and Mormons (20.3 questions right).” On the other hand, “[w]hite evangelical Protestants answer an average of 17.6 religious knowledge questions correctly. Though white evangelicals have lower scores than Jews and atheists/agnostics overall, they do significantly better on questions about the Bible. White evangelicals correctly answer an average of 5.1 out of seven Bible questions.”

The Assemblies of God is nearly 40 percent ethnic minority, so how “white evangelical Protestants” answered the questions is not representative. But from what I can tell, the scores for "black" and "Hispanic" evangelical Protestants were not any better. And while we may answer 5.1 out of seven Bible questions correctly, that means we receive a grade of C- (approximately 72 percent) in our own religion. And our knowledge of other religions and nonreligious ideas gets a grade of D or F.

Here is how I interpret the results of this survey: We Christians know our Bible, but we do not know our culture. We need to become better exegetes not only of Scripture but also of culture. If we want to make a spiritual impact on America, we need to do a better job of equipping those in our churches with biblical answers to pressing cultural questions. Too often we mine the Bible for answers to questions no one is asking. No wonder the culture often thinks Christianity is irrelevant.
In your tenure as pastor of Newport-Mesa Christian Center, you developed a reputation as an outstanding expository preacher. What are your concerns about the dearth of expositional preaching in the contemporary church? How does expositional preaching form people spiritually?

WOOD: I quoted the Pew study in my previous answer. In terms of biblical literacy, evangelical Protestants score a C-. That is a passing grade, but it is nothing to brag about. And based on what I see and hear as I travel around the country, I worry that our grade may slip into D or F territory due to the lack of solid biblical exposition in the pulpit.

Now, please do not misunderstand me. I preached topical sermon series too. You cannot answer your culture’s pressing questions without preaching topically. By the same token, you cannot form people spiritually without a regular diet of expositional preaching and Bible study.

Several years ago I wrote about expository preaching for Enrichment. Here are some of the benefits of expositional preaching that I wrote about in that article:

First, expository preaching exposes your congregation to the totality of God’s Word. Pastors who only preach topically ride their hobbyhorses into the ground. Think of our focus on the healthy church as modeled in Acts 2:42–47: connect, grow, serve, go, worship. Some pastors love to preach about worship, others enjoy preaching on fellowship, while others preach on discipleship, evangelism, or service. When you listen to those pastors, their topical sermons almost always come back to just one of those purposes. A healthy church needs to hear about all those purposes in a balanced way. The beauty of expository preaching is that Scripture addresses all those purposes. If we preach Scripture systematically, we will preach the purposes systematically.

Such preaching leads to the second benefit of expository preaching: it builds spiritual maturity in your congregation. Spiritual maturity is especially important because Pentecostals and charismatics are prone to promoting faddish doctrines and practices: the prosperity gospel, for example, or top-down authoritarian leadership masking as a recovery of the titles of apostle and prophet. A solid diet of expositional preaching helps members of your congregation discern that these fads are “cotton candy” at best and “poison” at worst, neither of which promote nutrition. The Bible is “solid food for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil” (Hebrews 5:14).

A third benefit of expository preaching is that it deals with issues God wants to deal with, but in His timing. Here is what I wrote in my Enrichment article: “Preaching expositorily gave me great liberty to deal with sensitive matters — the congregation knew I was not personally picking on them when I came to a text that was uncomfortable to them. This was not the preacher’s opinion — it was God’s. The preacher had not singled them out; the passage simply fell open to them that day because that is where the pastor was in his journey through that book in the Bible.”

Let me reiterate: Culturally relevant preaching will include topical preaching. By the same token, the spiritual formation needs of your congregation demand that you preach and teach systematically from the Bible. You and your congregation cannot provide biblical answers to cultural questions if you are not solidly rooted in the Bible itself.

What resources are available that can prepare pastors and congregations to respond to these challenges with biblical theology and apologetics?

WOOD: We live in a time when we “suffer” from a glut of good resources. Seriously, has there ever been a generation of Christians with greater access to schools, books, websites, conferences, magazines, podcasts, digital reference works, and social networks? Absolutely not. The average Christian pastor today has access to more biblical, theological, and apologetic resources than did the apostle Paul, St. Augustine, Martin Luther, or John Wesley. The real challenge is discerning which resources are better than others. Let me offer some suggestions for discerning good from bad.

First, use the resources that the Assemblies of God has developed. The national office vets its resources to make sure they are orthodox, mainstream, and helpful. Our curricular resources strive to be biblically faithful, culturally relevant, and easy to use. Do you read the Pentecostal Evangel? Do you read Enrichment journal? Enrichment is the finest, most...
respected resource available today for the continuing education of Pentecostal ministers. Do you use AG Healthy Church products? Are you aware of the new books from Influence Resources? Have you checked out the AG.org website, AGTV.ag.org, MinistryDirect.com, and other departmental sites? These resources are chock-full of good stuff. Use it.

Second, have you availed yourself of the educational resources of Assemblies of God colleges, universities, and seminary? Both our national and regional schools, as well as Global University, have ministry programs at the undergraduate and graduate level that can increase your understanding of sound biblical theology and effective, culturally relevant ministry. Some of our schools offer distance-learning options, degree-completion programs, or learning modules that do not require you to sit on campus in a classroom fulltime. These programs are not free, of course, but they are relatively inexpensive.

I want to encourage all of our pastors with a Berean level of education to invest in your ministry through ongoing education.

Third, many of our national departments and districts/ministry networks offer conferences or consultant services that will add sharp tools to your ministry toolbox. I am thinking particularly of the Healthy Church Network’s Acts 2 Initiative, the Church Multiplication Network’s church-planting boot camps, Discipleship Ministry’s teacher training program, and annual conferences sponsored by Youth and Children’s ministries. Many of our districts/ministry networks are adding schools of ministry and learning components to their annual district councils, just as the General Council now begins with the Influence Conference. Are you plugged in?

Obviously, the broader Christian community offers excellent resources too. But if you are looking for help in offering solid biblical answers to culturally relevant questions, why not start by availing yourselves of the many resources provided by your own Fellowship?

Rupertus Meldenius, an early 17th-century Lutheran theologian, coined the phrase, “In essentials unity, in nonessentials liberty, and in all things charity.” How can we tell the difference between essential doctrines and doctrines that show denominational distinctives? And how can we argue lovingly, that is, disagree without being disagreeable?

WOOD: When I was pastor at Newport-Mesa Christian Center, I quoted Meldenius in the New Members Class. I reminded prospective members that there are certain doctrines that draw a line between belief and unbelief. Hebrews 11:6 says, for example: “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 diligently seek him.” People who do not believe God exists, or who believe God exists but is indifferent to their spiritual longings, simply cannot be Christian. Some doctrines define and unite all Christians and distinguish them from nonbelievers. The inspiration and authority of the Bible, the Trinity, the Incarnation, the Atonement, and the Resurrection — these are examples of essential doctrines about which all orthodox Christians agree. They are what C.S. Lewis referred to as “mere Christianity.”

Other doctrines, by contrast, distinguish one Christian denomination from another. For example, like all classical Pentecostal groups, the Assemblies of God believes that baptism in the Holy Spirit is separate from and subsequent to conversion. We also believe that speaking in tongues is the initial physical evidence of Spirit baptism. These two doctrines are Articles 7 and 8 in our Statement of Faith. Now, obviously, we believe these doctrines are true and biblically rooted. We believe Spirit baptism is available to all Christians. And we believe that, among other purposes — such as evangelism, discipleship, and compassion — God has raised up the Assemblies of God to be a worshipping community that reminds the broader Christian community that it is “Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit,’ says the Lord Almighty” (Zechariah 4:6).

By the same token, however, we are fully aware that Bible-believing orthodox Christians disagree with us on these important doctrines. We may not credential such people for ministry in our Fellowship, but we certainly do not run them out of Christianity altogether. Indeed, through our long-time cooperation with the National Association of Evangelicals and other strategic groups, we help advance the kingdom of God and not just the Assemblies of God. Do we wish these
other groups would see things our way? Yes. Of course. Are we going to stop cooperating with them until they come around to our point of view? Absolutely not. We live in a crucial time where the distinction between belief and unbelief is becoming clearer and clearer, and we need to make allies, not enemies, of fellow believers.

You asked about disagreeing without being disagreeable. I long to see that applied within our own Fellowship. I am extremely troubled by some of the online critiques I see where Assemblies of God ministers critique other Assemblies of God ministers. Leading up to this past General Council, I saw personal attacks, sarcasm, and the questioning of sincerity and motivation on both sides of the debate about certain resolutions. I have seen some friends labeled “Pharisees” and others called “liberals” because of the methods they use in their ministries.

Brothers and sisters, this is not the way to love one another or satisfy the heart of Jesus in His prayer request of John 17:21–23. Assemblies of God ministers have been vetted at the district council and General Council levels. Each year they reaffirm their commitment to Pentecostal doctrine and practice. We should not question one another’s sincerity or purity of motivation. We should assume it. And when we find ourselves troubled by what others in our Movement are saying or doing, we should contact them privately, understand what motivates them, offer counsel where we can, cut them slack, and leave the rest to God. If a minister’s doctrine or behaviors do not align with our requirements, then there is an official way of dealing with that minister as provided for in Article X of the General Council Bylaws.

Paul was remarkably flexible about ministry methodology and more concerned with public truth than personal motives. In 1 Corinthians 9:22 he wrote: “I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some.” If someone uses a different ministry methodology than you do, ask whether it is working, and if it is, leave that person alone. In Philippians 1:15,18, Paul wrote: “It is true that some preach Christ out of envy and rivalry, but others out of goodwill. … But what does it matter? The most important thing is that in every way, whether from false motives or true, Christ is preached. And because of this I rejoice.”

We live in tough times. The gospel faces challenges on all sides. We need to keep in-house disagreements in perspective and focus our best efforts on winning the lost rather than beating up other Christians.

In essentials unity, in nonessentials liberty, and in all things charity. That is good advice for all Christians in every generation.

NOTES
John 3:16 is a familiar verse about salvation. We often quote it without considering what it teaches. If we want to fully understand this verse, we must hear it the way John’s first audience heard it — in the context of the rest of John’s Gospel. The themes in John 3:16 emphasize points relevant to salvation that recur repeatedly throughout John’s Gospel. These themes include the nature of God’s love, the meaning of the world, how God gave His Son, who His Son is, what saving faith involves, in whom saving faith must rest, and what eternal life means.

1. God Loved.
The ultimate cause of salvation in John 3:16 is God’s love. God was not morally obligated to save a world that had rebelled against its Creator, but the love that motivated Him to create us motivated Him to restore us to a positive relationship with Him.

What does this love mean? Some approaches to explaining this love are counterproductive. For example, many books talk about the different Greek words for “love” in John’s Gospel. By the time John wrote his gospel, however, people used these words interchangeably. No dictionary can adequately explain this love to us, whether it is in Greek, English, or some other language. Instead, the example of God’s love fills this word with more meaning than it could have possibly carried on its own.

For example, recognizing how much the Father loves the Son helps us understand His love for the world, for by love He gave His Son for the world. John’s Gospel emphasizes repeatedly the mutual love between the Father and the Son. For example:

- The Father loves His Son, who is truly obedient (10:17).
- The Father loves His Son deeply and entrusts everything to Him (3:35).
- The Father loves the Son forever (17:24).
- The Son loves the Father so much that He obeys the Father’s commandment to lay down His life for the world (14:31).

The love John describes reveals an intimate relationship, an affection expressed in self-giving sacrifice. Parents and children who love each other can relate to John’s description of divine love, even though our love can be no more than a shadow of the mutual love between the Father and the Son.

The first explicit reference to love in John’s Gospel appears in John 3:16 — God’s love for the world. Only God’s love for the world explains why He would send His beloved Son, whom He loved infinitely and eternally, to die on a cross. Lest anyone doubt this, Jesus teaches that the Father loved the world just as He loved the Son (17:23). In the face of what God sacrificed, to doubt God’s love for us is unbelief that wounds His heart.

To save the world He loved, God was willing to endure the pain of losing His Son. The Cross makes love believable. Many atheists...
and agnostics find a loving God difficult to imagine. They feel horror at the depth of the world’s suffering, but they overlook the God who chose to embrace suffering in the Cross.

I was once an atheist, but God’s love transformed my heart. My wife, who endured 18 months as a refugee in Congo, experienced deep suffering, but testifies it was only God’s love that gave her strength to endure.

2. God Loved the World.
The world is the object of salvation. God
By specifying that God gave His “one and only Son,” John highlights the immeasurable love God had for the world in giving Jesus.

**By specifying that God gave His “one and only Son, but also the world that did not know Him and opposed Him.” God’s love for the entire world reminds us He wants everyone to believe in Jesus and receive salvation.

Some of Jesus’ contemporaries emphasized God’s special love for Israel or for the righteous, but they did not recognize that God loved everyone. In the chapter following John 3:16, however, some Samaritans began to understand. They acknowledged Jesus as the Savior of the world (4:42; cf. 1 John 4:14). The “world” included Samaritans, whom most Jews despised. If it included Samaritans, it also included all other peoples, including those we might be tempted to despise today.

It may take more effort to bring God’s light to people groups shrouded in darkness, but there is no people group and no individual beyond the pale of God’s love. Jesus shed His blood for all. If we honor His sacrifice, we will love and serve across ethnic, cultural, and religious lines.

Because God gave His Son for the world does not mean everyone is saved; it means salvation is available for anyone. John 3:17 emphasizes that God’s purpose in sending His Son was not to condemn the world; it was already condemned. Instead, He sent His Son to save the world. Jesus is the sacrifice that appeases God’s anger for sins, not only ours, but also those of the entire world (1 John 2:2). Salvation is for “whoever believes.”

We should be motivated to share the good news because God desires everyone to receive salvation. When we think of unreached people groups, we remember that Jesus already paid the price for their salvation. However, they still must believe to be saved. This necessity invites us to follow our Lord’s sacrificial example to do whatever necessary to bring the unsaved the message that God loves them so greatly that He gave His own Son.

3. **God Gave.**

God’s love motivated salvation, but it was giving His Son that made it available. Often we read, “God so loved the world,” as if it meant, “God loved the world so much.” Indeed, it does imply the greatness of God’s love. Yet the Greek word houtos, translated “so” here, does not mean “so much.” It means, “In this way.” The verse says, "This is how God loved the world.” God did not simply say abstractly, “I love you.” He provided the ultimate demonstration of love, offering His own Son.

What does John 3:16 mean by saying that God “gave” His Son? John 3:14 explains that Jesus would be “lifted up.” Jesus told His enemies they will lift Him up (8:28). Later, Jesus promises He will attract the world to himself if He is lifted up. John explains: “Jesus spoke this to reveal the way that He would die” (12:32,33, author’s translation). That is, God gave His Son by letting His enemies crucify Him. The phrase “lifted up” echoes Isaiah 52:13. God’s servant would be lifted up. Isaiah 53 describes the Suffering Servant’s sacrifice.

God loves us all the time, but John 3:16 refers to a specific act of love. The verb tense John used for both “loved” and “gave” (the Greek aorist tense) more likely than not implies a single act. God gave the world His Son by Jesus giving His life on the cross. Like a sacrificial lamb for a sin offering, Jesus takes away the sin of the world (John 1:29). Jesus thus died in the world’s stead (cf. 11:51,52).

4. **God Gave His One and Only Son.**

The term rendered “one and only” was especially appropriate for a particularly beloved child, normally one’s only child. Ancient Jewish sources used it to highlight Abraham’s
obedience to God, in that he was willing to sacrifice his beloved son, Isaac. This description for Jesus reiterates the greatness of God’s sacrificial love in giving Jesus for us. Some Jewish sources already thought of the coming Messiah as God’s “son,” but John thinks of God’s Son here in a special way, in terms of Jesus’ eternal relationship with the Father.

The fact John 3:16 means Jesus’ sonship in this special sense becomes clear at key points in the same Gospel. John frames his opening prologue by emphasizing that Jesus is both God and intimate with the Father, i.e., Jesus is distinct from the Father, but as God the Son. In John 1:1, the Word was God and was with God, and in 1:18 “the one and only” God, Jesus, is in the Father’s bosom. Likewise, toward the end of this Gospel, Thomas confesses Jesus as his Lord and his God (20:28). John writes his Gospel so his hearers may also believe that Jesus is God’s Son (20:31).

We should reiterate the point of “one and only Son” in John 3:16. By specifying that the One whom God gave was His “one and only Son,” John highlights the immeasurable love God had for the world in giving Jesus.

5. Whoever Believes.

Although Jesus’ death provides salvation for all, only some appropriate that salvation. God provided salvation for the world at great cost to himself. Yet an individual’s salvation is not automatic. This passage declares that people must still receive His gift. We must “believe,” that is, trust the truth of the gift or depend on the gift. Christ’s death objectively provides salvation. Receiving Jesus by faith allows us to subjectively appropriate what He has provided.

Some have offered an appealing message that everyone will be saved. One can understand why people would like to believe this. Although God wants all to be saved, and we are right to want the same, neglecting the means God has provided for salvation has the opposite consequence: it obscures the truth about salvation. In John 3:18, we learn that people stand under judgment until they put their trust in God’s Son. God provided the gift for all, but we must accept His gift (and labor to ensure that others have access to it).

Others pay more attention to John’s term believes but read into it appealing ideas that are not there. Some, for example, affirm that if one believes at any moment, one will be saved whether or not one continues to believe in Jesus. Usually, however, we would expect the present tense used for “believes” (pisteuon) in John 3:16 to imply a continuing faith.

Moreover, the view that faith need not persevere ignores the context of John 3:16. Shortly before this passage, many people in Jerusalem saw Jesus’ signs and “believed” in Him. Jesus did not, however, reciprocate their trust, because He knew what was in them (2:23–25).

Being impressed with Jesus is not by itself saving faith. Later in the Gospel, some of Jesus’ listeners “believe” in Him — but their faith is temporary. By the end of that chapter they want to stone Him (8:30,59). Jesus warned that they would be His disciples only if they continued in His teaching (8:31) — and they obviously did not. Faith must persevere to the end if it is to be true, saving faith.

Over the years some of my closest friends have left the Christian faith. One dear friend converted to another religion; another became an agnostic. I would love to believe they remain saved in their current state. Such a belief, however, runs contrary to John 3:16 and a host of other texts from Paul’s letters to Hebrews to Revelation.2


Saving faith is not just persevering faith; it requires a specific object. Some people argue that as long as one believes in something, one will be saved. Simply having generalized religious faith does not save. John 3:16 describes saving faith as believing “in him” — in Jesus as God’s Son. Some people come closer to believing in Him than others. Muslims, for example, share with Christians the belief that Jesus was a virgin-born prophet and miracle worker; such respect for our Lord gives Muslims and Christians considerable common ground. Yet John declares that saving faith affirms more than Jesus as a prophet or miracle worker.

Throughout the Gospel, Jesus reveals His identity, often in explicit “I am” statements; for example, the shepherd or the vine (10:11; 15:1). At points in the Gospel, people also
Jesus invites a higher level of faith: “Blessed are those who believed even though they did not see.”

7. Whoever Believes Has Eternal Life.

Shortly before John 3:16, Jesus talked with Nicodemus about being born from God. New birth is the beginning of a new life — eternal life. That is, we are not only saved from judgment (3:18,36), but we are saved for a new life. Salvation is not just what we are saved from (death), but what we are saved for — a new life lived under the true and rightful Lord of humanity, our Creator and Savior, Jesus Christ. We do not act good to achieve the gift of salvation; rather, goodness is part of the gift. Salvation from sin means that in saving us, God gave us a new way to live.

What does the phrase eternal life mean? Based on Daniel 12:2, many Jewish people spoke of “eternal life” as the life of the coming world, expected after the future resurrection of the dead. Thus many Jewish people looked forward to eternal life in the future. In John 3:16, and often in John’s Gospel, by contrast, we have eternal life in the present tense. This means that in God’s Son, whom He raised from the dead, we have already begun to experience the life of the coming age. We still await the resurrection of our bodies, but even now we can live in relationship with God and one another as a foretaste of the future (cf. 17:3,21).

This means that the world should be able to look at the Church and see what the promised new world will be like. As Christians we sometimes live short of our birthright because we do not know who we are. We are the vanguard of a future age, lights of God’s future world in relationship with God and one another as a foretaste of the future (cf. 17:3,21).


FURTHER READING
Are the charges made by the New Atheists a distorted representation of Old Testament ethics? Is God a moral monster, as the New Atheists say He is?
The God of the Bible is a good God who demonstrates His love for people by giving His Son for the salvation of those who believe (John 3:16).

The New Atheists, however, think differently. They question God’s goodness by raising abundant complaints about Old Testament (OT) ethics. Richard Dawkins thinks that Yahweh is a moral monster: “What makes my jaw drop is that people today should base their lives on such an appalling role model as Yahweh — and even worse, that they should bossily try to force the same evil monster (whether fact or fiction) on the rest of us.” Yahweh’s commanding Abraham to sacrifice Isaac is both “disgraceful” and tantamount to “child abuse and bullying.”

Yahweh breaks into a “monumental rage whenever his chosen people flirted with a rival god,” resembling “nothing so much as sexual jealousy of the worst kind.” Add to this the killing of the Canaanites — an “ethnic cleansing” in which “bloodthirsty massacres” were carried out with “xenophobic relish.” Joshua’s destruction of Jericho is “morally indistinguishable from Hitler’s invasion of Poland,” or Saddam Hussein’s massacres of the Kurds and the Marsh Arabs. Beside all this, we have to contend with the “ubiquitous weirdness of the Bible” as well as the moral failures and hypocrisies of biblical characters: a drunken Lot seduced by and engaging in sexual relations with his daughters (Genesis 19:31–36); Abraham’s twice lying about his wife Sarah (Genesis 12:18,19; 20:1–18); Jephthah’s foolish vow that resulted in sacrificing his daughter as a burnt offering (Judges 11).

According to Christopher Hitchens, the now-forgotten Canaanites were “pitilessly driven out of their homes to make room for the ungrateful and mutinous children of Israel.” Moreover, the OT contains “a warrant for trafficking in humans, for ethnic cleansing, for slavery, for bride-price, and for indiscriminate massacre, but we are not bound by any of it because it was put together by crude, uncultured human animals.”

Sam Harris boldly asserts that if the Bible is true, we should be stoning people to death for heresy, adultery, homosexuality, worshipping graven images, and “other imaginary crimes.” Referring to Deuteronomy 13:6–11, Harris claims that the consistent Bible-believer should stone his son or daughter if he or she comes home from a yoga class a devotee of Krishna. Furthermore, once we recognize that slaves are human beings who are equally capable of suffering and happiness, we will understand that it is “patently evil to own them and treat them like farm equipment.” Indeed, we can be good and recognize right and wrong without God or the Bible: we can know objective moral truths without “the existence of a lawgiving God” and can judge Hitler to be morally reprehensible “without reference to scripture.”

I argue that these charges made by the New Atheists are a distorted representation of OT ethics, which fail to consider issues such as the earliest creational ideals (Genesis 1,2), the warm moral ethos of the OT, the ancient Near East (ANE) context, the broader biblical canon, and the metaphysical context to undergird objective morality. I have attempted elsewhere to address at both scholarly and popular levels the various OT ethical questions — slavery, the Canaanite issue, killing Canaanites vs. Islamic jihad, “harsh” moral codes and “strange” levitical laws, Abraham’s offering Isaac, the imprecatory psalms, divine jealousy, divine egotism, and so forth.

A Response to the New Atheists

Biblical scholar John Barton warns that there can be no “simple route” to dealing with OT ethics. John Goldingay sees Israel’s unfolding history as broken up into five distinct stages or contexts — wandering clan, theocratic nation, monarchy, afflicted remnant, and post-exilic community of promise. Each one of these
requires distinct rather than uniform moral responses. Thus, a proper response calls for greater attention to a range of relevant factors the New Atheists’ crass hermeneutic and left-wing fundamentalism completely ignore.

1. Mosaic law and historical narratives
A plain reading of Israel’s priestly/legal codes reveals that they are embedded within a broader historical narrative. Unlike other ANE cuneiform legislation, God ultimately instructs Israel, not by laying down laws or principles, but by telling stories of real people as they relate to their Creator and Covenant Maker. Ideally, God’s moral character and His activity in Israel’s history give the nation a necessary ethical framework to shape its way of life. This is in contrast to the prologue/epilogue to Hammurabi’s Code, which, rather than offering historical narrative, contains lofty language about Hammurabi’s being endowed by the gods as a benevolent earthly sovereign to be a just ruler on earth.

As we will see below, the critics’ assumption that Israel’s holiness code offers an ultimate, universal ethic is misguided.

Dawkins’ claims that biblical characters are often deeply flawed may win him points in the “rhetoric” category, but he is not saying anything with which Christians disagree. Such moral blackballing loses him points when he ignores many moral, noble actions of the biblical characters — Abraham’s magnanimity toward Lot; Joseph’s moral integrity; David’s refusal to touch King Saul, despite the oppurtunities; Nathan’s courage to confront David the adulterer. Indeed, many biblical narratives tend to confirm our moral intuitions, which reveal how biblical characters are often a mixed moral bag. Thus, Christopher Hitchens’ remarks about “the ungrateful and mutinous children of Israel” are accurate. St. Paul observes as much in 1 Corinthians 10. Many of Israel’s stories involving stubborness, treachery, and ingratitude are vivid negative role models — ones to be avoided. The OT’s descriptions (“is”) do not necessarily amount to prescriptions (“ought”).

2. The Mosaic law, human sin, and divine ideals
Bruce C. Birch observes that the ANE world — its slavery, polygamy, war, patriarchal structures, kingship, and ethnocentrism — is “totally alien” and “utterly unlike” our own social setting. He advises us to acknowledge this impediment: “these texts are rooted in a cultural context utterly unlike our own, with moral presuppositions and categories that are alien and in some cases repugnant to our modern sensibilities.” The new atheist ignores what Christians most likely affirm — that Mosaic legislation is not the Bible’s moral pinnacle but rather a springboard anticipating further development or, perhaps more accurately, a pointer back to the loftier moral ideals of Genesis 1 and 2 and Genesis 12:1-3. These ideals affirm the image of God in each person, lifelong monogamous marriage, and God’s concern for the nations. The moral implications from these foundational texts are monumental, though Israel’s history reveals a profound departure from these ideals.

Consequently, the believer need not justify all aspects of the Sinaic legal code. After all, God begins with an ancient people who have imbibed dehumanizing customs and social structures from their ANE context. Yet Yahweh desires to treat them as morally responsible agents who, it is hoped, gradually come to discover a better way. He does this rather than risk their repudiating a loftier ethic — a moral overhaul — that they cannot even understand and for which they are not culturally or morally prepared. As Goldingay puts it: “God starts with his people where they are; if they cannot cope with his highest way, he carves out a lower one.” This kind of progression, as we shall see, is not biblical relativism, as some allege. Indeed, we see unchangeable biblical ideals highlighted from the very beginning of the Scriptures (Genesis 1:26,27; 2:24), which are reaffirmed throughout.

3. Mosaic law, Cuneiform law, and moral improvements
Collections of cuneiform law include the laws of Ur-Nammu (c. 2100 B.C., during the Third Dynasty of Ur); the laws of Lipit-Ishtar (c. 1925 B.C.), who ruled the Sumerian city of Isin; the (Akkadian) laws of Eshnunna (c. 1800 B.C.), a city 100 miles north of Babylon; the laws of Hammurabi (1750 B.C.); and the Hittite laws (1650–1200 B.C.) of Asia Minor. Despite parallels between these and Mosaic law codes and even certain improvements in ANE codes over time, some
significant differences also exist. We have in the Mosaic law some genuine, previously unheard-of improvements.

Slaves in Israel, unlike their ANE contemporaries, were given radical, unprecedented legal/human rights — even if not equaling that of free persons. As the Anchor Bible Dictionary’s essay on “Slavery” observes, “We have in the Bible the first appeals in world literature to treat slaves as human beings for their own sake and not just in the interests of their masters.” By comparison, “the idea of a slave as exclusively the object of rights and as a person outside regular society was apparently alien to the laws of the ANE,” where slaves were forcibly branded or tattooed for identification. Indeed, in “contrast to many ancient doctrines, the Hebrew law was relatively mild toward the slaves and recognized them as human beings subject to defense from intolerable acts, although not to the same extent as free persons.”

Another unique feature of the Mosaic Law is its condemnation of kidnapping a person to sell as a slave — an act punishable by death (Exodus 21:16; cp 1 Timothy 1:10). This is a point lost on, or ignored by, those who compare slavery in Israel to that in the antebellum South. While Israel was commanded to offer safe harbor to foreign runaway slaves (Deuteronomy 23:15,16), Hammurabi demanded the death penalty for those helping runaway slaves (§16). As an aside, some have alleged that Paul’s returning the runaway Onesimus to his alleged owner Philemon is a step backward toward Hammurabi. This is a false charge. For one thing, there is scholarly debate on the question of whether or not Onesimus was a slave. For one thing, there are no “flight” verbs in this letter, and this “runaway slave” interpretation did not emerge until the fourth century. Moreover, Paul had declared that in Christ there is “neither slave nor free” (Galatians 3:28), and he elsewhere appeals to Christian masters — who have their own heavenly Master — to treat their slaves justly, impartially, and without threatening (Ephesians 6:9; Colossians 4:1). And if slaves can gain their freedom (1 Corinthians 7:21), Paul encouraged this. Surely, this is dramatic departure from Hammurabi.

Hebrew (debt) slaves — which we could compare to indentured servanthood during the founding of America — were to be granted eventual release in the seventh year (Leviticus 25:35–43) — a notable improvement over other ANE law codes. This release was to be accompanied with generous provisions and a gracious spirit (Deuteronomy 15:9). The motivating reason? “[Y]ou were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God redeemed you; therefore I command you this today” (Deuteronomy 15:12–18, NASB, esp. verse 15). Even if the poverty could not be eradicated, Deuteronomy 15’s overriding, “revolutionary” goal is that there be no debt slavery in the land at all (verses 4,11).

Concerning the ANE’s inferior sexual morality, we are familiar with the condemnation of the Canaanite female and male cult prostitutes (cp. Genesis 38:15,22,23; Deuteronomy 23:17,18; also Hosea 4:14). Many ANE cuneiform laws, however, permitted activities that undermined family integrity and stability by allowing men to engage in adulterous relations with slaves and prostitutes. The laws of Lipit-Ishtar of Lower Mesopotamia (1930 B.C.) take for granted the practice of prostitution (e.g., ¶ 27,30). In Hittite law (1650–1500 B.C.), “If a father and son sleep with the same female slave or prostitute, it is not an offence.” (¶ 194)

Not only do we find morally inferior cuneiform legislation, but also its attendant harsh, ruthless punishments. For certain crimes, Hammurabi mandated that tongue, breast, hand, or ear be cut off (§§ 192,194,195,205). Beside punishments such as cutting off noses and ears, ancient Egyptian law permitted the beating of criminals (for, say, perjury or libel) with between 100 and 200 strokes. Contrast this with Deuteronomy 25:1–3, which sets a limit of 40 strokes for a criminal. What of Scripture’s emphasis on *lex talionis*
Mosaic legislation reflects a revolutionary moral improvement over the existing ANE cuneiform laws — even if this is ethically inferior and less-than-ideal.

— an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth? First, except for capital punishment (“life for life”), these texts (Exodus 21:23–25; Leviticus 24:17–22; Deuteronomy 19:16–21), are not taken literally. Each example calls for (monetary) compensation, not bodily mutilation. Later in the New Testament (NT), referring to this language that was being used as a pretext for personal vengeance outside the lawcourts, Jesus himself did not take such language literally (Matthew 5:38,39) — no more than He took literally the language of plucking out eyes and cutting off hands if they lead to sin (Matthew 5:29,30). Second, this principle served as a useful guide for exacting proportional punishment and compensation; this was designed to prevent blood feuds and disproportionate retaliatory acts.

Additionally, the increased complexity and stringency of Mosaic regulations is a divine response to Israel’s disobedience. From the beginning, the earliest legislation (Exodus 21–23) was intended to be simple and much less harsh — comparable to patriarchal religion (cp. Jeremiah 7:2,3; Galatians 3:19,22). However, the greater stringency of the ensuing laws is the result of three things: (a) Israel’s refusal to approach God at the mountain as a “kingdom of priests” (Exodus 19:6), instead sending Moses as their mediator; (b) Aaron’s failure as high priest in the golden calf incident (Exodus 32), resulting in a tightening of priestly restrictions (Exodus 35 through Leviticus 16); (c) the people’s worship of the goat idols (Leviticus 17:1–9), resulting in more severe laws for the community (Leviticus 17:10–26:46). Consider how a rebellious child will often need external rules, severe deadlines, and close supervision to hold him over until (hopefully) an internal moral change takes place. Rules, though a stop-gap measure, are hardly ideal.

Although the New Atheists belittle the Mosaic Law for its ruthless strictness, it is an accommodation to a morally undeveloped ANE cultural mindset — with significant ethical improvements — as well as a response to the rebellious, covenant-breaking propensity of the Israelites.

4. The Mosaic law, Israel’s history, and varying ethical demands

I have noted the shift from an ancestral wandering clan to a theocratic nation, then to a monarchy/institutional state/kingdom, an afflicted remnant, and finally a post-exilic community/assembly of promise. Each stage offers enduring moral insights — faithfulness/covenant-keeping, trusting in God, showing mercy. Our focus, though, is on the varying ethical demands on God’s people. For example, in the first stage, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob are apolitical characters (except for Abram’s rescuing Lot in response to an invasion/raid [Genesis 14]). After Israel’s 400-year wait, including bondage in Egypt, until the sin of the Amorites reaches full measure (Genesis 15:16), they became a nation. This required land to inhabit. Yahweh fought on Israel’s behalf while bringing just judgment on an irredeemably Canaanite culture and religion that had sunk hopelessly below any hope of moral return — with the rare exception of Rahab and her family and the Gibeonites at the end of Joshua 9. As Leviticus 18:28 declares, the land would “spew out” its inhabitants, and Israel itself was subject to the same judgment.

“Holy warfare” is perhaps the most emotionally charged point raised by the New Atheists. It is primarily located in the second stage — and not throughout Israel’s OT history. So let me offer a few comments here. First, Israel would not have been justified to attack the Canaanites without Yahweh’s explicit command. Yahweh issued His unique command in light of a morally sufficient reason — the intractable wickedness of Canaanite culture and the moral and spiritual danger it posed.

Second, as I argue elsewhere, we have strong archaeological evidence that the targeted Canaanite cities such as Jericho and Ai were not population centers with women and children, but military forts or garrisons that protected noncombatant civilians in the hill country — namely, soldiers and political/military leaders — although occasionally female tavern keepers (e.g., Rahab) could be found in these citadels. Indeed, the terms “city” (‘Ir) and “king” (melek) were typically used in Canaan during this period to refer, respectively, to “fortress/garrison” and “military leader.” In addition, Jericho probably had about 100 or fewer soldiers in this outpost (which is why the Israelites could
encircle it seven times in one day and then do battle against it). So if Jericho was a fort, then “all” those killed therein were warriors — Rahab and her family being the exceptional noncombatants dwelling within this militarized camp. The same applies throughout the Book of Joshua. Moreover, the attacks on cities were more like “disabling raids,” not acts of utter decimation, as Egyptologist Kenneth Kitchen argues: “these campaigns were essentially disabling raids: they were not territorial conquests with instant Hebrew occupation. The text is very clear about this.”

Third, the “obliteration language” in Joshua (e.g., “he left no survivor” and “utterly destroyed all who breathed” [Joshua 10:40, NASB]) and in early Judges is clearly hyperbolic — another stock feature of ANE language. Consider how, despite such language, the latter part of Joshua itself (along with Judges 1) assumes plenty of Canaanites still inhabit the land (e.g., Joshua 23:12,13). Fourth, the biblical language of the Canaanite “utter destruction” is identical to that of Judah’s destruction in the Babylonian exile. So utter annihilation or even genocide is completely inaccurate. Indeed, God threatened to “vomit” out Israel from the land just as he had vomited out the Canaanites (Leviticus 18:25,28; 20:22). In the Babylonian invasion of Judah (sixth-century B.C.), God threatened to “lay waste the towns of Judah so no one can live there” (Jeremiah 9:11). Indeed, God said, “I will completely destroy them and make them an object of horror and scorn, and an everlasting ruin” (Jeremiah 25:9, NASB). God “threatened to stretch out My hand against you and destroy you” (Jeremiah 15:6, NASB; cp. Ezekiel 5:16) — to bring “disaster” against Judah (Jeremiah 6:19). In Isaiah 43:28, the Lord uses this term herem (“[consignment to the] ban”) in an exaggerated fashion: “So I will pollute the princes of the sanctuary, and I will consign Jacob to the ban and Israel to revilement” (NASB). The biblical text, supported by archaeological discovery, suggests that while Judah’s political and religious structures were ruined and that Judahites died in the conflict, the urban elite were deported to Babylon while many “poor of the land” remained behind to inhabit the towns of Judah. Clearly, Judah’s being “completely destroyed” and made an “everlasting ruin” (Jeremiah 25:9) was a significant literary exaggeration — which reinforces our point about the Canaanite “destruction.”

In Deuteronomy 7:2–5, we see from that wiping out Canaanite religion was far more significant than wiping out the Canaanites themselves.

What of the Amalekites in 1 Samuel 15? Were they totally destroyed? Apart from keeping animals and king Agag alive, Saul said he had obeyed God (verse 20). What’s more, at the end of the book David is fighting an army of Amalekites, and over 400 soldiers escaped (30:17). Clearly, no “total destruction” was in view. The same is true of the Midianites in Numbers 31. After the seduction of Israel by Midian, “every male” Midianite was killed (verse 7). Is this literal? Not at all. Judges 6:5 tells us that the Midianites (and their camels) were too numerous to count.

Fifth, we should take seriously the numerous references of “driving out” the Canaanites (e.g., Exodus 23:28; Leviticus 18:24; Numbers 33:52; Deuteronomy 6:19; 7:1; 9:4; 18:12; Joshua 10:28, 30,32,35,37,39; 11:11,14) or “dispossessing” them of their land (Numbers 21:32; Deuteronomy 12:2; 19:1; etc.). We then read in Joshua of repeated affirmations that Joshua did all that Moses commanded (Joshua 11:12,14,15,20). But if he did so, and many Canaanite survivors remained, then clearly Moses did not intend this to be literal either.

Sixth, God’s difficult command regarding
the Canaanites as a limited, unique salvation-historical situation is in some ways comparable to God’s difficult command to Abraham in Genesis 22. Yet, we should no more look to the divinely mandated attack on Canaanites as a universal ideal for international military engagement than we should look to Abraham’s sacrifice of Isaac as a timeless standard for “family values.” Behind both of these hard commands, however, is the clear context of Yahweh’s loving intentions and faithful promises. In the first place, God had given Abraham the miracle child Isaac, through whom God promised to make Abraham the father of many. Previously, he saw God’s provision when he reluctantly let Ishmael and Hagar go into the wilderness — with God reassuring Abraham that Ishmael would become a great nation. Likewise, Abraham knew that God would somehow fulfill His covenant promises through Isaac — even if it meant that God would raise him from the dead. Thus Abraham informed his servants, “we will worship, and then we will come back to you” (Genesis 22:5 [NRSV]; cp. Hebrews 11:19).

With the second harsh command regarding the Canaanites, Yahweh has already promised to bring blessing to all the families of the earth without exclusion (Genesis 12:1–3; 22:17,18) and desires to include Israel’s most-hated enemies in this blessing (e.g., Isaiah 19:25). This should be set against the background of Yahweh’s enemy-loving character (Matthew 5:43–48; cp. Exodus 34:6) and worldwide salvific purposes. In both cases, we have a good, promise-making God who has morally sufficient reasons for issuing these commands.

5. The Law of Moses, the biblical canon, and moral undertones

The New Atheists tend to assume that the Mosaic Law is comprehensively normative for the consistent Bible believer. This huge presumption misses the flow of biblical revelation. I will address this on a number of fronts.

First, we are not to equate Mosaic legislation with the moral. Laws are often a compromise between the ideal and the enforceable. The Mosaic Law is truly a moral improvement on the surrounding ANE cultures — justifiably called “spiritual” and “good” (Romans 7:14,16) and reflective of Yahweh’s wisdom (Deuteronomy 6:5–8). Yet it is self-confessedly less than ideal. Contrary to New Atheists’ assumptions, the Law is not the permanent, fixed theocratic standard for all nations.

Polygamy, for instance, is practiced — contrary to God’s ideals in Genesis 2:24 and contrary to the prohibition in Leviticus 18:18 — perhaps in part because its prohibition would have been difficult to enforce, even if the biblical writers hoped for something better (cp. Deuteronomy 17:17; 1 Kings 11:3). Like divorce and other inferior moral conditions (cp. Matthew 19:8), polygamy was tolerated rather than upheld as an ultimate moral standard.

Second, the Mosaic law reveals God’s forbearance because of human hard-heartedness. Matthew 19:8 indicates that divorce was permitted — not commanded — because of hard hearts; it was not so “from the beginning.” The same can be said of a strong patriarchalism, slavery, and warfare common in the ANE context; these are in violation of Genesis 1,2’s creational ideals. Rather than banishing all evil social structures, Sinaitic legislation frequently assumes the practical facts of fallen human culture while pointing Israel to God’s greater designs for humanity.

God shows shows remarkable forbearance in the OT: “He passed over the sins previously committed” (Romans 3:25, NASB); elsewhere Paul declares: “Therefore having overlooked the times of ignorance, God is now declaring to men that all people everywhere should repent, because He has fixed a day in which He will judge the world in righteousness through a Man whom He has appointed, having furnished proof to all men by raising Him from the dead” (Acts 17:30,31, NASB). In the OT, God puts up with sinful human structures as less-than-ideal.

Third, the Mosaic Law — an improved, more-humanized legislation — attempts to restrain and control an inferior moral mindset without completely abolishing these negative structures. While negative aspects of slavery are retained, slaves achieve astonishing rights in contrast to the rest of the ANE. Even so, Deuteronomy 15 expresses the hopeful goal of eventually eradicating slavery while both (a) diminishing the staying power of slavery in light of the exodus and (b) controlling the institution of
Naturalism does not have the metaphysical resources to move from valueless matter to value (including rights-bearing human beings and objective morality/moral duties). Theism is immensely better equipped metaphysically to provide such a context.

slavery in light of the practical fact misfortune in a subsistence culture could reduce anyone to poverty and indebtedness. The same kind of progression is evident in legislation regarding women, primogeniture, and the like.

Fourth, the Mosaic Law contains seeds for moral growth, offering glimmers of light pointing to a higher moral path. Yes, God prohibits worship of other gods, but His ultimate desire is that His people love Him wholeheartedly. Love is not reducible to the Law’s restraining influence, and enjoying God’s presence is not identical to idol-avoidance.

The model of Yahweh’s character and saving action is embedded within and surrounding Israel’s legislation — a “compassionate drift” in the Law, which includes protection for the weak, especially those who lacked the natural protection of family and land (namely, widows, orphans, Levites, immigrants and resident aliens); justice for the poor; impartiality in the courts; generosity at harvest time and in general economic life; respect for persons and property, even of an enemy; sensitivity to the dignity even of the debtor; special care for strangers and immigrants; considerate treatment of the disabled; prompt payment of wages earned by hired labor; sensitivity over articles taken in pledge; consideration for people in early marriage, or in bereavement; even care for animals, disabled; prompt payment of wages earned by hired labor; sensitivity over articles taken in pledge; consideration for people in early marriage, or in bereavement; even care for animals, domestic and wild, and for fruit trees.

In their zealous preoccupation with the negative in OT ethics, New Atheists neglect these warm undertones in the Law of Moses itself, exemplified in Yahweh’s gracious, compassionate character and His saving action.

Fifth, the Mosaic Law contains an inherent planned obsolescence, which is to be fulfilled in Christ. Despite the significant moral advances at Sinai, the Law is not the final word. God promised a new covenant that would progress beyond the old (e.g., Jeremiah 31; Ezekiel 36,37). According to Hebrews, Jesus brings “substance” to the OT’s “shadows,” fully embodying humanity’s and Israel’s story. Thus, stopping at OT texts without allowing Christ — the second Adam and the new, true Israel — to illuminate them, our reading and interpretation of the OT will be greatly impoverished. If the NT brings out more fully the heart of God, then we must not let the “tail” (the OT) wag the “dog” (the NT) as the New Atheists commonly do.

Concluding Remarks

I have argued that Christians can readily acknowledge that the Mosaic Law is not the ideal, ultimate ethic. However, let me make a couple of statements regarding the New Atheists’ trivialization of Yahweh and the inconsistency between their “objective” moral outrage and naturalism.

First, like Narnia’s Aslan, gracious and compassionate Yahweh (Exodus 34:6) is not to be trifled with. He is good, but not “safe.” The New Atheists resist the notion of Yahweh’s rightful prerogatives over humans; they seem uncomfortable with the idea of judgment or cosmic authority. Yet God must reveal himself with holy firmness (at times, fierceness) to get the attention of human rebels — including Israel (Deuteronomy 9:6,7).

Dawkins’ charge that God’s breaking into a “monumental rage” when Israel “flirted with a rival god” is “sexual jealousy of the worst kind” seems to diminish the meaning of the marriage covenant — and, in particular, this unique bond between God and His people. Israel had not simply “flirted” with rival gods, but cohabited with them, “playing the harlot” (cp. Ezekiel 16 and 23); Israel did so on the “honeymoon” (Exodus 32). Hosea’s notable portrayal of Israel as a prostitute — no mere flirt — is quite serious despite Dawkins’ casual dismissal. The appropriate response to adultery is anger and hurt (cp. Isaiah 5:4; 65:2,3; Ezekiel 6:9). When there is none, we rightly wonder how deeply and meaningfully committed to marriage one truly is.

Second, despite Dawkins’ moral outrage, his metaphysic disallows it, admitting that a universe full of electrons contains “no evil and no good, nothing but blind pitiless indifference.” Indeed, science “has no methods for deciding what is ethical.” Individuals and society decide. Naturalism does not have the metaphysical resources to move from valueless matter to value (including rights-bearing human beings and objective morality/moral duties). Theism is immensely better equipped metaphysically to provide such a context.

Harris’ attempt to “demolish the intellectual and moral pretensions of Christianity” is quite ironic for a several reasons: (a) biblical theism has historically served as a moral compass for Western civilization’s advances despite historical deviations from Jesus’ teaching (e.g., the
Crusades, Inquisition). (b) Despite the New Atheists' appeals to science, they ignore the profound influence of the Jewish-Christian worldview on the West's scientific enterprise. In Paul Davies' words, "Science began as an outgrowth of theology, and all scientists, whether atheists or theists ... accept an essentially theological worldview."21 (c) The New Atheists somehow gloss over the destructive atheistic ideologies that have led to far greater loss of human life within just one century than "religion" (let alone "Christendom") with its wars, Inquisitions, and witch trials. Atheism has proven to be a far more destructive force than "religion." (d) Though Harris correctly defends knowledge of objective moral truths "without reference to scripture," he misses the greater point of how human value and dignity could emerge given naturalism's valueless, mindless, materialist origins. All humans are God's image-bearers, morally constituted to reflect God in certain ways: so atheists and theists alike can recognize objective right/wrong and human dignity — without special revelation (Romans 2:14,15). Naturalists still lack the proper metaphysical context for affirming such moral dignity and value.

Though OT ethics presents certain challenges, we have seen that the New Atheists often overstate and distort them. Their typi- cal rhetoric and often-simplistic arguments may score points with popular audiences, but their assertions present a lopsided picture of OT ethics and Yahweh's character.  


14. John Sailhamer, The Pentateuch as Narrative, 46–59; see also Sailhamer, Introduction to Theology, 272–89.
15. Paul Copan "Yahweh Wars and the Canaanites," Philosophy Christi n.s. 11/1 (2009), 73–90.
22. Richard Dawkins, A Devil's Chaplain (Boston: Houghton and Mifflin, 2003), 34.

QUESTIONS FOR SELF-REFLECTION OR GROUP DISCUSSION

1. Why is the teaching of the perfect goodness of God indispensable when it comes to the Christian faith?
2. What are some challenges to God's goodness that you have faced in your personal walk?
3. Which Old Testament laws and commands seem to pose the biggest challenge to God's goodness? How should Christians read the Old Testament and remain faithful to its authority as part of the Christian Bible?

RESOURCES FOR FURTHER STUDY


PAUL COPAN, PH.D., West Palm Beach, Florida, is professor and Pledger Family Chair of Philosophy and Ethics at Palm Beach Atlantic University in West Palm Beach, Florida. He is author and editor of a number of books, including When God Goes to Starbucks, True for You, But Not for Me, That’s Just Your Interpretation, Creation Out of Nothing, and Is God A Moral Monster? Making Sense Of The Old Testament God. He is also president of the Evangelical Philosophical Society.

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IS GOD’S LOVE LIMITED TO THE ELECT?

Rebutting a Calvinist Challenge to the Gospel

Gary Locke
the recent renaissance of Calvinism among evangelicals has brought to the fore the issue of the scope of Christ’s atoning death on the Cross. Many evangelical Christians simply assume that Christ died for all — that He bore the sins and suffered the punishment for every sinner. For the last four centuries, however, there has been a minority report among Protestants. Most Calvinists, followers of the French Reformer of Switzerland John Calvin (1509–64), have taught that Christ only bore the punishment for the sins of the elect — those unconditionally predestined by God for salvation. Contemporary Calvinists (they often prefer we call them Reformed Christians) call this doctrine “particular redemption” or “definite atonement.”

Among the contemporary evangelical defenders of limited atonement are, most notably, R.C. Sproul and John Piper. Sproul (b. 1939) has been an influential evangelical apologist and Reformed theologian for much of the last half of the 20th century. From his base in his Ligonier Ministries he has spoken on the radio, traveled to speak at numerous apologetics and theology conferences, and written many books — most of them dealing with God’s sovereignty from a strongly Reformed perspective. Piper (b. 1946), pastor of Minneapolis’ Bethlehem Baptist Church, and founder of Desiring God Ministries, also travels widely and speaks at large gatherings of evangelical Christians — including the Passion conferences attended by thousands of mostly Southern Baptist teens and twenties. He is a prolific author whose books, including Desiring God: Confessions of a Christian Hedonist (1986), have sold millions of copies. Like Sproul, Piper is a passionate promoter of five-point Calvinism.

Five-Point Calvinism

Five-point Calvinism is belief in the doctrines symbolized by the TULIP acronym: total depravity, unconditional election, limited atonement, irresistible grace, and perseverance of the saints. Calvinists created the acrostic about 1913, but the “doctrines of grace” it represents date back to Calvin’s successor — Theodore Beza (1519–1605) — principal of the Genevan Academy (a Reformed seminary in Geneva, Switzerland, founded by Calvin). Limited atonement stands at the center of this theological system. Sproul, Piper, and many other contemporary, influential evangelical theologians tenaciously hold and defend this position.

Limited atonement

What does limited atonement or particular redemption mean? According to Sproul, who prefers to call this doctrine “purposeful atonement,” it means that God intended Christ’s death on the Cross to secure the salvation of a definite number of fallen human persons — those unconditionally chosen by God. Like other Calvinists, Sproul argues that Christ’s substitutionary death (i.e., God inflicted on Christ the punishment for sins deserved by sinners) was of sufficient value to save everyone, but God only intended it to save the elect. In the most important sense, Christ only died for the elect and not for everyone.

For Sproul (and others like him), this doctrine is not dispensable; it is part and parcel of the TULIP system that they believe alone does justice to the sovereignty of God and the gift nature of salvation. One argument Sproul uses, following the Puritan
Universal atonement does not require universal salvation; it only requires the possibility of universal salvation.

Theologist John Owen (1616–83), is that, if Christ died for everyone alike, then everyone is saved. After all, so the argument goes, it would be unjust of God to punish the same sins twice — once by laying the punishment on Christ and another time by sending the sinner to hell.

Piper is equally passionate about limited atonement. Like Sproul, he does not consider it a minor point of theology. In an article entitled, “For Whom Did Christ Die? And What Did Christ Actually Achieve on the Cross for Those for Whom He Died?” Piper argues that it is not the Calvinist who limits the Atonement but the non-Calvinist who believes in universal atonement. The reason: Those who believe in universal atonement must say Christ’s death did not actually save anyone but only gave people opportunity to save themselves. Or they must embrace universalism.

Piper continues by arguing that Christ did actually die for all people but not in the same way. All people benefit from Christ’s death by, for example, receiving certain blessings in this life they would otherwise not have — but only the elect receive the benefit of salvation from it.

This doctrine of limited atonement is probably the most hotly debated of the five points of Calvinism among evangelicals. Evangelical theologian Vernon Grounds, former president of Denver Seminary, lashed out against the doctrine. Pointing to John 1:29; Romans 5:17–21; 11:32; 1 Timothy 2:6; Hebrews 2:9; and 1 John 2:2 he wrote, “It takes an exegetical ingenuity which is something other than a learned virtuosity to evacuate these texts of their obvious meaning: it takes an exegetical ingenuity verging on sophistry to deny their explicit universality.” Needless to say, many evangelicals, including some Calvinists, find this doctrine repugnant.

**Basis for limited atonement**

Before explaining why this doctrine is repulsive, it will be beneficial to look at the reasons why many Calvinists think so highly of it and promote it so passionately. Once again, what is this doctrine? It is that God intended Jesus’ death on the Cross to be a propitiation (substitutionary, atoning sacrifice) only for the sins of the elect — those God has selected to save apart from anything He sees in them or about them (other than His choice of them for His glory and good pleasure).

Why would anyone believe this? Proponents of limited atonement point to several Scriptures: John 10:15; 17:6, and similar verses in John 10–17; Romans 8:32; Ephesians 5:25–27; Titus 2:14.

Calvinists use John 10:15 to support their teaching: “The Father knows me and I know the Father — and I lay down my life for the sheep.” Many other verses in John say much the same — that Christ laid down His life for His sheep (i.e., His disciples and all who would come after them).

Calvinists also point to Romans 8:32: “He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all — how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?” They assume “us all” refers to the elect.

Ephesians 5:25–27 says, “Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless.” Calvinists believe this passage, like many others, refers only to the church as the object of Christ’s cleansing sacrifice.

Titus 2:14 reads: “Who gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are of his very own, eager to do what is good.” Calvinists believe that Paul, the author of Titus, seems to restrict the saving benefits of Christ’s death to “his people” which they equate with the elect.

Calvinists assume these verses and others like them teach that Christ died only for those chosen by God for salvation. But these verses do not teach Calvinistic beliefs. Nowhere does the Bible explicitly teach this Calvinist doctrine.

Calvinists read into these passages their belief that Christ only died for the church, for His people, for His sheep. These verses do not say Christ did not also die for others. And, as we will see, there are many passages that clearly teach Christ did die for everyone.

There is another reason Calvinists believe in limited atonement. If Christ died equally for everyone, they aver, then everyone is...
saved. They argue that those who believe in universal atonement face two unavoidable but biblically untenable options: either Christ’s death saved everyone or it saved no one. This argument is, however, fallacious. Universal atonement does not require universal salvation; it only requires the possibility of universal salvation.

It is possible for the same sins to be punished twice and that is what makes hell so absolutely tragic — it is totally unnecessary. God punishes those with hell who reject His Son’s substitution. An analogy will help make this clear. After the Vietnam War, President Jimmy Carter gave a blanket amnesty to all draft dodgers who fled to Canada and elsewhere. By presidential decree they were free to come home. Some did and some did not. Their crime was no longer punishable; but some refused to take advantage of the amnesty and punished themselves by staying away from home and family. Believers in universal atonement believe God allows sinners who refuse the benefit of Christ’s cross to suffer the punishment of hell in spite of the fact it is totally unnecessary.

Perhaps the most rhetorically powerful reason given for limited atonement is that offered by John Piper (and other Calvinists before him) who says in For Whom Did Christ Die? that those who believe in universal atonement “must say” that Christ’s death did not really save anyone but only gave people an opportunity to save themselves. This is totally fallacious reasoning.

Arminians (those who follow Jacob Arminius in rejecting unconditional election, limited atonement, and irresistible grace) believe Christ’s death on the Cross saves all who receive it by faith. Christ’s death secures their salvation — just as much as it secures the salvation of the elect in Calvinism. It guarantees that anyone who comes to Christ in faith will be saved by His death. This does not imply they save themselves. It simply means they accept the work of Christ on their behalf.

Responding to Calvinism

It’s difficult to resist the impression that Calvinists who believe in limited atonement do so not for clear biblical reasons but because they think Scripture allows it and reason requires it. There is nothing necessarily wrong with that, but at least some Calvinists such as Piper have criticized others for doing the same. Piper criticizes others for allegedly embracing doctrines only because Scripture allows them and logic requires them. It seems to many non-Calvinists, however, that believers in limited atonement do exactly that. Lacking any clear, unequivocal biblical support for this doctrine, they embrace it because they think Scripture allows it and their TULIP system logically requires it. After all, if election is unconditional and grace is irresistible, then it would seem that the atonement would be only for the elect.

Scripture contradicts limited atonement in John 3:16,17. Romans 14:15; 2 Corinthians 5:18,19; Colossians 1:19,20; 1 Timothy 2:5,6; 1 John 2:2. Everyone knows John 3:16,17: “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.” Typically, Calvinists respond that in these verses “world” refers to all kinds of people and not everyone. However, that would make it possible to interpret all the places where the New Testament reports that the “world” is sinful and fallen as meaning only some people — all kinds — are sinful and fallen. The Calvinist interpretation of John 3:16,17, seems to fit Vernon Grounds’ description of the faulty exegetical process used to defend limited atonement.

First John 2:2 is another passage we cannot reconcile with limited atonement: “He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world.” This passage completely undermines the Calvinist interpretation of “world” in John 3:16,17 because it explicitly states that Christ died an atoning death not only for believers, but also for everyone. Here “world” must include non-believers because “ours” refers to believers. This verse makes it impossible to say that Christ’s death benefits everyone, only not in the same way. (Piper says Christ’s death benefits the nonelected by giving them temporal blessings only.) John says clearly and unequivocally that Christ’s atoning sacrifice was for the sins of everyone — including...
A believer in limited atonement can never say to any random stranger or group: “God loves you and Christ died for your sins and mine; you can be saved.”

What about 2 Corinthians 5:18,19? “All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people’s sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation.” Calvinists sometimes argue that this passage supports limited atonement. After all, if God was in Christ not counting everyone’s sins against them, then everyone is saved. Therefore, they say, “everyone” must mean only the elect. But that’s not true. When Paul says that God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting people’s sins against them, He means if they repent and believe. In other words, the Atonement did reconcile God with the world so He could forgive; it satisfied the demands of justice so reconciliation is possible from God’s side. But it remains for sinners to accept that by faith. Then full reconciliation takes place.

Colossians 1:19,20 says, “For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, 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.” It is impossible to interpret “all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven” as referring only to the elect. This passage refutes limited atonement. So does 1 Timothy 2:5,6: “For there is one God and one mediator between God and mankind, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all people.” The only way a believer in limited atonement can escape the force of this passage is to interpret the Greek translated “all people” as somehow meaning “all kinds of people,” but that is not an interpretation allowed by the common use of the phrase in Greek literature outside the New Testament (or elsewhere in it).

Many Scriptures clearly indicate that Jesus’ atoning sacrifice was meant for everyone; that His substitutionary punishment was for all people. But there are two seldom discussed New Testament passages that absolutely undercut limited atonement: Romans 14:15 and 1 Corinthians 8:11. In these verses, Paul sternly warns Christians against causing people to be destroyed for whom Christ died. The Greek translation of the words “destroy” and “destroyed” in these verses cannot mean merely harmed or injured. Clearly Paul is warning people that it is possible to cause people for whom Christ died to go to hell (by causing them to stumble and fall by showing off one’s own liberty to eat meat sacrificed to idols). If TULIP Calvinism is correct, this warning is useless because this cannot happen. According to Calvinism, the elect, for whom Christ died, cannot be lost.

The weight of Scripture is clearly set against limited atonement. Calvinist interpretations of these and similar passages remind one of the sign outside a blacksmith’s shop referring to its artistic work with metals: “All kinds of fancy twisting and turning done here.” However, the problem with limited atonement goes beyond a few verses that Calvinists cannot explain without distorting their clear meanings. The greatest problem goes to the heart of the doctrine of God. Who is God and what is God like?

Limited Atonement and the Nature of God

If God is love (1 John 4:7) but intended Christ’s atoning death to be the propitiation for only certain people so only they have any chance of being saved, then “love” has no intelligible meaning when referring to God. All Christians agree that God is love. But
It's difficult to resist the impression that Calvinists who believe in limited atonement do so not for clear biblical reasons but because they think Scripture allows it and reason requires it.

Calvinists typically handle this in one of two ways. Some say that God's love is different from our love. But if it is that different, it is meaningless. If God's "love" has no similarity to anything we would call love, if it resembles hate more than love, then it loses all sense of meaning. Then when a person says God is love he might as well be using a nonsense word like “creech” — God is creech. Also, where did God better demonstrate His love than in Jesus Christ? But is Jesus Christ's love for people arbitrary and hateful to some? Or does Jesus Christ in His love for all people reveal the heart of God? Calvinism ends up having to posit a hidden God very much unlike Jesus Christ.

Another way Calvinists handle the love of God and try to reconcile it with limited atonement and double predestination (the two are really inseparable) is to say that God loves all people in some way but only some people (the elect) in all ways. Piper, for example, exalts the love of God for everyone — even the nonelect. He says that God bestows temporal blessings on the nonelect — meaning as they move toward their predestined eternal torment in hell. John Wesley, responding to a similar claim by Calvinists in his time, quipped that this is such a love as to make the blood run cold. Another response is that this simply means God gives the nonelect a little bit of heaven to take with them on their journey to hell. What kind of love is this — that gives temporal blessings and happiness to people chosen by God for eternal suffering in hell? After all, if Calvinism is correct, there is nothing blocking God from choosing all people for heaven, except, some say, His own glory. Some Calvinists say that God must manifest all His attributes and one attribute is justice that makes hell necessary. Again, however, that won’t work because the Cross was a sufficient manifestation of God’s justice.

Limited atonement makes indiscriminate evangelism impossible. A believer in limited atonement can never say to any random stranger or group: “God loves you and Christ died for your sins and mine; you can be saved.” And yet this is the very life blood of evangelism — telling the good news to all and inviting all to come to Jesus Christ with repentance and faith. Many Calvinists are evangelistic and missions minded, but in their evangelism and missions they cannot tell everyone within the sound of their voices that God loves them, Jesus died for them, and He wants them to be saved. They can proclaim the gospel (as they interpret it), but they cannot solicit faith by promising salvation through Christ to everyone they meet or to whom they preach.

Limited atonement is the Achilles’ heel of TULIP Calvinism; without it the other points of TULIP fall. If God is truly love, then Christ died for everyone that all may be saved. **NOTES**

4. Ibid., 48ff.

**ROGER E. OLSON, Ph.D.,** professor of theology, George W. Truett Theological Seminary of Baylor University, Waco, Texas. He authored Against Calvinism: Rescuing God’s Reputation From Radical Reformed Theology.
IS THE ATONEMENT DIVINE CHILD ABUSE?
A Response to Nonviolent Atonement Theories
I pondered the negative role reserved for the Heavenly Father. Though Jesus is thanked for graciously drinking our bitter cup and inviting us to His table, the role reserved for the Heavenly Father is entirely negative. The Father crushes Jesus, who serves to satisfy the Father’s wrath.

We could easily overlook the lack of a positive role for the Father if it were not symptomatic of a larger problem. Neglecting a positive role for the Father has historically been a problem in atonement theology. One recalls as an extreme example the famous sermon by the 18th-century theologian, Jonathan Edwards, entitled, *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God*. His sermon speaks of God’s sovereignty and holiness but not of His divine love. He describes God: “The God who holds you over the pit of hell, much as one holds a spider, or some loathsome insect over the fire, abhors you, and is dreadfully provoked: His wrath toward you burns like fire; He looks upon you as worthy of nothing else, but to be cast into the fire.” Edwards then introduced Jesus as the One who came to change this by taking the Father’s wrath for us so the Father could look differently on us.

Does the God of the Cross really see humanity as a nest of loathsome insects? Do we need Jesus to stop the Father from yearning to feed disgusting humans to the flames? We need to address this genuine distortion.
Atonement Theories

Satisfaction theory
The lack of attention to the positive role of the Father in the Atonement goes back in part to the medieval theologian, Anselm. He highlighted Jesus’ role on the Cross as satisfying God’s honor by providing an offering through His death that would restore the honor to God that our sin had injured. Anselm thought this act would also restore moral rectitude to the cosmos. He advocated his “satisfaction” theory of the Atonement to criticize the earlier idea that Jesus paid a ransom to the devil to gain our release from sin and death. Anselm rightly saw that the devil had no right to an offering. So Anselm replaced this terrible idea with a better alternative: Jesus offered himself on the Cross to the Father to restore divine honor. In this way, the Father could turn favorably to humanity. But is the Father not positively involved in the Atonement from the beginning, not simply waiting for Jesus to restore His honor before showing mercy, but rather upholding divine honor by showing mercy?

Penal theory
Anselm states briefly that the Father sent Jesus to the Cross, but Anselm does not elaborate positively on this important insight. Subsequent theologians added to Anselm’s theory by emphasizing Jesus’ role in appeasing the Father’s wrath, which we call the “penal” theory of atonement. The tendency then existed to stress the Father’s role as one of wrath and Jesus’ as one of vicarious suffering and grace. But this contrast seems to place the Father and Jesus in opposition to each other. We need to explain the penal doctrine of the Atonement in a way that avoids this opposition.

The need for such explanation is urgent, for the one-sided and distorted emphasis on the Cross as the appeasement of the Father’s violent wrath toward humanity has come under fire from a number of sources. Nonviolent atonement advocates maintain that the Father in penal theories of atonement comes off looking like an oppressive and violent patriarchal figure who abuses His Son out of a desire to crush humanity. Jesus appears like a passive victim who submits to the Father’s violent wrath so others can avoid it.

Dorothee Soelle is the key voice originally behind these criticisms. She calls the God of the penal atonement theory “sadistic” and the Christ of this theory “masochistic.” Others followed Soelle in calling the penal atonement theory divine or cosmic “child abuse.” Rather than encourage oppressed people to affirm their God-given dignity and resist abuse, this theory of atonement seemed to support violence and passive submission to it. Joan Carlson Brown and Rebecca Parker write, “The image of God the Father demanding and carrying out the suffering and death of His own Son has sustained a culture of abuse and led to the abandonment of victims of abuse and oppression.”

Nonviolent theory
To avoid any implication that the Father willed the violence of the Cross, J. Denny Weaver suggests that the Cross was not God’s will for Jesus’ mission. Weaver’s basic assumption is that Jesus’ nonviolent ethic demands a nonviolent Father as well. The Father’s will for Jesus was not in Jesus’ suffering and death but rather through His establishing God’s kingdom of peace on the earth. The Cross is sort of an occupational hazard that Jesus had to risk in seeking to bring the Kingdom to a violent world. God turned the Cross into a victory, but the Cross was not God’s intention in sending Jesus. Weaver’s book has become a major statement of the

Nonviolent atonement advocates assume Jesus’ nonviolent ethic demands a nonviolent Father.
We should not remove from the gospel the necessity of the Cross as the place where God overcomes wrath to extend grace to humanity.

**Biblical View of the Atonement**

The relationship between God and violence in Scripture is a complex issue, but in response we need to be careful not to throw the proverbial baby out with the bath water. It is important to talk about the Cross as the place where Christ bears divine wrath for us; we must not simply dismiss the penal doctrine of the Atonement. But we must be careful in how we describe the penal doctrine of the Atonement so we avoid misunderstanding. A valuable step toward doing so needs to involve the following points.

First, it is important to note that the Father sent Jesus to the Cross primarily out of love for humanity. The New Testament makes this point abundantly clear: “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him” (John 3:16,17). John elsewhere notes, “This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him” (1 John 4:9; cf. Romans 5:8). The Father loved the Son from before the creation of the world (John 17:24) and sent Jesus to the Cross to draw all of creation by the Spirit into the embrace of this love.

Second, we should not remove from the gospel the necessity of the Cross as the place where God overcomes wrath to extend grace to humanity. H. Richard Niebuhr complains that liberal theology advocates “[a] God without wrath, who brought people without sin into a kingdom without judgment, through the ministrations of a Christ without a Cross.” This complaint is still relevant today.

The wrath of which I speak is the alienation and condemnation to which God delivers the unjust — but only because they have chosen this path in their willful fleeing from God. Jesus bears this human condition on the Cross for us. The Heavenly Father laid it on Him, so He could give us life anew. Read Isaiah 53:6 in this light: “We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to our own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.”

Though Isaiah said the Lord God “crushed” the suffering servant (Isaiah 53:10), verse 6 indicates that God did so by laying on Him the full weight of our sinful flight from God. John 3:19 notes as well that divine judgment comes in the form of the darkness that people choose for themselves: “This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but people loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil.”

Paul also describes the wrath of God revealed from heaven (Romans 1:18) as God delivering sinners over to the deviant desires of their own hearts (1:24–32). But notice that in Romans the Father “delivers Christ over” to the same alienation and condemnation (“for our transgressions”) to save these sinners (4:25; 8:32). This act is descriptive of how the one God bears up under the wrath that we have brought on ourselves to draw us into the divine embrace. As Karl Barth noted, in Christ, the Judge becomes the judged so we could know God’s justice. In a more literary vein, C.S. Lewis said poetically of Christ’s death: “When a willing victim who had committed no treachery was killed in a traitor’s stead, the table would crack and death would start working backwards.”

Third, Jesus is not only human, He is also divine. Since the Father and Jesus are eternally distinct persons of the one indivisible Godhead, they are not opposed to each other in the event of the Cross. They act in concert with each other and the Holy Spirit as the one triune God in providing atonement for sinful humanity. In the Cross, Jesus did not simply reconcile us to a wrathful God; from a Trinitarian perspective it is more accurate to say that “God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ” (2 Corinthians 5:19) (i.e., saving the world through Him, John 3:17). Likewise, the Atonement was not simply Jesus’ act of taking God’s wrath for us; from a Trinitarian view it is more accurate to say that God was overcoming God’s own wrath in the Cross to extend grace to us.

In extending love to humanity, God had to overcome divine alienation and wrath and did so through the faithful journey of the divine Son to the Cross. The divine love poured out for sinful humanity on the Cross is a love wounded by human rejection and willing to bear the sins and punishment that humanity caused. In Jesus, God partook of
In extending love to humanity, God had to overcome divine alienation and wrath and does so through the faithful journey of the divine Son to the Cross.

Fourth, in sending Jesus to the Cross, the Father did not will violence and suffering; the Father wills instead to seek out the lost down the twisted paths they travel in their flight from God. This path involved suffering and violence to be sure. God willed from before the creation of the world to bear it for us in the Cross (Revelation 13:8).

Nothing is virtuous in this story about violence or suffering in itself. The gospel glorifies neither of these. In the Parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15), the father allows his son to squander his inheritance and to plunge himself into despair. The spurned father rejoices at his return. But the elder brother resists this gracious acceptance of the outcast younger son.

In telling this story, however, Jesus does not resist the acceptance of the outcasts and sinners. He is not like the elder son in the parable. In fact, Jesus is the faithful Son of the Heavenly Father who goes into the far country to find us and to bring us home.

There is no possibility of finding in the Parable of the Prodigal Son a sadistic father or a masochistic son. The father in the story does not will to inflict harm. Jesus as the faithful Son does not covet suffering. He desires the return of the outcasts and is willing to bear their shame to bring them home.

It is thus possible to note that Jesus had to go to Jerusalem to suffer and die to save humanity while still holding that He did this to liberate people from the debilitating effects of sin and oppression.

Courage is available in the way of the Cross for resisting destructive and manipulative forces and for affirming the fulfillment of God’s calling on our lives. A willingness to forgive our offenders in the spirit of the Cross breaks the cycle of violence and resists allowing the offender to exercise an enduring influence on us. Those facing unavoidable suffering can turn their path into a witness to the power of God’s transforming grace. It is not the suffering that brings grace, however; grace comes from the Lord.

Conclusion

Affirming a loving God does not require that we eliminate the valuable truth that Jesus in His divinely ordained mission had to suffer the violent results of human rejection and condemnation (Matthew 16:21). The two ideas go beautifully together. The loving God sent the Son down the path of violence, suffering, and condemnation because this was required to save us. It is true that the Cross implies judgment for those determined to persist in their paths of sin and rejection. But the Cross is primarily an enduring symbol of the fact God wills something very different for the world and was willing to suffer much to redeem it. The Cross is not an act of divine child abuse or violence. It is rather an act of radical love and liberation, a suffering love that is grieved and wounded by sin but still reaches out in grace to the offenders. “While we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Romans 5:8).

NOTES

7. This connection between Romans 1:24–28; 4:25; and 8:32 is especially clear in the Greek where Paul uses the same term: pærodoken (pæredoθē) (“delivering up” or “handing over”).
When you talk about matters of faith with your nonbelieving secular neighbors, what Christian belief do they object to most? Is it the biblical concept of hell? Your views on gay marriage? The inerrancy of Scripture? For many of your Muslim neighbors, these Christian beliefs are not offensive. Indeed, your Muslim neighbor may mostly agree with you on these points. But most Muslims do find deeply offensive another belief that is central to the Christian faith — the assertion that Jesus Christ is the “Son of God.”

In my 15 years living in an Islamic Republic in the Arab world, and my additional 12 years working daily with Muslims in the U.S. and around the world, I have found that many Muslims consider this Christian belief to be more offensive than any other. If you are a pastor who encourages your congregation to reach out in love to their Muslim neighbors, you must help them think through how to respond to Muslim concerns about this sacred title of our Savior.

Common Ground?

Before going deeper into this sharp difference between Muslims and Christians, let us remember that Christians do have some important common ground with Muslims regarding the person of Jesus. The Qur’an teaches that Jesus was born of a virgin (Sura 19:20); that He is a Prophet (Sura 2:136); that He is among those closest to God (3:45); that He taught a message of kindness and compassion (57:27); that He healed the sick and raised the dead by the power of God (3:49); that He miraculously fed the hungry (5:112ff.); that He is alive now in heaven (3:55); and that He will return at the end of the age (43:61). Remarkably, the Qur’an affirms that Jesus is the Messiah and the Word of God (3:45 and 4:171), though most Muslims do not understand these titles the way...
Say: He is God the One; God the Absolute Eternal. He does not beget, nor is he begotten, nor is there anything like unto Him.
If you remove the Trinity, the Incarnation, the Cross, and the Bible from the Christian faith, you have removed virtually all that Christians consider necessary to salvation.

Christians do. Muslims revere Jesus. Most will not say His name without immediately adding “Peace be upon Him” — which in Arabic need not imply He is in need of peace, but rather that we hail Him with respect.

At the same time, however, most Muslims feel strongly that Jesus did not die on a cross. They believe He did not rise from the dead or atone for human sin, and that people should not worship Him as God. Muslims generally believe that the One God of Abraham is not triune and has not become incarnate among us. Though they believe the New Testament, Torah, and Psalms are God’s inerrant Word in the original manuscripts, most also believe that people have so thoroughly altered the original text that the Bible we have today is not reliable. They often feel most strongly, however, that it is deeply offensive to refer to Jesus as the Son of God.

These are not marginal issues. If you remove the Trinity, the Incarnation, the Cross, and the Bible from the Christian faith, you have removed virtually all that Christians consider necessary to salvation. In articles elsewhere I have suggested a way forward on some of these other issues. Here I will focus on helping you equip your congregation to respond constructively to Muslims’ objection to the title “Son of God.”

The Importance of Context

Most Muslim-Christian conversations on this topic take place in a polemical context. Search the blogosphere and you will find Muslims and Christians saying nasty things to each other about the doctrine of Christ’s divine Sonship. The problem with this is that it is very possible to win an argument while losing a friend — and alienating that friend from Jesus.

In Matthew 18:15, Jesus reminds us that when we disagree with a friend, the goal of our conversation should be to win “your brother or sister,” not merely to win the argument. If you give your congregation powerful apologetics to prove that Jesus is the divine Son of God, but your congregation does not know how to communicate that message in love, you will have failed to equip your congregation.

We must first reach out in simple, warm friendship to our Muslim neighbors. I am not implying that giving verbal expression to one’s faith is not critically important — only that this expression must take place in a context of friendship, love, and mutual trust and respect. Christians should have no fear if opportunities for conversations about faith arise. Unlike most nonbelieving Americans, many Muslims are delighted to talk about religious questions with their Christian friends. Of course, for friendship to be genuine, we must see it as valuable in itself, not only as a means to an end.

The most important key to relationships with Muslim friends is giving and receiving hospitality. If a Muslim friend drops in to see you, always remember to offer something to eat or drink. Invite them and their family over for a meal, and accept their invitations for meals. Make sure to invite Muslims of the same sex as you, or else include spouse(s) or same-sex relatives in the invitation. When you invite them, make sure to not serve pork/ham/bacon and follow the Assemblies of God position paper in abstaining from alcohol. It may help if you reassure Muslim friends in your invitation that you will not serve pork or alcohol.

In my experience, when I discuss Christ’s divine Sonship with a Muslim acquaintance in a context of polemics and mistrust, neither of us progress in helping each other understand what we believe and why it is important to us. But when we build a friendship through breaking bread together, and then talk respectfully about what we believe, suddenly we are able to communicate in a meaningful way.

Not What We Say, But What They Hear

In talking with Muslims about Jesus, we must learn what we call “receptor-oriented communication.” We must think not only about what we intend to say, but also about what others are hearing. When Christians use the phrase “Son of God,” most Muslims hear something very different from what Christians think they have said and from what the Bible affirms. To understand this more deeply, let us look first at the Qur’an and then the Bible to see what they say about the term “Son of God.”

Muslims’ daily prayers involve reciting short passages from the Qur’an. Many Muslims daily recite Surat al-Ikhlas (112), one of the shorter chapters in the Qur’an: “Say: He is God the One. God the Absolute Eternal. He does not beget, nor is he begotten, nor is...
Most Muslims find deeply offensive the belief that is central to the Christian faith — the assertion that Jesus Christ is the “Son of God.”

Essential Scriptural Integrity
For many years Assemblies of God World Missions has partnered in ministry with Wycliffe Bible Translators. Presently, 35 Assemblies of God missionaries work with Wycliffe. In the last year, for the first time, AGWM leadership has questioned the propriety of this long-held partnership. A major factor in this issue is how Wycliffe translates the Scriptures for Muslim readers.

Because of Islamic beliefs concerning the Trinity and Jesus as the Son of God, some translations designed for Muslim readers remove familial terms, such as Father, Son, Son of God, Son of the Living God, and Son of Man from the text. In their place, they use alternative terms, such as, “Beloved of God,” a familiar Arabic Muslim characterization often used when referring to Muhammad.

Wycliffe addresses its translation standards on its ministry website: “In certain circumstances, specifically where it has been demonstrated that a literal translation of ‘Son of God’ would communicate wrong meaning, an alternative form with equivalent meaning may be used.” The problem arises in what Wycliffe means by communicating “wrong meaning” and “equivalent meaning.”

Dr. Greg Mundis, AGWM executive director, says, “Our Fellowship is deeply committed to the integrity of Scripture. I believe we have done due diligence in researching, reflecting, and searching both the Scriptures and our hearts. This places us in a position in which we cannot agree with Wycliffe/SIL’s stated and publicized position.”

Since our public statement in the March 4, 2012 issue of the Pentecostal Evangel, we are gratified by recent expressions from Wycliffe, assuring us that they are seeking God’s guidance and re-evaluating their methodology in Bible translation.

With more than 4 billion spiritually lost people in the world, the divinity of Jesus Christ and His relationship with the Father are essential to the message we proclaim.

— RANDY HURST, AGWM communications director, Springfield, Missouri
More than 95 percent of the problem over the title “Son of God” is a problem of miscommunication, rather than an objection to Christian doctrine.

the Bible intends. Although this proposal reflects traditional translation principles, I disagree with it for two reasons.

First, I have yet to see an alternate metaphor that communicates the full range of diverse, complex, and powerful meanings bound up in the words “Father” and “Son” in the Bible (see below for analysis of those meanings). Second, the term “Son of God” is so central to the Bible and to Christian theological tradition that most Muslims are very much aware that the phrase is supposed to be in the Bible. If we replace it with a dynamic equivalent, we only seem to confirm Muslims’ concern that Christians feel free to alter the biblical text when it suits us. We thereby undermine the credibility of the Bible.

But before dismissing this suggestion too quickly, it is important to understand what a powerful emotional impact the term “Son of God” has on many Muslims. Linguists tell us that the emotional connotations of certain expressions are so deeply embedded in our neural pathways that even if we try to apply a new meaning to the expression, we cannot separate it from its older emotional associations. Even Muslim-background believers in Christ, who understand what “Son of God” means and accept that meaning, sometimes struggle with using the phrase. The feelings they associate with the phrase “Son of God” — developed in early childhood — mean that it inevitably prompts them to think of the idea of illegitimate offspring of a sexual union between God and Mary.

Does the suggestion that Jesus is illegitimate offend you? What about the notion that God had sexual intercourse with Mary? Of course such a concept offends! And it should. But this is precisely how many Muslim friends feel even after their Christian friends have tried to clarify what Christians do and do not mean by the term “Son of God.”

This is still not sufficient reason to change the way we translate Scripture. But it is sufficient reason to be extremely careful about how we use this term with our Muslim friends. It is better first to establish a warm friendship built on mutual trust and mutual respect than to use the term lightly or carelessly. And most important: Never use the term without immediately explaining what you do and do not mean by it.

What Does “Son of God” Mean in the Bible?
The phrase “Son of God” has different meanings in different contexts in the Bible. The first sense, which most Bible scholars see as its most common meaning in the Gospels, is simply a messianic title — more or less equivalent to “Messiah,” “Son of David,” or “King of Israel.” Matthew 26:63; John 1:49; 11:27; and 20:31 provide examples of this. The origin of this term as a messianic title comes from 2 Samuel 7 and parallel passages in 1 Chronicles 17 and 22. David wanted to build a temple for the Lord, but the Lord promised to raise up a descendant of David who would build an eternal temple and whose throne God would establish forever. God says of this future messianic ruler: “I will be his father, and he will be my son. I will never take away my love from him” (1 Chronicles 17:13).

So far, most Muslims would not disagree with this. In these passages the title “Son of God” may not necessarily imply any divine status (but see Psalm 45:6). It simply means the promised messianic ruler who has a special love relationship with God. In no sense does it imply literal, carnal begetting. But in other biblical passages “Son of God” (or the plural “children of God”) has other meanings.

A second sense in which the term is used is in John 1:12,13 — one of many passages in the Bible that refer to believers in Jesus as “children of God.” Clearly this does not refer to literal, carnal begetting; indeed, verse 13
explicitly rejects the idea of any sexual begetting. Rather, this refers to a metaphorical, spiritual relationship of love.

A third sense is in Acts 17:28,29, which says that all human beings are in some sense “God’s offspring” (obviously a different sense from John 1:12). And Luke 3:38 refers to Adam as a “son of God.” Again this is clearly not referring to any kind of literal, carnal begetting.

Though most Muslims would not use the term “children of God” to refer to believers in general or to human beings in general, my experience is that in a nonpolemical context of friendship, most Muslims agree (with qualifications) that they do not find this sense of the term offensive. Indeed, on a few occasions I have heard Muslim leaders and scholars use the term “children of God” in reference to believers in the God of Abraham or to human beings in general. Similarly, most Muslims would not refer to God as our “Father” in this sense, but they do not necessarily find this offensive. On a few occasions, I have heard Muslim leaders and scholars affirm (with qualifications) that God is our Father in the sense of being a loving Provider who cares for us, disciplines us, teaches us, and takes delight in us.

**God the Son?**

There is a critically important fourth sense in which the Bible uses “Son of God,” notably in several passages in John. Here the term is more-or-less equivalent to the “Word of God” who is God’s self-expression and the visible manifestation of the invisible God.

John 1 says the Word of God was eternally with God and is God, and that through God’s Word all things were created, and that this Word was manifested in Jesus Christ, and that we have seen His glory. In verse 18 it adds (though the Greek here is open to other translations): “No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is himself God and is in closest relationship with the Father, has made him known.” John then used the term “Son” in this sense in several passages.

In John 5:18–26, Jesus says that everyone should “honor the Son just as they honor the Father. Whoever does not honor the Son does not honor the Father, who sent him.” This passage also seems to affirm that by talking about His relationship with God in this way Jesus was “making himself equal [or identical] with God.” In John 10:30, Jesus says, “‘I and the Father are one.’” And in John 14:9, Jesus says, “Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father.”

Biblical texts like these launched a centuries-long process of theological reflection on the relationship of the Word/Son to God the Father, in light of the Bible’s strong assertion that God is One. This led to the articulation of what we now call the doctrine of divine Trinity. Today, many Christians, when they use the term “Son of God,” really mean “God the Son, the Second Person of the Trinity.” It is important to remember that the Bible does not use the term in precisely that way. That usage reflects the mature theological formulations of later centuries. But it is equally important to remember that the Bible does use the term in ways that lead inevitably to an understanding of God as triune.

Though the Qur’an refers to Jesus as God’s Word, most Muslims do not understand that term in the way the Bible does. But even on this point it is clear that the biblical term “Son” is not referring to literal, carnal begetting. It is describing a unique, eternal, spiritual relationship between Jesus and God. Muslims’ objection here is not to the term “Son” itself, but to the idea that God was manifest in human flesh and that Jesus Christ is that manifestation.

On that question we can have a more constructive conversation if we think about the relationship of God’s Word to God’s own Being. The Islamic theological tradition has a rich heritage of vigorous debate about the relationship of God’s Word to God’s Essence. The Qur’an, like the Bible, teaches that all things were created by God’s Word — by God’s speaking to them and saying “Be!” (e.g. Sura 16:40). The majority Sunni community concluded therefore that God’s Word itself is eternal and uncreated. They also concluded that God’s Word is not identical with God’s Essence, nor is it anything other than God; rather God’s Word eternally and uncreatedly subsists in God’s Essence. Some Sunni theologians concluded further that since God’s Word is manifest in the Holy Qur’an, therefore the Qur’an is both the eternal, uncreated quality of Speech in God and also the created, temporal expression of that eternal Word.

Christians do have some important common ground with Muslims regarding the person of Jesus — more than we do with any other religion.
When many Christians try to explain their faith to a Muslim friend, they unintentionally express views that make them feel?

4. What does the Bible mean by “Son of God”?  

5. How might you discuss these questions with a Muslim friend?

QUESTIONS FOR SELF-REFLECTION OR GROUP DISCUSSION
1. How do you see the social context in which Muslims and Christians talk about this issue?
2. What beliefs about Jesus do Muslims and Christians have in common?
3. What does “Son of God” mean to Muslims, and how does that make you feel?
4. What does the Bible mean by “Son of God”?  
5. How might you discuss these questions with a Muslim friend?

Some important differences exist between this doctrine and the mainstream Christian understanding of the two natures of Christ — divine (uncreated) and human (created) — and of the relationship of the divine Word/Logos to the Father. I do not propose to minimize or ignore those differences. But there are enough similarities that this can serve as a bridge for understanding, so when Christians explain what they believe, Muslims may understand accurately what their Christian friends intended to say, whether or not they agree.

Unintentional Heresies
Unfortunately, many Christians are ill-informed about their own faith. When they try to explain their faith to a Muslim friend, they unintentionally express views the Church has historically understood as heretical.

For example, the Qur’an asserts that Jesus was created like Adam from the dust (e.g. 3:59). In response, some Christians stoutly assert that Jesus is in no sense a created human being. Nonetheless, traditional Christian doctrine holds that Jesus has two natures — divine and human — united in one person. His divine nature (the Word/Logos) is uncreated (John 1:1). But His human nature is like us in every way except sin (Hebrews 2:17; 4:15), created from the dust and temporal just like us. To deny Jesus’ fully humanness is conventionally referred to as “the Docetist heresy.”

Other Christians, when talking with Muslim friends, fall into what is known as “the Apollinarian heresy” — the belief that Jesus’ soul was divine and was clothed in a human body. The problem with this is that if Jesus did not have a fully human soul, then He was not like us in every way — and tempted like us — yet without sin.

Other Christians, seeking to be sensitive to their Muslim friends, emphasize so strongly the separation between human and divine in Christ that they describe Jesus as nothing more than a human being indwelt by God. This is often called “the Nestorian heresy” (though the historical Nestorian held more nuanced views).

Talking with Muslim friends will very likely put to the test how well your congregation understands their own faith about the person of Christ. The four most common errors into which lay Christians (and some pastors) unintentionally slip are the following: 1) forgetting that Christ in His divine nature as the Logos is fully God, 2) forgetting that in His full human nature Christ is of the very same essence as we are, 3) forgetting that these two natures are indissolubly united in one person, and 4) forgetting that that union does not take away the distinction between the two natures.

Conclusion
As pastor, the more you equip your congregation to understand sound doctrine about the person of Christ, the more you will have equipped them to respond faithfully to questions raised by their Muslim friends. And in the process, you will have also equipped them at a deeper level for the life of faith itself — because our salvation depends on the person of Christ. As many Christian thinkers through the centuries have pointed out: “If Christ were not God, He could not save us, because only God can save us. But if Christ were not human, He could not save us because only someone who is like us in every way except sin can represent us as our high priest offering himself in atonement for our sins.” The salvation of the human race depends upon the fact Jesus Christ is both fully divine and fully human, and that these two natures are united but distinct in one person — the Son of God.

NOTE

JOSEPH CUMMING is an Assemblies of God minister who lived 15 years in North Africa. He serves as director of the Reconciliation Program at Yale University’s Center for Faith and Culture. www.josephcumming.com
Friedman is a strong advocate of an ideology of pluralism that embraces religious diversity and allows equal recognition of alternative faith communities, so people can nurture their faith without claiming exclusive truth. Citing Rabbi David Hartman in support of his view, Friedman asks: “Can Islam, Christianity, and Judaism know that God speaks Arabic on Fridays, Hebrew on Saturdays, and Latin on Sundays, and that He welcomes different human beings approaching Him through their own history, out of their language and cultural heritage?”

Religious conflict marks the post-9/11 world. Many today, however, see the real enemy of global peace and harmony as not terrorism per se or religious violence, but religious fundamentalism or totalitarianism. In an article entitled “The Real War”1 published in the wake of 9/11, New York Times columnist, Thomas Friedman, candidly expresses this view, placing the blame for 9/11 squarely at the feet of what he terms the ideology of religious totalitarianism — “a view of the world that my faith must reign supreme and can be affirmed and held passionately only if all others are negated.” He places all faiths that come out of the biblical tradition — Judaism, Christianity, and Islam — within this category because of their tendency to believe they have exclusive truth.

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Is single-minded fanaticism a necessity
for passion and religious survival, or can we have a multilingual view of God — a notion that God is not exhausted by just one religious path?" This is a classic pluralist strategy of stereotyping religions that lay claims to absolute truth as "single-minded fanaticism" and trivializing the differences between religions as essentially linguistic, reflecting historically and culturally conditioned responses to ultimate reality. The issue is one with serious implications, raising a series of tough questions, some of which strike at the jugular of the Christian faith.

In the midst of a society that is increasingly multireligious and culturally diverse, what should the Christian posture be toward the diverse faiths of our neighbors? Do we view them as enemy-occupied territory that we need to conquer for Christ, or pilgrims traveling on different paths, eventually leading to the same destination? When we confess Jesus as the universal Lord and Savior, does this mean that Christianity is the only true religion and that there is no truth or goodness whatsoever in any other religion? If every religion claims to be the only true one and sees its mission as converting those of other faiths, will it not intensify religious bigotry, fanaticism, and communal strife?

**The Seduction of Pluralism**

Plurality of religions and cultures has been an integral feature of life within the human community since time immemorial. However, the twin forces of modernization and globalization have helped give rise to a phenomenon that is distinctively modern, both in terms of the cultural diversity experienced by societies today, and the contemporary response to this reality within the global cultural environment. While *plurality* refers simply to the fact of cultural and religious diversity, *pluralism* more properly describes an egalitarian perspective that maintains a rough parity among religions concerning religious truth.

Pluralism holds that no one religion can claim to be somehow normative and superior to others.
effective in its own way in each religion.

A complex set of historical and sociological factors have led to the growing attraction pluralism holds for people in our world today. For much of the history of the world most people lived in isolation from the ethnic and cultural other. The advent of globalization, however, has resulted in unprecedented proximity to one another of people of different religions and cultures. Travel and technology have brought about a mingling of peoples and cultures that our parents could not have imagined.

Today, interconnectedness between different corners of the globe has changed our world irrevocably so our planet has become a web of crisscrossing influences. The cultural "other" has thus become less alien and unfamiliar resulting in increased acceptance of difference. An important by-product of this intermingling of cultures is the idealization of ethnic and religious diversity and skepticism toward claims of absolute truth in religion.

The modern encounter between cultures can be an exotic and exhilarating experience, but it is also fraught with tension and potential for violence. Religion, which is at the heart of most cultures, has been the most powerful source of social conflict in recent times.

The rise of religious fundamentalism is thus another factor that has added to the seduction of pluralism in our times, since some would argue that fundamentalist ideology in any religion appears to generate hatred, suspicion, and fear in its followers toward other religions. Recent works documenting the rise of religious terrorism point out the close connection that we often observe between religious fundamentalism and terrorist violence. In this context pluralism appears to offer an attractive ideological basis for social tranquility.

The Challenge of Pluralism
The ideology of pluralism has been steadily gaining credibility and spreading its influence in recent decades. It forms an unofficial orthodoxy in much of academia today, is widespread in popular contemporary culture, and is firmly entrenched within the entertainment and media elite. A matter of serious concern, however, is its growing acceptance among professing Christians. Consider, for instance, two sample statements from Christians based on interviews conducted by sociologist Christian Smith in a study of American Christianity:

"I am not a believer in missionaries. If we want to go to Africa and provide medical help and teach people how to farm, great. But if we go to Japan and try to convert Shintoists, no way. If they came here and tried that on me, I'd get mad, and I think they have every right to feel the same. Christianity is great. If I'm anything, I'm a Christian. But I think that others have a right to believe for themselves; and if they go to hell, they just took the wrong turn."

"To say that other religions are wrong is self-centered and egocentric. I am not even comfortable with saying all religions point to the same God. Whatever trips your trigger is fine with me, if that's your belief system. We are mortal. Who is to say who is right and wrong? If it helps you get through your life and helps bring meaning to your life, then fine."

These are not the opinions of radical relativists or atheists, but self-confessed Christians who have bought into the pluralist ideology and view Christ as one among many alternative paths to God.

Pluralism raises crucial questions concerning the nature and purpose of Christian mission and Christianity itself. The Christian gospel maintains that all humans are sinners in need of redemption, and that God desires the salvation of peoples of every race, culture, and religion. It also asserts that God's salvation comes to us through a particular person — Jesus Christ — the decisive self-disclosure of God who took upon himself the sins of the world, and that only by faith in Him can human beings be restored to right relationship with God. Pluralism rejects this understanding of the gospel as intellectually untenable and morally repugnant. It strikes at the nerve center of Christian faith at three crucial points.

First, pluralism challenges the claim of historic Christianity to have privileged access to divine revelation in the unique authority accorded to the 66 books of the Protestant canon. Pluralists assert that tolerance toward other religions requires that Christians accept the scriptures of people of other faiths as
possessing the same authority as the Bible. Biblical Christianity, on the other hand, maintains that while the doctrine of general revelation does provide a basis for acknowledging the presence of truth in other religions (Romans 1:18ff; 2:12–16; Acts 14:15ff), this does not have the same authority or salvific value as the revelation in Christ.

Second, pluralism seems to lay the axe to the central constitutive claim of the Christian faith — that Jesus of Nazareth was not simply one of many, or even the greatest of all human religious figures, but He is the decisive self-disclosure of the eternal God himself. Pluralists regard this as an arrogant claim, an impossible obstacle in the movement toward interreligious harmony so essential to world peace. While Christians may hold that Jesus is unique and normative for them, they cannot claim that Jesus is unique or normative in a universal sense. Jesus may be the Savior for Christians, but He is not the only Savior for all peoples. Pluralists thus seek to frame a radical revisionist Christology that effectively empties Jesus of any decisive claims.

A third serious problem with pluralism is its belief that different religions represent many different paths leading to the same ultimate goal. The different religious traditions thus merely describe responses from different contexts within which men and women experience essentially the same salvation/enlightenment. Pluralists assume that sincere and morally respectable people simply cannot be mistaken about basic religious beliefs, especially when such beliefs and practices seem to have beneficial effects. This perspective understandably has some emotional appeal, but clearly undermines the grounds and motivation for Christian mission.

Pluralism Unmasked

Pluralism manifests itself in a wide range of expressions, from a rather crude, undeveloped intuition that God will accept sincere and good people of any or no faith to sophisticated philosophical models. But is the pluralist position tenable? Rarely, if ever, do we come across serious attempts at a biblical defense of pluralism. A relatively modern trend, pluralism also has little or no support in church tradition. Consequently, theological criteria employed in pluralist constructions tend to be arbitrary. Pluralism, however, may be weighed and found wanting on its own terms. We will see that it fails to hold together both empirically and logically as we interrogate it along two lines: 1] Does it fit the facts? Does the actual data of religions and religious experience support the pluralist claim? 2] Does it make sense? Is it logically coherent and consistent as an alternative solution to the problem of religious diversity?

Does it fit the facts?

The first big problem pluralists have to contend with is the problem of conflicting truth claims. Do the different religions all make essentially the same claims and teach basically the same truth? Even a cursory survey of the world’s living religions reveals they have marked differences in their essential affirmations. Let’s illustrate by comparing three cardinal beliefs of three of the world’s major religions.

What is God [the religious ultimate] like? Allah is the one eternal creator God in Islam. Muslims regard any attempt to blur the distinction between the Creator and creation as idolatry. There is no one concept of the religious ultimate common to all Buddhists. In Theravada Buddhism, nirvana is the ultimate reality — the condition of complete cessation of attachment; in Mahayana Buddhism, Dharmakaya, the all-inclusive Law Body of the Buddha essence is the ultimate; and in Zen Buddhism, the ultimate reality is sunyata or emptiness.

In Hinduism, the highest philosophical conception of ultimate reality is monistic: the absolute, impersonal Being is nirguna Brahman of advaita Vedanta. Popular Hinduism, on the other hand, is polytheistic with a pantheon consisting of a mind-boggling 330 million male and female deities. There are also monotheistic sects within Hinduism as well as atheistic Hindus who are pure materialists.

What is the nature of the human predicament? For Islam, the ultimate sin is shirk, associating anything created with Allah, and idolatry is unambiguously condemned. Sin is more a weakness, a defect, or imperfection than a radical corruption of the nature and will. While there are some minor differences, Hinduism and Buddhism both share the belief

Many today see the real enemy of global peace and harmony as not terrorism or religious violence, but religious fundamentalism or totalitarianism.
The inevitable starting point in any attempt to come to grips with the message of Jesus must always be Jesus himself.

that humankind is trapped within samsara, a cycle of rebirth and transmigration based on karma. The root problem of human existence is not moral sin, but innate, primordial ignorance regarding the true nature of reality.

What is the nature of salvation/liberation? According to Islam, a glorious future salvation awaits the faithful: on the Day of Judgment Allah will admit those whom he declares worthy to the delights of Paradise. In Hinduism, salvation is moksha — total liberation from the chains of karma and the cycle of rebirth. People can attain this in one of three ways: the way of selfless or disinterested action [karma marga]; the way of mystical knowledge [jnana marga]; the way of devotion to a personal deity [bhakti marga].

All Buddhists view salvation as release from samsara through nirvana, the complete elimination of desire and the conditions producing rebirth. But while some regard this as strictly resulting from one's own efforts, others regard self-effort as futile and maintain that only faith in the mercy and merit of another can bring enlightenment.

Is the ultimate reality personal or impersonal? Is there one God, many deities or no higher Being of any kind? Is the human predicament the result of moral sin or cosmic illusion? Is salvation essentially a release from the cycle of rebirths, or the promise of a blissful, sensual paradise rewarded to the faithful?

Too much diversity of beliefs exists in the various religions, and many cardinal assertions are in fact mutually incompatible. This forces pluralists to resort to a reductionist reinterpretation of religious beliefs and practices in ways often unacceptable to orthodox followers of religions. The pluralist argument, that despite their divergent beliefs that all religions are more or less equally true, is thus clearly untenable. The facts simply do not fit. Pluralists must "chip" these facts if they are to fit the theory.

Does it make sense?

An essential premise in the pluralist vision is that if the various religions of the world surrender their divisive, tradition-specific distinctives in favor of pluralist approaches, religious harmony will automatically follow. The pluralist thesis rests on the assumption that there is no privileged religious tradition. A critical question for pluralists: Is there such a thing as a nontradition-specific approach?

Let's test this against the views of a leading modern proponent of pluralism, John Hick. In Hick's view, the best hypothesis that explains religious plurality positively is: All religions are paths to the Real. This is most plausible because it does justice to the wide range of religions. The Real is ultimately beyond all description and certainly not exhausted in the descriptions of the various religions, all of which are partially true and partially false.¹

The crux of the matter here is simple: How does Hick know what is true and false in the descriptions of the various religions? What criteria does he employ in making such judgments? More specifically, how does Hick know all that he asserts about the nature of the Real? Hick's definition of the Real is intended to be all-inclusive, but in effect it excludes all forms of orthodox religious belief, Christian or otherwise, which may claim that the Real has revealed itself. But how does Hick reject all of the contrary claims as false? He does so based on the tradition-specific starting point of liberal modernity, influenced by eastern mystical monism.

This is the point at which the pluralist project fails miserably: the flawed assumption that it is possible to have a helicopter vantage point above all of the religions from which

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“Here’s the secret to Sunday School. Whenever they ask you a question, just answer ‘Jesus’ or ‘God.’ You’ll get it right most of the time.”
we can formulate transcendent theologically neutral criteria for evaluating religious truth claims. The fact is, there is no such privileged high ground in any theological evaluation of religious truth claims. Like all other religious truth claims, pluralist truth claims are also inevitably tradition-specific. This, then, is the most serious weakness of the pluralist position — the huge logical inconsistency inherent in its attempt to deny the right of other religions to make any privileged claims even as pluralism itself employs tradition-specific criteria in evaluating religious beliefs.3

Since all pluralists are committed to holding some form of tradition-specific truth criteria, nothing called pluralism really exists. When we unmask pluralist ideology, we see it for what it is — an alternative, syncretistic religious ideology that makes exclusive truth claims about the nature of reality just like any other religious system of belief.

The Incomparable Christ — Pluralism’s Nemesis

The inevitable starting point in any attempt to come to grips with the message of Jesus must always be Jesus himself. What did Jesus say? What did Jesus claim to do? Who did Jesus claim to be? The New Testament portrait of Jesus is of a man without any equal. His birth is miraculous. He makes claims to deity: authority to forgive sins, to give life to the dead, and to judge the world. He predicts His own death and resurrection and then fulfills the prediction. Those who recorded the details of Jesus’ life were convinced He was God in the flesh, and that in His life, death, and resurrection God has provided salvation for all.

If for whatever reason we doubt the reliability of the New Testament and its witness to Jesus’ life and ministry does not convince us, we should simply walk away from Christ and the Christian faith. We have no right to select facts arbitrarily from the New Testament record and fashion a Jesus of our own making who we can then accommodate within our prefabricated presuppositions. This is precisely what Christian pluralists try but fail to do convincingly, because pluralism meets its nemesis when it comes face to face with the incomparable Christ, who declared himself to be “the way and the truth and the life” (John 14:6).

As followers of Jesus Christ, what we have to share is not essentially a set of timeless truths or a sophisticated ethical system, but a story — His story — the story of Jesus. We did not invent or create this story. God has entrusted it to us, and we have no right to change it or keep it to ourselves. We do our best to share this story noncoercively, sensitively, and humbly with neighbors of other faiths (1 Peter 3:15). We must be willing to exercise tolerance as we allow others the same freedom to practice their faith as we desire for ourselves. We must also not hesitate to acknowledge any rays of truth, goodness, or beauty that we observe in the devotion, culture, or lifestyle of people of other faiths. But we must never cease to proclaim: “That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched … concerning the Word of life” (1 John 1:1) — our unique and incomparable Christ, the Savior of the world. @

NOTES

QUESTIONS FOR SELF-REFLECTION OR GROUP DISCUSSION

1. What can Christians do to avoid the stigma of religious totalitarianism?
2. In what ways might it be possible to affirm our distinctive Christian convictions and share Christ with neighbors of other faiths without arousing violence?
3. Why will God not welcome those who approach Him through their own history, out of their language and cultural heritage?
4. How might we confess Jesus as the universal Lord and Savior and still acknowledge truth, goodness, or beauty in other religions?

RESOURCES FOR FURTHER STUDY


IVAN SATYAVRATA, Ph.D., senior pastor of the Assemblies of God, Kolkata, India, and former president of Southern Asia Bible College in Bangalore, India.
The people in your pews face this question from their Calvinist friends. Many may know that we believe people can abandon their salvation, but they may not know how to respond with Scripture. This article provides the theological basis for our belief concerning eternal security and also ways you can help your people respond to those who challenge their beliefs.

Calvinistic Teaching
According to most Calvinists, a person was not a Christian in the first place if he or she departs from the faith. A number of moderate Calvinists, including popular Bible teacher Charles Stanley, hold to a variation of eternal security, a teaching often called “once saved, always saved.” This idea argues that if we have ever made a salvation decision, we can in no way lose or abandon that salvation, even if appearances are otherwise. Stanley states, “God does not require a constant attitude of faith in order to be saved — only an act of faith in Christ.” Even if we die in a completely reprobate state, cursing God, and rejecting any relationship with Him, we would still spend eternity in His presence. Stanley further states, “Believers who lose or abandon their faith will retain their salvation, for God remains faithful,” and “even if a believer for all practical purposes becomes an unbeliever, his salvation is not in jeopardy.”

Christians seem to agree on this: “If you end up in heaven, you have been saved.” The process of how we end up in heaven brings with it controversy. In John 3:16, we encounter the God who loved, gave, and saved. He assures us that His intent is not condemnation but salvation (verse 17). He repeats this promise of salvation, followed by a stern warning in John 3:18: “Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because they have not believed in the name of God’s one and only Son.” But what is the fate of those who believed and then afterward rejected salvation?

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A number of present-day teachers eloquently propose that once you have gained salvation, you cannot lose it. Does Scripture clearly refute this position?

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for “if the sins you commit after becoming a Christian can annul your relationship with the Savior, those sins were not covered at Calvary.” Another danger seen by Stanley is that salvation becomes a matter of faith and works, not faith alone.

Biblical Response
What does the Bible teach about the possibility of departing from faith? From the beginning God reveals himself as a God who lets humanity choose whether or not to be in relationship with Him. The Bible offers examples and warnings of departure from God. Adam and Eve, as innocent of sin and “saved” as anyone might ever have been, had opportunity to reject Him. The Bible is silent on their ultimate destiny. Their choice was a real one, resulting in separation from God and bringing sin and death to mankind. Likewise, the prophets warn Israel that God has divorced her and sent her away because of her sin and lack of faithfulness (Isaiah 50:1; Jeremiah 3:8).

Jesus offers several parables that include warnings about falling away. In the story of the sower (Luke 8:5–15), some “believe for a while, but in the time of testing they fall away” (verse 13). In the parable of the unfaithful steward (Luke 12:42–46), the master assigned the steward — whom he trusted and yet proved faithless — to “a place with the unbelievers” (verse 46).

We find Jesus’ strongest warning in the teaching on the vine and the branches (John 15:1–6). Here Jesus warns, “If you do not remain in me, you are like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned” (verse 6). The entire discussion is about remaining in Christ, the true Vine. This is not, as some suggest, about people who seemed to be in the church but were not truly in Christ. The ones discarded and burned were in Christ, but have not remained in Him.

The New Testament uses the language of being “in Christ” to refer to believers (Romans 8:1; 1 Corinthians 5:17; et al.). Individual branches (believers) that remain in Christ bear fruit and God prunes them. But God cuts off believers who do not produce fruit (John 15:2), and they ultimately suffer eternal separation from God.

Paul
Paul warns believers of the need to persevere. Paul told the Galatians, who were flirting with a return to the Law, “You who are trying to be justified by the law have been alienated from Christ; you have fallen away from grace” (Galatians 5:4). This language of alienation and falling away is clear. Paul reminded the Corinthians to keep hold of their faith and the truth of the gospel: “By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain” (1 Corinthians 15:2). Those who have “believed in vain” contrast with those who “are saved.” Paul warns believers to “hold firmly” or risk the loss of their salvation.

This is clearly not just a theoretical admonition. In 1 Timothy 1:19,20, Paul names Hymenaeus and Alexander, two who rejected “faith and a good conscience” and therefore “have suffered shipwreck with regard to the faith.” Paul works toward the goal of their repentance, but we have no record that this occurred. At the time Paul wrote the letter to Timothy, they had already been “handed over to Satan.”

Writing to Timothy, Paul offers encouragement coupled with a warning: “If we died with him, we will also live with him; if we endure, we will also reign with him. If
we disown him, he will also disown us; if
we are faithless, he remains faithful, for he
cannot disown himself” (2 Timothy 2:11– 13). Paul offers this caution to the believers
for whom Timothy is responsible: Christ
will disown those who disown Him. This
warning against apostasy is to believers, not
to the world. God is consistent in Scripture,
true to His nature. He must remain faithful
to His character, for to do otherwise would
be to disown himself, which He cannot and
will never choose to do. He is the Cosmic
Lover, never the Cosmic Stalker who lets
no one get away. In faithfulness to His own
nature, He must disown those who reject
Him. In Romans 6:1–4, Paul absolutely
rejects the idea that one who experienced
God’s grace would deliberately continue
in sin. God calls believers to live a new life
that glorifies God.

Peter
Peter offers similar cautions, even as he reas-
sures his audience that he expects them to
persevere. He urges them to "make every
effort to confirm your calling and election.
For if you do these things, you will never
stumble, and you will receive a rich welcome
into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and
Savior Jesus Christ” (2 Peter 1:10,11). Once
again, if they do what is necessary, they will
confirm their calling and election. The alter-
native is to "stumble," which indicates they
would forfeit their “rich welcome into the
eternal kingdom” of Christ.

Hebrews
The writer of Hebrews offers numerous
examples of the danger of turning one’s back
on salvation. The majority of Israelites, saved
from Egypt and led toward the Promised
Land, lost their ultimate reward because of
their unbelief (Hebrews 3:7–19). The author
warns, “See to it, brothers and sisters, that
none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart
that turns away from the living God. But
encourage one another daily, as long as it
is called 'Today,' so that none of you may
be hardened by sin’s deceitfulness. We have
come to share in Christ, if indeed we hold
our original conviction firmly to the very
end” (verses 12–14, emphasis mine). To
receive our share in Christ, we must hold our
original conviction firmly. The writer cautions
those who have started the journey that they
need to complete it.

We find the strongest language in Hebrews
6:4–8, where the author offers a warn-
ing very similar to that of Jesus in John 15,
using images of discarding and burning: "It
is impossible for those who have once been
enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly
gift, who have shared in the Holy Spirit,
who have tasted the goodness of the word of
God and the powers of the coming age and
who have fallen away, to be brought back to
repentance. To their loss they are crucifying
the Son of God all over again and subjecting
him to public disgrace. Land that drinks in
the rain often falling on it and that produces
a crop useful to those for whom it is farmed
receives the blessing of God. But land that
produces thorns and thistles is worthless and
is in danger of being cursed. In the end it will
be burned."

The explicit risk of destruction and loss
is for those who have clearly been in rela-
tionship with Christ. Further, in Hebrews
10:26–31, the author admonishes the read-
ers that: "If we deliberately keep on sinning
after we have received the knowledge of the
truth, no sacrifice for sins is left, but only
a fearful expectation of judgment and of
raging fire that will consume the enemies
of God. Anyone who rejected the Law of
Moses died without mercy on the testimony
of two or three witnesses. How much more
severely do you think someone deserves
for those who insult the Spirit of grace? For we know him who
said, 'It is mine to avenge; I will repay,' and
again, 'The Lord will judge his people.' It is
a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the
living God."

Again, the focus is on those who “have
received the knowledge of the truth” and
have subsequently rejected that salvation.
Indeed, for those who insult the Spirit of
grace, “It is a dreadful thing to fall into the
hands of the living God.”

Application
A number of present-day teachers eloquently

Individual branches (believers) that
remain in Christ bear fruit and God prunes
them. But God cuts off believers who
do not produce fruit (John 15:2),
and they ultimately suffer eternal
separation from God.
ONCE SAVED, ALWAYS SAVED? (continued from page 73)

Accepting that the danger is real and that we can abandon our salvation does not mean that we live in continual fear of doing so.

Propose that once we have gained salvation, we cannot lose it. Scripture clearly refutes their position. The Word of God offers many vivid and impassioned warnings that make sense only if a believer can forfeit salvation by rejecting a relationship with God. Perhaps a personal cost/benefit analysis of these opposing positions would be useful.

What are the benefits of a “once saved, always saved position”? If it is indeed correct, which is unlikely in light of the explicit warnings of Scripture, then all who have ever come into relation with Christ would have no uncertainty regarding their eternal destiny. After one decision for Christ, the way a person lives no longer determines his eternal destiny. With this benefit fear could never cripple anyone.

Some who hold to a position that we can abandon our salvation may live in unnecessary fear, failing to enjoy the assurance of their salvation. An extreme perspective, where one is continually falling in and out of salvation, results in such unhealthy fears. This is not, however, the position we hold. We believe that true believers will enjoy the assurance of their salvation. We need not be afraid of losing our salvation, like a wallet dropping from a pocket in a careless moment. Scripture assures believers of God’s provision and the sustaining power of His Holy Spirit. Accepting that the danger is real and that we can abandon our salvation does not mean that we live in continual fear of doing so.

What are the benefits of heeding Scripture’s warning and living a faithful life? Paul asked the Romans, “What benefit did you reap at that time from the things you are now ashamed of? Those things result in death!” (Romans 6:21).

As a young man, had I believed I could confess Christ once and then live any way I wanted, I might have succumbed to some very attractive temptations that could have brought spiritual death. Looking back, I am profoundly grateful that I was spared from many of the experiences common to those who do not follow Christ. Did I fear the Lord and fear missing out on eternal life? Perhaps yes. But if this caution preserved my life and salvation, its benefits surely outweighed its costs. Paul noted that his suffering was “not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us” (Romans 8:18). In my case, any “suffering” I might have experienced, “missing out” on the attractions of sin as a result of reverent fear, may have preserved my life. What some might consider costly, I assess as a benefit.

Calvinists believe that passages such as John 10:29; Romans 8:28–39; and Hebrews 7:25 (among others) teach eternal security: that the believer, once saved, cannot depart from salvation. The Bible is clear: God desires to save all, and He offers humanity not only the gracious gift of salvation but also strengthens those who respond. While the Bible assures us of God’s loving will, it also gives strong warnings of the peril of falling away. While God is stable and strong, our response is fickle and weak.10 When a former believer abandons salvation, God’s desire for relationship with that person has not changed. His faithfulness to His loving nature allows that person to walk away.

What about the costs of ignoring the warnings as unrelated to salvation? Those who rely on this doctrine and engage in a careless, licentious lifestyle suffer consequences here and now. How much more serious are the eternal consequences. If the scriptural cautions are real, this teaching of “once saved, always saved” is potentially devastating and destructive. The one who
relies on it and ignores the admonitions to continue in relationship with God will suffer for eternity.

The burden of proof rests with those who propose a view of false eternal assurance, for their error imperils one’s eternal destiny. Those who heed the cautions of Scripture and live a faithful reverent life need never fret about where they will spend eternity. They enjoy full assurance of their salvation, the benefits of a faithful life, and look forward to the blessed hope.

God calls us to holy living. While 2 Peter 1:10,11, presents very real warnings, the preceding verses reassure us that “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” (2 Peter 1:3). Peter spells out this godly life with an exhortation to “make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; and to godliness, mutual affection; and to mutual affection, love. 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. But whoever does not have them is nearsighted and blind, forgetting that they have been cleansed from their past sins” (verses 5–9).

Having been cleansed from our past sins, may we not regress into a habitual life of sin again, believing all the while that we are “safe.” Let us truly walk in the power of the Spirit. The good news is indeed that God saves us (Romans 1:16,17), and we no longer live as slaves to sin, but as bond slaves of God, choosing to live in holiness and bound for eternal life (Romans 6:22,23). We are saved by this gospel, but only if we hold firmly: otherwise, we have believed in vain (1 Corinthians 15:1,2). The false doctrine of “once saved, always saved” not only offers false hope for eternity, but also robs the gospel of its power to change lives and produce holiness. ☞

NOTES
1. Some include John F. MacArthur, Jr., in this category, but in Faith Works: The Gospel According to the Apostles (Dallas: Word, 1993), MacArthur explicitly states that perseverance “does not mean that people who ‘accept Christ’ can then live any way they please without fear of hell. The expression ‘eternal security’ is often used in this sense, as is ‘once saved, always saved.’” (180). He rejects this teaching and labels it a “full-scale assault against the doctrine of perseverance affirmed in the Westminster Confession. Worse, it subverts Scripture itself” (181). His book, Saved Without a Doubt: Being Sure of Your Salvation, rev. ed. (Colorado Springs: Victor Books, 2006) presents the classic Calvinist position, that anyone who seems to have made a salvation decision and then departs from that was never really saved to begin with. Likewise, Mark Driscoll, another popular teacher identified by some with the “once saved, always saved” position, holds to the classic Reformed position on eternal security.
6. Stanley, Glorious Journey, 173. These arguments are flawed, as fear and a resulting hesitancy to witness will only result if the believer has an incorrect view of salvation.
7. Stanley, Glorious Journey, 172. This argument is also flawed. The sinner’s fundamental need is restoration of relationship with God. Our sins are a result of that broken relationship. Christ restored us to proper relationship (reconciled us to God) by His death on the Cross, which also took care of all sins, but the primary concern was relationship.
8. Cf. 1 Corinthians 5:5.
9. This text raises questions regarding the possibility of coming back to salvation. The NASB renders Hebrews 6:6 — “It is impossible to renew them again to repentance, since they again crucify to themselves the Son of God and put Him to open shame” and notes that “since” can also be rendered “while.” As long as someone continues to reject Christ, they cannot be renewed to repentance.
10. I am indebted here to discussions with George Paul Wood. Further material is available in the position paper on Eternal Security found at http://ag.org/top/Beliefs/Position_Papers/index.cfm.

QUESTIONS FOR SELF-REFLECTION OR GROUP DISCUSSION
1. What teaching did you receive about the assurance of salvation when you came to Christ? Did your commitment to Christ save you? Did continuing to be in a relationship with Christ save you? Or would you not know if you were saved until you died and went to heaven?
2. Did you ever wonder whether you had lost your salvation? Did this hinder you in following Christ, or did it spur you on to seek God?
3. What is your obligation to former believers living in sin? How does one’s view on this issue influence whether one is obligated to admonish them?

To view a teaching video on unlimited atonement by Waldemar Kowalski, scan the QR code below.
http://ej.ag.org/201303unlimitedatonement
Because of the rising prominence of Eastern religions, Christians need to understand Buddhism as it relates to practical approaches to sharing their faith.

BY ALAN R. JOHNSON

"The Buddha in many ways has shown us to have confidence in our own action and its results, and thereby encouraged us to depend on no one but ourselves. ... [He told one of his disciples], ‘Ananda, be dependent on yourself, take refuge in yourself and not in others. ... be dependent on the Dhamma, go for refuge to the Dhamma — the righteous principles.’ "
— Attahi Attano Natho
Pali — “Oneself is the refuge for one”
(Buddhist quote from the Dhammapada)
I have worked and lived in Thailand for 26 years now. It is not unusual for me to get into interesting “faith” conversations with seatmates when traveling. One time on a flight in the States, after hearing I was involved in Christian work in Thailand, my seatmate told me she was a Christian-Buddhist. I asked her what that meant. She explained there were some themes in Buddhism she felt were not addressed by the Christian faith.

On another flight a woman explained how she regularly flew to San Francisco to meet with a Tibetan Buddhist monk to learn from him.

The Buddhist core comprises 468 million adherents worldwide. When you take a wider definition that includes Chinese folk-religionists, “it is appropriate to speak of 1 billion Buddhists.” There are 3.7 million Buddhists in North America, with more than 2 million in the United States. It is likely that someday you will meet someone who has converted to, is dabbling with, or was born into Buddhism.

Siddhartha Gautama (563–483 B.C.), by virtue of his enlightenment, became the Buddha (meaning “enlightened one” or “awakened one”) and founded the religious system known as Buddhism. The insights he gained from this experience form the core belief and practice among the three major streams of Buddhism that exist today.
ULTIMATE LIBERATION: RESPONDING TO THE BUDDHIST VIEW OF SALVATION (continued from page 77)

Because of the rising prominence of Eastern religions in mainstream popular culture and fascination with concepts like *karma* and reincarnation, Christians need to understand Buddhism. The Buddhist worldview is a challenge to Christians who believe they are to declare the good news of what God has done for mankind in Jesus Christ and make disciples among all the tribes, tongues, and peoples of the earth.

The purpose of this essay is to help pastors and Christian leaders understand key aspects of Buddhism and practical approaches to sharing their faith, so they can equip their members to effectively minister to their Buddhist friends.

**Salvation in Buddhism: The Quest for Liberation**

When the gospel meets the Buddhist worldview, one of the most fundamental points of difference is how people achieve ultimate salvation. For Christians, they do not earn salvation from sin, reconciliation to the living God, and eternal life. These are gifts of grace, brought about by what Christ has done for them through His death and resurrection. Christians receive these gifts by faith. Buddhism, however, locates the human dilemma, not in a broken relationship with the living God, but in a grasping that leads to endless cycles of rebirth and suffering (*samsara*). To be liberated from these cycles is the work of the individual and no other.

Gautama framed the insights of his enlightenment experience in what Buddhists call the Four Noble Truths. These ideas represent interrelated concepts that make up the fundamental worldview and understanding of reality in Buddhism. These ideas can be simplified using the following six propositions.

1. **The illusory nature of “reality” as we know it.**
   People often describe Buddha’s insight as a “knowing and seeing things as they really are.” Dhammananda says, “When we recognize that all phenomenal things are transitory, are subject to suffering and are void of any essential reality, we will be convinced … that true happiness must be sought only through mental purity and cultivation of wisdom.” Buddha saw that the world and everything in it, including all deities and all human experience, are marked by *anitiya* (impermanence, transitory), *dukkha* (painful and unsatisfactory, suffering), and *anatman* (devoid of self or essence).

2. **Dukkha is the main subject of the Four Noble Truths.** It follows ancient medical formula in stating the nature of the illness (diagnosis), the condition that brings about the illness (cause), whether the illness can be cured (cessation), and the means of bringing about the cure (extinguish).

   The first Noble Truth is Buddha’s diagnosis of the sickness of humankind, which is *dukkha*, usually translated as suffering. Since everything is impermanent, all objects, people, mental states, and worlds are transitory and pass away; thus our experience of life is *dukkha*.

   The second Noble Truth has to do with the cause of suffering which comes about by extinguishing craving.

   The fourth Noble Truth is how to extinguish craving by following the Eightfold Path. Buddhists traditionally divide the path, the means to liberation from *samsara* (endless cycles of birth, old age, pain, death, and rebirth), into three groups: the moral disciplines of right speech, right action, and right livelihood; the concentration group made up of right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration; and the wisdom group of right view and right intention.

   Buddhist teachers see an indivisible unity between the Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path since the right view “involves a correct understanding of the entire Dhamma or teaching of the Buddha, and thus its scope is equal to the range of the Dhamma itself.” Bikkhu Bodhi summarizes it in this way: “The two principles penetrate and include one another, the formula of the Four Noble Truths containing the Eightfold Path and the Noble Eightfold Path containing the Four Truths.”

   *Samsara*, also known as conditioned existence, is sometimes translated as transmigration or rebirth. *Samsara* is the circle of suffering that is the destiny of all living beings until they achieve enlightenment and break the pattern of rebirth to experience the truth of existence. *Samsara* is our failure to understand the Four Noble Truths that cause us to continue to go around the cycle of birth and death.
3. **Karma** is the impersonal law of cause and effect and drives rebirth.

Although people often use *karma* with the connotation of “bad,” the word *karma* is neutral. It means action and carries the notion that all intentional actions have consequences. It is an unchanging law whereby what you do, good or bad, will be repaid to you at some point in the future whether in this life or a rebirth. In *samsara*, good and evil *karmic* retribution govern all sentient beings (meaning having perception and consciousness). Thus, *karma* determines the movement of beings between rebirths.

4. **Rebirth is the reconstitution of the five aggregates (khandas).**

People commonly misunderstand that Buddhists believe in reincarnation as in the transmigration of the soul to another embodiment. But the *anatman* doctrine means there is no permanent soul or self to continue on. “What we call ‘I’ or ‘being’ is only a combination of physical and mental aggregates working together interdependently in a flux of momentary change within the law of cause and effect. There is nothing permanent, everlasting, unchanging, and eternal in the whole of existence.” Grasping or clinging to one or more of the five aggregates (*khandas*), elements or objects representing conscious existence, perpetuates the cycle of birth, pain, old age, and death, which is suffering (*samsara*). Suffering is extinguished when one surrenders attachment to aggregates.

5. **The goal is to break out of the cycle of birth and rebirth into Nirvana.**

*Nirvana* is a notoriously difficult concept to define even within Buddhism. Buddhists contrast *Nirvana* with *samsara* as a conditioned state. They say *Nirvana* is the opposite, which is unconditioned. *Nirvana* literally means extinction or quenching, and Buddhists see it as the release from *samsara*. Some synonyms used in primitive Buddhist teachings are: the unconditioned, the final limit, nondelusion, truth, inexpressible, tranquil, all craving extinct, free from desire, release, nonabiding, refuge, reaching the other shore.

6. **The quest for liberation is the work of each individual person to attain enlightenment.**

Since in this view what we experience as “life” is a delusion because there is no actual “I” that exists, the path for liberation from the unending cycle of birth and rebirth is one of awakening and enlightenment to know truth. People gain this through following the Eightfold Path. Buddhists divide meditation — one of the elements in the path — into two parts: *shamatha*, which is for calming, and *vipasana*, which is for insight.

Any psychological benefits accrued from meditation in the Buddhist view are only by-products of the main purpose which is “to free the mind to realize the truth.” Individuals carry out this pursuit completely by themselves. Buddhists frequently quote Buddha, “Work out your own salvation. Do not depend on others.”

While formal, doctrinal Buddhism focuses on liberation from *samsara*, in societies where people are born into the religion, the popular practice is a mix of traditional religion and local practices along with Buddhist concepts. This includes ritual accumulation of merit to secure a better future life; ceremonies to control fate, destiny, and luck to face present problems; consulting astrologers, palm readers, and spirit mediums; asking powerful beings that have great stores of merit to help them with their needs; the use of curses, amulets, and tattoos for protection. The extreme difficulty in the pursuit of enlightenment makes people seek answers for daily needs in other kinds of practices.

### Salvation Through Jesus Christ: By Grace Through Faith

In contrast to the Buddhist view of human existence as a cycle of suffering caused by ignorance with the need for enlightenment through self-effort to achieve liberation, the Bible tells us God exists from eternity, has no beginning and no end, and is separate from His creation. God spoke the physical universe into existence. As the capstone of His creation, He made man and woman in His image to worship and obey Him and to live in relationship with Him. God’s original creation was good. But when humans disobeyed His commandment, our relationship with Him became broken. We became subject to physical death, judgment for our sin, and all creation itself became subject to the “bondage to decay” (Romans 8:21).

The story of the Bible is that from the very beginning the solution to the problem of human sin always rested with God. In the
Garden of Eden after Adam and Eve’s disobedience, God sought them (Genesis 3:8-9). He called Abraham to himself (Genesis 12:1-3). It was Abraham’s belief in the Lord’s promise of a son and countless offspring that was credited to him as righteousness (Genesis 15:4–6).

Salvation and a restored relationship with the living God have always been on the basis of grace. As God established His covenant with Israel at Mount Sinai, He recounted His delivering them from slavery and bringing them to himself “on eagles’ wings” (Exodus 19:3–6; 20:2) before establishing the laws that would govern their relationship. In the New Testament, Jesus sees himself as the ransom given for many (Mark 10:45). John the Baptist declares Jesus the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world (John 1:29).

Contrary to Buddhism, humanities’ problem is not delusion but the objective problem of a broken relationship with the God. Both the initiative and means for restoring that relationship lie with God. Human beings cannot work their way out of their sin problem. They cannot buy, earn, or merit forgiveness and restoration. The incredible news of the Bible is that God came to earth and became a human being to bear our sin so we can become His children.

Paul says salvation from the penalty of sin is solely by grace, God’s unmerited favor toward us (Ephesians 2:8). What is the human response to God’s gracious provision that allows us to receive the gift of new life? John 3:16 says, “whoever believes in him” receives eternal life. Paul says it is “through faith … not by works, so that no one can boast” (Ephesians 2:8,9). The biblical view of salvation is diametrically opposite to the self-effort of the Eightfold Path or any pursuit to attain enlightenment by one’s own efforts.

**The Truth of the Gospel in a World of Religious Pluralism**

When Bible-believing Christians interact with Buddhists or people of other faith traditions, they often try to assert or defend the gospel as contrasted with other views. I have found Lesslie Newbigin’s work to be helpful in thinking about how to approach such encounters. Newbigin points out that there are “patterns of belief and practice accepted within a given society, which determine which beliefs are plausible to its members and which are not.” We call these “plausibility structures.” Inside a plausibility structure things make sense. However, looking from the outside it is extremely difficult to comprehend that thought world. He also reminds us that we cannot have coherent thought without some kind of basic foundational “givens.” The difficulty is this: When Christians attempt to point out the problems with foundational concepts of Buddhists, or vice versa, it leaves the latter feeling misunderstood. Argument for the truth of one’s perspective and thus the falsity of the other position often ends up reinforcing perspectives rather than opening doors for further discussion.

The good news about Christ’s death and resurrection gives rise to a new plausibility structure, a radically different vision from those that shape all human cultures apart from the gospel.” However, to come to know the truth of Jesus Christ is not something we can think or reason our way into; it is a revelation from God (Matthew 16:17). If this is the case, then we need to follow the advice of Peter who told his readers they were to give an answer for their hope “with gentleness and respect” (1 Peter 3:15). Our role becomes one of creating an account of the world that we inhabit from our vantage point of the resurrection of Jesus Christ and the entire Bible, and then powerfully living that account out before people.

The religious pluralism in our society does not require we accept the ideology of religious pluralism — that all religious claims are equally true and equally effective in bringing salvation. To believe in Jesus as “the way and the truth and the life” (John 14:6), is not a license for arrogance, nor does it mean we fully apprehend all truth. What it does mean is that we can boldly and confidently share our experience of Jesus Christ and how that relationship brings an explanation to our origin, nature, meaning, and purpose in this world.

Alister McGrath, in his second lecture in the 2009 Gifford Lectures on Natural Theology, quotes C.S. Lewis: “I believe in Christinity as I believe that the Sun has risen, not only because I see it, but because by it I see everything else.” He follows this up by saying, “These words of C.S. Lewis speak of the
binary intellectual virtue of the Christian faith: the conviction that it makes sense in itself, and that it makes sense of everything else … the Christian vision of reality possesses an internal coherence and consistency which is at least matched by its remarkable ability to make sense of what we observe and experience.”

If we work from this perspective, we can raise questions that operate from inside the Buddhist’s system about what humans commonly observe and experience. Let me illustrate with examples of possible lines of questioning.

We can inquire about Buddhist explanations of how everything got here and notions of cyclical time, and then talk about God’s creation and the way current scientific theory sees a distinctive beginning. How do we explain the “no-soul” doctrine and the apparent “fine-tuning” that are evidenced in the universe that allows for life and human existence? How does the “no-soul” doctrine relate to the universality of human notions of right and wrong and the fact we are aware of not doing right? What about the things in human experience where we cannot depend on ourselves, such as when we are born, when our parents feed us, or the fact brain surgeons cannot do surgery on themselves? We can ask Buddhists, since Nirvana is the stated goal, if they personally know anyone who has reached Nirvana?

We can begin to raise questions that may cause them to seek answers about origins, the presence of human life, right and wrong, being made in the image of God, free will, the need for someone outside ourselves to help us be reconciled to the living God, and the powerful witness in history of the empty tomb and lives that are changed by the risen Christ.

Sharing Good News With Buddhist Friends
Sharing the gospel effectively with Buddhists or those influenced by a Buddhist worldview depends in part on the kind of Buddhist with whom you are interacting. Those interested in Buddhism, or who are converts in North America, are often reacting against an experience of a version of Christianity that has been unsatisfactory for them. They know about Jesus but have chosen to reject the Christian faith. In such cases, we need a long-term and intentional redemptive relationship to break down stereotypes and misunderstanding so through words and deeds they can see Jesus in a new light.

In what follows I focus on immigrants to North America who were born into a Buddhist society. Many principles I discuss will be useful for any kind of witnessing encounter with people who are from a different faith tradition or who hold a radically different worldview from ours.

1. Build good relationships with Buddhists.
Christian demographers tell us that 86 percent of the Muslim, Hindu, and Buddhist world do not know a single Christian. People from these traditions come to the United States to study, work, or live. Yet many never have a single conversation with a Christian, much less develop a good friendship with a Christian. To reach a Buddhist with Christ’s love requires making space for a genuine relationship. Your life is going to provide the interpretive background for anything you say to them about Jesus.

2. Bring issues of faith to the forefront of the relationship.
Be upfront about who you are and your faith in Christ. Buddhists and others can feel setup when Christians pursue a friendship with them and then after a period of time spring on them that Jesus is the greatest thing in their lives. We need to genuinely love and serve people and not see them as objects of our mission. At the same time we need to let them know that our lifestyle choices are deeply connected to our
relationship with Jesus Christ.

When eating together, let them know you pray over your food and invite them to participate. Ask them to tell you what they do before eating. Tell people what you did over the weekend and about going to church. Talk about your Christian spirituality, devotional life, and fasting and prayer. Most of the world outside the West sees people as born into their religion. They think all Americans are Christians. Imagine what they think Christians do. They are genuinely shocked to find that really following Jesus Christ results in a changed life of purity and holiness. Talking about their perceptions of what Christians are like is a great starting point for sharing.

3. Recognize that virtually all the concepts you normally think about when you share the good news with people are not clear to your Buddhist friend. Notions of God, His creation, His character, sin and the human dilemma, the Cross, faith, and eternal life all sound strange to Buddhists. They often reinterpret them in light of their worldview. For instance, they often equate God with the law of karma. They see Jesus’ death on the Cross as the result of living a bad life and accumulating much demerit in previous lives. Virtually every key element in John 3:16 is an enigma to the person who sees life according to their Buddhist worldview.

4. View sharing the gospel as a process. Share content and check for understanding. If the people we are talking with do not easily understand the content of our message, instead of rushing through the points of the gospel and pressing for a decision to receive Jesus, we need to communicate the content of the gospel and then ask questions to assess what they understand. Sharing the gospel is a process and not a point-in-time event. This includes dialogue, not just monologue. For instance, ask questions about what they believe and practice in their faith. Find out what is happening in their life, what problems they are facing. Often sincere inquiry will cause people to ask you how you handle things in your life, bringing the chance to talk about your relationship with Jesus.

5. Tell stories from the Bible, read the Bible with them, and let them read it on their own. Folk Buddhists do not have a tradition of reading their sacred texts. At the same time, they often love stories. Much of the way they communicate their faith is via stories. This is a great opportunity to tell the stories of the Bible to people in answer to specific issues they may be facing or worldview issues.

6. Help them probe the implications of a decision to follow Jesus. Because Buddhists focus on correct practice more than correct belief, they are often thinking about what the message means to them in terms of their social relationships rather than whether it is true or not. Taking time with people and allowing them to ask questions as they explore the implications of a decision to follow Jesus are critical to having them make an informed decision. Remember they may come from societies that value saving face and will pray the prayer to make you happy without any actual commitment to follow Jesus. When they do make a decision it needs to come from their heart and voluntarily.

7. Whenever possible work with the entire family. Try to build a positive climate for the potential new convert by building trust with the family. In societies that highly value respect for elders and parents, for a Christian to lead a child or minor away from their ancestral path is the ultimate insult and a grievous offense. We set potential converts up for failure if we lead them to faith but then let them stand alone against the enmity of their closest social relations.

8. Expose them to the community of faith. Invite your Buddhist friends to a small group, to a gathering of Christians, and to church services. Let them hear of God’s grace at work in people’s lives. Utilize small group and larger group events to expose people to personal testimonies and the gospel.

9. Buddhist people come to faith through experiencing Christ and not through verbal presentations alone. Normally in our Western tradition of witnessing, we talk about the gospel but do not often pray with people to experience the power of Christ. Do not simply say, “I will pray for you.” Ask people what needs they have and pray with them for healing, blessing, and provision right alongside them.
then. Invite people to pray on their own as well. The experience of answered prayer often opens the eyes of folk Buddhists who will then be more open to learn about Jesus.

10. Pray for your Buddhist friends.

At the end of the day, it is the work of the Holy Spirit that draws people to Jesus. One convert from a Buddhist country shared how her initial attraction to a church in her homeland was to the foreigners teaching English there. She attended church services, but they made no sense to her. Then while listening to a message on Revelation 3:20 she said Jesus knocked on the door of her heart and she invited Him in. This is what Jesus does; He reveals himself to people. Let Him use you to plant the seed of the gospel into the hearts of Buddhist people in your life.

Conclusion

The apostle Paul lived and worked in a religious environment every bit as pluralistic as ours. He did not just talk about Jesus in the safety of the synagogue with Jews and Gentile God-fearers; we see him proclaiming good news to Gentiles in crowds (Acts 13:8–20), reasoning with people at the marketplace in Athens, bearing witness at a meeting of the Areopagus (Acts 17:16–34), and leading discussions in the lecture hall of Tyranus for 2 years with such impact that the whole province of Asia heard the word of the Lord (Acts 19:8–11). We believe as Paul did that the gospel is the power of God unto salvation (Romans 1:16). With that conviction we need to pray for boldness to fearlessly make known this message (Ephesians 6:19) to everyone including our Buddhist friends and those of other faith traditions. Our missionaries 6:19) to everyone including our Buddhist friends and those of other faith traditions. Our friends and those of other faith traditions.

To reach a Buddhist with Christ’s love requires making space for a genuine relationship.

NOTES

3. Ibid., 15.
7. Skilton, 27.
8. Ibid., 28.
9. Ibid., 28, 29.
12. Ibid.
13. Ibid.
14. Ibid.
19. Mizuno, 27.
20. Harvey, 39.
23. Mizuno, 154.
24. Ibid., 133.
26. Ibid.
28. Ibid.
29. Ibid., 9.
32. Ibid.
33. Johnson and Ross, 316.

ALAN R. JOHNSON is a missionary in Thailand, serving there since 1986.
The doctrine of hell, once a staple of Pentecostal evangelism and preaching, is not as prominent now either in the pulpit or in personal witnessing. Fearing the charge of trying to frighten the lost into the Kingdom or using the gospel as a means to escape future punishment, the focus has shifted to the God of love. The idea of eternal and everlasting torment for unbelievers is a troubling concept.
It is correct to emphasize the love and compassion of God. These characteristics were clearly on display in the life and ministry of Jesus of Nazareth. However, to dismiss the reality of the wrath and judgment of God on that basis fails to reckon with abundant biblical testimony. Both Testaments are clear in their description of God’s judgment on sin in the present era and in the future — including allowing rebellious humans to reside in hell after death as the consequence of their choosing to reject God’s offer of forgiveness in this life.

We find a challenge to understand the destiny of the wicked in the dialogue between Traditionalism and Conditionalism/Annihilationism. Traditionalism maintains that the wicked pass from this life into hell, a state of punishment that never ends. Some in this camp take the biblical depictions of the fire of hell literally; others see descriptions of fire best understood figuratively. In this understanding hell is certainly terrible, although the exact nature of that terror is beyond our ability to grasp. Both, whether literally or figuratively, understand the punishment of hell as never ending.

Conditionalism/Annihilationism also takes the reality of hell seriously, but it argues that God’s judgment destroys the wicked. The length of the punishment in hell is not the concern; the concern is for the eternal consequences — the complete passing from existence as the punishment for sin. What separates this view from the one that sees physical death as the point of annihilation is this: Conditionalists see a judgment of sinners, an assignment to hell, and then annihilation. There could be a period of time of suffering in hell before complete destruction. For this reason, and to simplify our expression, I will consider this view as Conditionalism because it allows for a conditional resurrection of the wicked dead, ending in destruction.

Before sketching the arguments that separate Traditionalism and Conditionalism, I must note that both believe in hell as punishment for the unbelieving dead. They both believe in the absolute authority of the Bible. Differences arise as they diverge in their interpretation of the biblical texts. Both appeal to important figures in the history of the Church in support for their view, but I will not trace that part of their arguments here.

**The Arguments Immortality of the soul**

Conditionalism argues that the philosophical basis for Traditionalism is the concept of the immortality of the soul; that is, within humans is an immaterial aspect not subject to death, dissolution, or decay. Since, as Conditionalists assert, Traditionalists accept this anthropology, they must also see the everlasting torment of the wicked in hell. Conditionalists charge that the idea of the immortality of the soul is not biblical; rather, it comes from Hellenistic philosophy originating with Plato.

Platonic philosophy understands that the human soul is inherently immortal. Drawing from the philosophical premise that we find reality in forms, not in material expressions of those forms, this philosophy sees the soul as that which is real about human beings. Conditionalists take the Pauline teaching “Now to the King eternal, immortal … “ and “God, the blessed and only Ruler … who alone is immortal,” and assert that only God is immortal, humans are not. Therefore, God can destroy humans for their rebellious
refusal to accept the grace of God (1 Timothy 1:17; 6:15,16).

The focus for Conditionalists is on resurrection — to eternal life for the believer and to destruction for the unbeliever. Whatever immortality the believer may enjoy in the future is the result of the redemption provided in Jesus (Romans 2:7; 1 Corinthians 15:53,54; 2 Timothy 1:10). The resurrection of the wicked dead will result in the righteous Judge judging them and consigning them to destruction. Conditionalists further support their argument by citing Jesus warning His hearers to fear “the one who can destroy both soul and body in hell” (Matthew 10:28). The soul, they conclude, is not immortal so hell means the destruction of the wicked.

Traditionalists generally agree that the philosophical immortality Plato understood as being inherent with humanity does not exist. The biblical revelation that God alone is immortal, however, does not prohibit God from gracing humans with something of himself — a limited aspect of immortality. The more detailed account of the creation of human beings found in Genesis 2 depicts the Creator breathing into Adam, causing him to become a “living being” (Genesis 2:7). Of all of the created beings, the biblical text only assigns the “image of God” to humans and records this intimate detail of human formation.

This truth posits great potential for communication with the Creator and for eternal abode with Him — or away from Him. Biblical anthropology includes the tragic reality of the Fall that disrupted the realization of this potential, but also rejoices in the redemptive plan of God for fallen humans. Receiving redemption returns to humans the joyous anticipation of eternally abiding in His presence. Rejecting redemption consigns humans to the fearful dread of eternally abiding away from His presence. Traditionalists do not base their view of eternal hell on Hellenistic philosophy but on the biblical revelation of the Creator God endowing creation with some limited aspect of immortality.

Death, destruction, second death
Conditionalism understands the overwhelming teaching of the Bible to be that the wicked will face death — understood as destruction. Paul taught clearly that the “wages of sin is death” (Romans 6:23). The apostle James challenged believers that, “Whoever turns a sinner away from his error will save him from death” (James 5:20). Jesus, in contrasting the two ways by which people can live their lives by using the analogy of the narrow and wide ways/gates, asserted that “wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it” (Matthew 7:13,14). In the dialogue between Jesus and Nicodemus, Jesus taught: “God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16). According to Conditionalists, the future for the unrepentant person is not unending torment, but a complete ending.

John anticipated a future “second death” (Revelation 20:14; 21:8). As John’s vision moved toward the revelation of the New Jerusalem, the new heaven and the new earth, he saw a terrible moment when “death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire,” and a “fiery lake of burning sulfur,” that he described as the “second death.” Conditionalists interpret this future event to be when God consigns to final destruction those whose names are not in the Book of Life. The most severe punishment imaginable — the total cessation of existence — befalls those who have not accepted Jesus as their Savior.

Traditionalists note that biblical writers give most of the death and destruction passages as dire warnings to the wicked concerning the shortness of this plane of living and are not descriptive of their ultimate destiny. The death and destruction they warned about is not annihilation; rather, it is reference to the end of physical life, the point when the material body returns to the dust and that immaterial aspect of humankind passes to another realm of existence (Ecclesiastes 12:5–7).

The images of the second death in Revelation 20:14 and 21:8 do predict the future eternal destiny of the wicked. In that destiny, Traditionalists assert, the unrepentant are, along with the ultimate enemies of God, cast into the lake of fire. At that point, the plan of God for this earth will have run its course, God will consign the wicked to eternal abode away from His presence in the “fiery lake of burning sulfur,” and He will reveal His perfect
Traditionalism maintains that the wicked pass from this life into hell, a state of punishment that never ends.

The images recorded by John of the punishment of those who worship the beast (Revelation 14:11; 19:3) contain the description of the ongoing ascent of smoke. Whether we understand it as literal, it does denote that which is continuous. Traditionalism concludes that the horrific images of unquenchable fire, the worm not dying, and smoke arising lead to the sad truth that the punishment of the wicked in hell is of unending duration. Adding to the horror of this is the truth that the continuing gnashing of teeth might illustrate that the wicked, though enduring punishment, continue in their rebellion.

The meaning of eternal, everlasting

Biblical writers describe the torments of hell as being eternal, or everlasting. In Matthew 25:41, Jesus assigned those who "are cursed into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels," noting that "they will go away to eternal punishment" (Matthew 25:46; see also Jude 7). Paul teaches that those who neither know God nor obey Jesus’ gospel “will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord” (2 Thessalonians 1:9). In listing basic doctrines that readers already know and he does not need to reteach, the writer of Hebrews includes the concept of “eternal judgment” (Hebrews 6:2). Conditionalists interpret these passages to mean that the concept refers to the effect, not the duration of
The sinful activities of humans, though on the finite scale, are against the infinite God. The punishment. That is, the fire, punishment, and judgment result in the destruction of the wicked so God completely removes them from existence. Annihilation is irreversible, so Conditionalists believe its effect to be eternal.

We know that the biblical words translated eternal and everlasting have some variation of meaning. But Traditionalists argue that in the passages in which biblical writers use them connected with punishment, destruction, judgment, and the like, they convey the concept of duration. Thus, they conclude that hell and the punishment of the wicked is of everlasting duration.

Perhaps the most powerful illustration of this position is the juxtaposition of eternal as a descriptor both of punishment and life (Matthew 25:46). Contrasting the destinies of the “sheep” and the “goats,” Jesus affirms that the former will “go away to eternal life,” but the latter will “go away to eternal punishment.” It is difficult to see one destiny — eternal life — carry the connotation of unending reward in the presence of God and not see that the other destiny — eternal punishment — connotes an unending result, punishment.

The moral problem

Conditionalists struggle with a moral problem in regard to understanding hell. Human sinfulness and refusal to accept the grace of God occurs within a time-bound realm. Eternity, however, by its very definition, has no time boundaries. Conditionalists ask about the justice in consigning humans to unending torment for sins committed during a limited time span. Is not there something unjust about assigning infinite punishment for finite rebellion? Therefore, Conditionalists conclude that annihilation is a far more moral answer to the ultimate sin of humankind.

If God allows the sin that afflicts human existence to continue without end, even while He is punishing it in hell, Conditionalists argue that God never truly conquers it and reigns supreme. The beautiful Christ hymn in Philippians joyfully anticipates a future in which “at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (Philippians 2:10,11). Conditionalists argue that the only way God can accomplish a complete victory is for Him to fully annihilate sin and the wicked. In that way God can truly be all in all and His new heaven and earth can be without the taint, or even the reminder, of sin.

Traditionalists respond to the moral dilemma by noting that God is not the causation of either the initial Fall of humans or the resultant eternal punishment. Rather, He has provided every opportunity for humans to escape hell. Arriving in the place of unending punishment is the result of the ongoing choice of humans to resist the grace of God. Hell is the result of the horrible choice of the fallen creature.

The sinful activities of humans, though on the finite scale, are against the infinite God. The sins of limited humans against the absolutely unlimited God take on vast proportions, so eternal punishment in hell corresponds to the degree of the sin.

The eternal punishment of the wicked in hell is the revelation of the sovereignty and supremacy of God. The rebellion against His good creation, the refusal to allow God to be ruler of human existence, and the rejection of the Redeemer are fully resolved in allowing for the fulfillment of that rebellion in eternal hell, completely away from the positive presence of the Almighty.
Perhaps the most loving way in which God interacts with humans is to give them space to respond to Him without coercion.

**View of God**

Conditionalism sees the unending punishment of the wicked in hell as antithetical to a loving and gracious God. They have no problem with seeing God annihilate the wicked, but they cannot accept that He would have anything to do with unending torment. His love allowed Him to provide for fallen humans a way of escape, a provision that was very costly to Him. Being so intimately acquainted with suffering, He would not, Conditionalists maintain, sanction everlasting torment for humans who do not accept His gracious provision. Annihilate them, yes; torment them unendingly, no.

A loving and gracious God, Traditionalists respond, granted and grants humans the freedom to make choices, but those choices have consequences. He has done, and is doing, everything short of vacating the free will of humans to redeem them and enfold them with His arms of love. Perhaps the most loving way God interacts with humans is to give them space to respond to Him without coercion. The eternal hell unbelievers are headed towards is not the place to which God is sending them; it is the place they are going to because of their choice(s).

**Conclusion**

When we compare the two views, it is clear that the Traditional view takes the biblical material more literally. It takes more effort to reinterpret the passages to eliminate the references to an unending punishment for the wicked. The description of fire that cannot be put out and the worm that does not die argues forcefully for hell being a period of ongoing punishment. The image of smoke ascending forever is hard to interpret in anyway but descriptive of that which is continuous. The connection of eternal and everlasting to the punishment of hell leads to the conclusion that hell is unending. This is especially true when we remember that biblical writers use the same biblical words translated eternal in relation to punishment to describe God as being eternal (1 Timothy 1:17; Romans 16:26).

The moral dilemma raised by Conditionalism is blunted by the reminder that God grants humans freedom. Desiring that they love Him freely demands that they be able to really make such a choice. Choices always have consequences, and in this case they have ultimate consequences. Humans rebelliously demanding that God allow them to live apart from His direction and intervention will receive an eternal fulfillment of that choice. The great and loving God is presently at work in the world to redeem from ultimate punishment as many as will accept His gracious offer of forgiveness.

The Traditional understanding of hell as of everlasting duration is a message that needs to return to the Pentecostal pulpit and classroom — not as a fear tactic but as a dire warning. There is a hell to shun and a heaven to gain. In a life that gains heaven there will be qualitative and quantitative changes for the better. While we might debate the precise nature of hell — literal fire, literal darkness, or figurative torment — the eternal nature of human destiny is clear.

**Note**

At the outset of *Love Wins*, Rob Bell writes two statements that explain why his book created controversy among Christian readers. First, “Jesus’ story is first and foremost about the love of God for every single one of us. It is a stunning, beautiful, expansive love, and it is for everybody, everywhere.”1 Second, “Jesus’ story has been hijacked by a number of other stories, stories Jesus isn’t interested in telling, because they have nothing to do with what He came to do” (vii–viii). Among those “other stories” is this one: “A select few Christians will spend forever in a peaceful, joyous place called heaven, while the rest of humanity spends forever in torment and punishment in hell with no chance for anything better” (viii).
Bell alleges that this story is “misguided and toxic and ultimately subverts the contagious spread of Jesus’ message of love, peace, forgiveness, and joy that our world desperately needs to hear” (viii).

Bell’s first statement is controversial among Calvinist readers who limit the scope of God’s saving love to the elect. But it should be uncontroversial to the rest of us, for the Bible teaches it. God “wants all people to be saved”; and to accomplish that salvation, “the man Christ Jesus . . . gave himself as a ransom for all people” (1 Timothy 2:4–6). God graciously offers “eternal life” to “whoever believes in [His Son]” (John 3:16). He patiently delays “the day of the Lord,” “not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance” (2 Peter 3:9,10). All people, whoever, anyone, everyone: These terms express the universal scope of God’s love.

Bell’s second statement is where the controversy really lies. On the one hand, it is a caricature of the traditional belief about hell. On the other hand, minus the caricature, it captures — almost quotes — what Scripture teaches about hell. Consider, for example, Revelation 20:10: “They will be tormented day and night forever and ever.” This verse’s tension really lies, for Bell denies what Scripture affirms.

Noticing what’s absent
The first thing to notice about his case is what is absent: the Second Coming. The Nicene Creed summarizes an important element of biblical eschatology when it confesses, “[the Lord Jesus Christ] will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead.” The creed’s vocabulary mirrors the Greek and English New Testaments (cf. Matthew 24:30; 25:31; for “come in glory”; and Acts 10:42; 2 Timothy 4:1; and 1 Peter 4:5 as judge of “the living and the dead”).

Christ’s coming marks “the end of the age” (Matthew 24:3; cf. 13:36–43). The judgment that follows Christ’s second coming results in either “eternal life” or “eternal punishment” (Matthew 25:46), “relief” or “trouble” (2 Thessalonians 1:6,7), “eternal life” or “wrath and anger” (Romans 2:7,8). In all these cases, the Judgment is an event — the event, really; Christ is the agent of judgment; and the judgments He delivers are (or appear to be) mutually exclusive (either/or) and final (“no chance for anything better” — or worse).

In and of itself, the absence of the Second Coming from Love Wins does not refute the book’s argument, but it is an interesting lacuna. Is the Day of Judgment consistent with “endless opportunities in an endless amount of time for people to say yes to God”? Is Christ’s verdict temporary in duration, perhaps even reversible? To answer these questions, we must turn from what is absent from Love Wins to what is present.

A confused understanding of hell
Traditionally, Christians understand hell to be a final state God imposes on those who persist in disbelief and disobedience. In Greek, its place name is gehenna, which derives from the Hebrew word gehinnom, or “Valley of Hinnom.” King Ahaz “sacrificed his children in the fire” there (2 Kings 16:3; 2 Chronicles 28:3), at a place called Topheth, as did King Manasseh (33:6) and other Judeans (2 Kings 23:10). The prophet Jeremiah denounced their idolatry (Jeremiah 7:30–34; 19:1–15). And through the prophets, God announced that Topheth and the Valley
Traditionally, Christians understand hell to have a retributive purpose. Bell argues, however, that hell may have a rehabilitative purpose.

Retribution and rehabilitation

Traditionally, Christians understand hell to have a retributive purpose. For example, 2 Thessalonians 1:6,7 says: “God is just: He will pay back trouble to those who trouble you and give relief to you who are troubled, and to us as well. This will happen when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven in blazing fire with his powerful angels.” Verses 9,10 say: “They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might on the day he comes to be glorified in his holy people and to be marveled at among all those who have believed.” Other passages that teach a retributive understanding of judgment include Romans 2:5–11, which says, “God will repay each person according to what they have done” (verse 6). Similarly, Revelation 11:18 says, “The nations were angry, and your wrath has come. The time has come for judging the dead, and for rewarding your servants the prophets and your people who revere your name, both great and small — and for destroying those who destroy the earth.” Bell argues, however, that hell has (or, at least, may have) a rehabilitative purpose. There are three prongs to his argument. First, he cites the promise of restoration after judgment by the Old Testament prophets as proof that “failure … isn’t final, judgment has a point, and consequences are for correction” (88). Second, citing 1 Timothy 1:20 — which speaks of two sinful Christians being “handed over to Satan to be taught not to blaspheme” — he writes: “Whoever and whatever he [Paul] means by the word ‘Satan,’ there is something redemptive and renewing that will occur when Hymenaeus and Alexander are ‘handed over’” (89). Third, he argues that the phrase “eternal punishment” in Matthew 25:46 is more accurately translated as “a period of pruning’ or ‘a time of trimming’ or an intense experience of correction” (91). Each one of these arguments needs to be challenged.

Scripture teaches that “the Lord disciplines the one he loves” (Hebrews 12:6; cf. Proverbs 3:12). The purpose of such discipline is rehabilitative, not merely retributive. In other words, such discipline aims at the repentance and reformation of the one God disciplines. Bell is correct that the Old Testament promises of restoration after judgment and...
the New Testament language of “handing over to Satan” demonstrate a rehabilitative purpose. But he is wrong about who is being rehabilitated, when, and how.

For example, consider Bell’s use of Jeremiah 32:37. God says, “I will surely gather them [Judah] from all the lands where I banish them in my furious anger and great wrath; I will bring them back to this place and let them live in safety.” This passage (and others like it) pertains to corporate Israel. Rehabilitation for corporate Israel is consistent with retribution for individual Israelites. Or consider another passage Bell cites, Amos 9:11: “I will restore David’s fallen shelter.” Here, the focus is individualistic. Indeed, Jesus Christ himself is the fulfillment of this promise (Acts 15:16). But notice that the rehabilitation of the Davidic monarchy as a whole is consistent with retribution against certain Davidic kings in particular. In a word: Jesus Christ, yes. Ahaz and Manasseh, no.

For another thing, being “handed over to Satan” is not the same thing as being “cast into hell,” for the simple reason that Satan is not the master of hell but its most prominent resident (Revelation 20:10). He is, however, “the god of this age” (2 Corinthians 4:4). What Paul seems to have in mind in 1 Timothy 1:20 and 1 Corinthians 5:5 is some form of excommunication whose purpose is to help sinful Christians come to their senses — spiritually, theologically, and morally — by reexposing them to the awful realities out of which Christ saved them. This excommunication makes sense in the present age, when there is still time for repentance (2 Peter 3:9), but the judgment of hell is final (see below).

Third, regarding “eternal punishment,” Bell has misled the reader on the specific words to be interpreted. The Greek phrase in Matthew 25:46 is kolason aιγνιαω (an adjective and a noun), not “an aion of kolazo” (a noun and a verb) (91). Below, I will examine the meaning of aιγνιαω, which is typically translated as “eternal” or “forever” in the New Testament. Here, however, I want to focus on kolason.

Bell argues, “The word kolazo is a term from horticulture. It refers to the pruning and trimming of the branches of a plant so it can flourish” (91). By extension, when used metaphorically of punishment, the word refers to “an intense experience of correction” (91).

For the sake of argument, let’s say that Bell is correct about the etymology of kolason/kolazō. Even so, etymology alone cannot determine whether “punishment” is rehabilitative or retributive. Why? Because when we prune a tree, the tree is rehabilitated but the prunings are not. In John 15:1–8, Jesus uses the image of pruning to describe the Father’s relationship to Jesus’ disciples. “He cuts off [Greek, aierō] every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does not bear fruit he prunes [Greek, kathairei] so that it will be even more fruitful” (verse 2). What happens to the cuttings and prunings? “If you do not remain in me [Jesus], you are like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned” (verse 6).

So, etymology alone does not settle whether kolason/kolazō is rehabilitative or retributive. So we must look to usage. The New Testament uses the noun kolason and the verb kolazo two times apiece: Matthew 25:46 and 1 John 4:18, and Acts 4:21 and 2 Peter 2:9, respectively. First John 4:18 says, “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.” In this verse, a rehabilitative understanding of fear makes little sense. Why, after all, would a person fear being rehabilitated?

In Acts 4:21, the verb kolazo describes the Sanhedrin’s desire to “punish” Peter and John so they would stop preaching Christ. Such “punishment” is hardly rehabilitative, however. It is torturous, coercive, and a bad model for understanding how God rehabilitates sinners. In 2 Peter 2:4–10, Peter contrasts those whom “God did not spare” (fallen angels, the “ungodly people” of Noah’s day, the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah) with those whom he “protected” (Noah) and “rescued” (Lot). And he concludes: “the Lord knows how to rescue the godly from trials and to hold the unrighteous for punishment on the day of judgment” (verse 9). This “punishment” does not seem to be rehabilitative.

How long is hell?

Traditionally, Christians understand hell to be “eternal,” “everlasting,” or “forever” in duration. For example, most English versions of Matthew 25:46 translate the Greek phrase...
There is a strong prima facie reason why the Christian tradition understands hell to be eternal in duration. That is what the New Testament itself teaches.

oloaim as “eternal punishment.” Bell thinks this is mistaken. Applied to God, he argues that the Hebrew word olam — and, by extension, the Greek word aiōn which translates it — “is much closer to the word ‘forever’ as we think of it, time without beginning or end” (92). In other instances, however, he argues that olam/aiōn is “a versatile, pliable word, in most occurrences referring to a particular period of time” (92). Consequently, he interprets kolasin aiōnion in Matthew 25:46 as “a period of pruning” or “a time of trimming” or “an intense [but temporally limited] experience of correction” (91).

This conclusion seems to be wrong. For one thing, the noun aiōn does not have the same semantic range as the adjective aiōnios. In 43 of the 70 uses of aiōnios in the New Testament, it modifies the noun zoe (“life”) and clearly describes life that begins today and extends forever. Often, zoe aiōnios appears in texts where it stands in contrast to an alternate outcome, variously described as “perishing” (John 3:16; 10:28), God’s “wrath” (John 3:36; Romans 2:7,8), losing life (John 10:28), “death” (Romans 5:21; 6:23), “destruction” (Galatians 6:8). However, on occasion, aiōnios also modifies the nouns that describe this alternative outcome. The New Testament thus speaks of “eternal fire” (Matthew 18:8; 25:41), “eternal punishment” (25:46), an “eternal sin” that “will never be forgiven” (Mark 3:29), “everlasting destruction” (2Thessalonians 1:9), “eternal judgment” (Hebrews 6:2), and “the punishment of eternal fire” (Jude 1:7).

If the primary meaning of aiōnios is “eternal,” everlasting,” or “forever” when it modifies zoe, it stands to reason that this is also the primary meaning of aiōn when it modifies the alternates to zoe. This is evident in 2 Corinthians 4:16–5:5, where Paul contrasts “an eternal glory” that outweighs “light and momentary troubles,” an “unseen” future that is “eternal” compared to a “seen” present that is “temporary” (prokairē, “for a time”), and “an eternal house in heaven” that will replace “the earthly tent” that is being “destroyed.”

But what about the noun aiōn? Bell is right that it sometimes refers to a limited period of time, most obviously “this age,” which is “coming to nothing” (1 Corinthians 2:6). But sometimes it refers to eternity. Here, the relevant issue is not the meaning of the noun aiōn in isolation, however, but of the noun phrase eis tous aiōnas ton aiōnion, which the New Testament uses on 20 occasions.12 Literally, it means “from the ages to the ages,” but it is commonly translated as “for ever and ever.” This translation makes perfect sense, given the words it modifies. A variety of virtues — predominantly “glory” but also “power” — belongs to God and/or Christ “for ever and ever” (Galatians 1:5; Philippians 4:20; 1 Timothy 1:17; 2 Timothy 4:18; Hebrews 13:21; 1 Peter 4:11; 5:11; Revelation 1:6; 5:13; 7:12). Christ and/or God the Father live “for ever and ever” (Revelation 1:18; 4:9,10; 10:6; 15:7). Christ’s throne exists “for ever and ever” (Hebrews 1:8), as does His reign...
(Revelation 11:15). Those who are with Christ in paradise will also reign “for ever and ever” (Revelation 22:5).

In each of these instances, the meaning of εἰς τοὺς αἰῶνας ἀπό αἰῶνος clearly connotes eternity or everlastingness, not “a particular period of time” that is limited in duration. When, therefore, the New Testament uses the same phrase for judgment, the same implications of eternity and everlastingness apply. So, “The smoke from her [i.e., Babylon, which God has just passed “hijacked” “Jesus’ story” — the story of God’s lasting love for the human race —] goes up for ever and ever” (Revelation 19:3). And “the devil,” “the beast,” and “the false prophet” will be “thrown into the lake of burning sulphur,” where they “will be tormented day and night for ever” (Revelation 20:10, 15).

There is a strong prima facie reason why the Christian tradition understands hell to be eternal in duration. That is what the New Testament itself teaches. It uses the same adjectives and noun phrases to modify words that describe heaven as words that describe hell. What applies to the former therefore applies to the latter.

Conclusion

In Love Wins, Rob Bell contrasts two stories: “Jesus’ story” and “other stories” that have “hijacked” “Jesus’ story” — the story of God’s universal love and the story of a final hell. What I have tried to demonstrate in this essay is that, according to the New Testament, these two stories exist alongside one another. God loves and desires to save everyone, but those who persistently refuse to receive His love or to act in loving ways themselves — incur the judgment of hell, a judgment which is final.

Admittedly, the doctrine of hell is neither easy to understand nor to proclaim. We want no one to go to hell. After all, that is why Jesus came and died on the cross for our sins. And that is why we also give ourselves to ministry — to “rescue the perishing, care for the dying. Jesus is merciful, Jesus will save.” In the last analysis, Scripture teaches — contra Rob Bell — both the universal scope of God’s love and the reality of final judgment and eternal hell. It is a dual reality that we should preach with hope and through tears.

NOTES
2. For an excellent critique of Calvinism on this point, see Roger E. Olson, Against Calvinism (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 110–21.
3. One could argue that Bell is summarizing the viewpoint of Christian Universalists in these quotes, not stating his own. However, his use of the catchphrase “love wins” clearly connects him to them.
7. See also the penultimate paragraph on 93.
9. First Corinthians 5:5 also uses the phrase, “hand over to Satan” in a disciplinary context.
10. See Love Wins, 83–88, for Bell’s list of restoration passages in the Old Testament prophets.
12. See also ταύ αἰώνων τούτων (Ephesians 3:21), εἰς ἡμέραν αἰῶνος (2 Peter 3:18), πρὸ πάντων ταύ αἰώνων . . . παντας τους αἰῶνας (Jude 1:25).

GEORGE PAUL WOOD, executive editor of Enrichment journal and director of Ministerial Enrichment, Springfield, Missouri.
I feel so lonely.

Does my life have a purpose?

Will anybody notice when I am gone?

CAN I HELP THEM?

I am so sad.

Is it really cheating?

Is there something else out there?
HOW WILL THEY HEAR?
The Challenge of Nonevangelism

BY RANDY HURST

The airline had lost my luggage on a flight to London. When I checked in for my flight back to the United States, the airline station manager apologized and upgraded me to first class.

The flight attendant serving me was kind. From our conversation, she learned I was a minister. During the course of our conversation, the Holy Spirit impressed a thought upon my heart concerning a specific issue in her life. Finally, I said, “I have to tell you something. I’ve never flown first class from London to Dallas. But I believe God arranged this, not so I could have a nice ride home. He put me here for you. You just went through a divorce, didn’t you?”

As she nodded her head, I continued. “Before you were born God had a plan for your life, but it isn’t happening. And it can’t happen until you receive His forgiveness and surrender your life to Christ.” I asked, “Can I pray with you to receive Jesus Christ as your Savior?”

“Yes,” she replied, “because I have something to tell you. I have never flown first class from London to Dallas either. Another flight attendant called in sick. On my way out the door of my apartment, I did something I had not done for many years — I prayed. I said, ‘God, You know my life is a mess, and You have got to show me on this trip what to do.’”

After I prayed with her to receive Christ, her face beamed with joy. A couple of years later I received a phone call. The woman said, “You don’t know me. My pastor gave me your number. I am a flight attendant. This week I met another flight attendant, and we discovered we were both Christians. When we shared our testimonies, she told me that she accepted Jesus on a flight from London to Dallas and mentioned your name. I told her that you had preached in my church. She asked me to contact you and tell you she is still serving Jesus and attends church faithfully.”

In every witnessing encounter I have experienced where an unbeliever received Christ, I have discovered that God had already prepared the person’s heart for the message.

It is a reasonable goal for people to share their faith with a few people a year. But, if it’s reasonable, why don’t more Christians do it?

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The Bible clearly teaches that personal witnessing is not just for the few who are especially gifted to be evangelists (Ephesians 4:11). It is the responsibility of every follower of Christ. Philip is the only individual named as an evangelist in the New Testament. In Acts 8, God used him to bring the Ethiopian eunuch to faith, providing an example of what an evangelist does. In modern culture, most people think of evangelists as those who preach to large crowds in athletic stadiums or on television. But Philip’s example is a one-on-one personal evangelism encounter.

It is a reasonable goal for people to share their faith with a few people a year. But, if it’s reasonable, why don’t more Christians do it? This article explains why people neglect personal evangelism, outlines a biblical theology of evangelism, and offers two best practices based on that theology that can help engage more believers in personal evangelism.

Why People Don’t Witness

When I was in seminary, a professor shared the results of an extensive study of evangelical churches. It revealed that almost all personal evangelism is done by less than 10 percent of any given congregation. Why don’t most believers share their faith with nonbelievers? Following are four significant reasons.

Apathy or indifference

The study to which the professor referred also showed that of the 10 percent in congregations who share their faith, the vast majority have been Christians less than a year. Church leaders must address two significant aspects of personal evangelism: education and motivation. For most people, I believe motivation is the far greater challenge.

Lack of confidence

While many think the most common reason people do not share the gospel is apathy, I believe for most people the bigger issue is a lack of confidence. Most followers of Christ want to be effective witnesses. But many believers feel inadequate, intimidated, or even fearful about sharing their faith in Christ, especially with someone who does not have a Christian background.

Pluralism and a climate of tolerance

Religious tolerance is considered a virtue in popular culture. Some major religions, such as Buddhism and Hinduism, are naturally pluralistic. The increasingly popular worldview is that no one religion is the sole or exclusive source of truth (if truth even exists) and some truth and value exist in every religion. Many Christians now feel that direct evangelism is disrespectful of others’ beliefs.

Wrong beliefs

Many people do not understand the necessity of evangelism because of false assumptions about the human spiritual condition and the way of salvation. Secular culture tries to explain away man’s sin. They attribute immorality and violence to poverty, social injustice, and even genetics.

Prevailing thought — including that of an increasing number of evangelical Christians — accepts that God will judge unredeemed humanity and then, like animals, annihilate them. Even from the time of the Early Church many have wishfully speculated that all people will eventually, somehow, reach heaven. Much of contemporary culture promotes the idea that anything a person believes can be a pathway to eternal life and ultimate peace.

Addressing wrong beliefs with biblical truth will largely resolve the problems of indifference, lack of confidence, and the issues of pluralism and tolerance.

Biblical Truth Concerning Evangelism

The human spiritual condition and the way of salvation

Three facts are inescapable: the lostness of humanity, the certainty of eternity, and the exclusiveness of Jesus Christ.

Humanity is lost

God’s Word clearly shows that all mankind is lost, since “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23). In one of Asia’s modern cities, in the midst of gleaming skyscrapers, I visited a heathen temple. Thousands of onlookers stood in an outer courtyard. Unintentionally, in the press of the moving crowd, I found myself several feet away from a priest who was chanting as
worshippers submitted to a demonic trance. Rows of steel hooks pierced the flesh of their backs, yet not a drop of blood flowed. Each hook was connected to a chain that stretched back to a cart of rocks. The worshippers pulled the cart through the streets in an attempt to obtain forgiveness, healing, or prosperity. Each torturous yoke bore silent, graphic witness of the antithesis to God’s grace. As disturbing as these images are, it is important to remember that even those who claim to be Christians but do not personally know Christ are as lost as any who fit the stereotype of “heathens.”

**Eternity is certain**

While all created beings have a beginning, God’s Word indicates that once human life begins, existence never ends. Jesus taught: “Then He will also say to those on his left, “Depart from Me, accursed ones, into the eternal fire.” … These will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life” (Matthew 25:41,46, emphasis mine). Each person will face a final lasting judgment. Whatever a person’s destiny, it is eternal.

**Jesus Christ is the only way of salvation**

The Bible teaches that only one way exists to peace with God and everlasting life. Jesus said, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father except through Me” (John 14:6). He is both the door and the way. Peter said, “There is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12).

**The nature of evangelism**

**The power of the gospel**

The apostle Paul wrote, “I am under obligation both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to the wise and to the foolish. So, for my part, I am eager to preach the gospel to you also who are in Rome. For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek” (Romans 1:14–16, emphasis mine). The primary power in evangelism is not in the messenger, but in the message.

Having established that the power for salvation is the gospel, Paul presents a compelling argument for the urgency of its proclamation: “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved. How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? And how can anyone preach unless they are sent?” (Romans 10:13–15). After announcing God’s gracious offer in Christ, Paul asks provocative, rhetorical questions in a logical sequence, with each additional question building on the key verb from the preceding question. The conclusion is clear: The gospel must be proclaimed.

When Paul taught concerning his proclamation of the gospel, he clearly revealed that our message is more than words. It also includes actions.

Paul wrote to the believers at Thessalonica: “Our gospel did not come to you in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction; just as you know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake” (1 Thessalonians 1:5, emphasis mine).

Paul’s witness was not merely what he said (“in word”), but also **how** he said it (“in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction”), and **who** he was (“you know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake”).

**What we say.** The gospel is a message we must convey in words. The study of evangelism in the New Testament shows conclusively that the focus of our message should be Jesus. In the Early Church, the believers’ message always focused on the person Jesus Christ. As the early Christians boldly and clearly proclaimed Jesus, great numbers believed.

**How we say it.** Our emotions, attitudes, and actions are as much a part of our message as our words. In his letter to the Colossians, Paul said, “Conduct yourselves with wisdom toward outsiders, making the most of the opportunity. Let your speech always be with grace, as though seasoned with salt, so that you will know how you should respond to each person” (Colossians 4:5,6, emphasis mine).

The apostle Peter wrote, “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, keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander” (1 Peter 3:15,16, emphasis mine).

Both Paul and Peter emphasize a witness that includes more than words. Paul says our speech should “always be with grace.” Peter says we should speak “with gentleness and respect.”

Who we are. If our manner and actions are inconsistent with our words, they will greatly hinder the content of our message. With many people, especially those we know personally, our individual testimony of the difference Christ has made in our lives, and its consistent proof through our actions, will be what compels them most.

In a society where people are rapidly losing faith in the integrity of leaders in government and the business world, the personal credibility of Christians is not merely an added blessing in witness, it is an essential requirement.

The empowerment of the Spirit
Paul told the Thessalonians that effective proclamation of the gospel occurred “in power and in the Holy Spirit.”

The word translated “power” in Acts 1:8 (dunamis) is wonderfully comprehensive. It simply means “ability” and applies to whatever we need in personal evangelism.

The Holy Spirit enables us in all three of the components of our message: what we say, how we say it, and who we are. The Holy Spirit empowers our witness in what we say and in how we speak — with sincere, compelling passion. He also enables us to become what God has called us to be. As we allow the fruit of the Spirit — the nature of Jesus Christ — to shape our lives, Christ becomes evident to those around us.

Comprehending the eternal consequences of spiritual lostness and the exclusiveness of Christ confronts our apathy and indifference and addresses the issues of pluralism and tolerance. Understanding the power of the gospel and the nature of the Spirit’s empowerment of the messenger helps believers’ confidence in personal witness.

Best Practices in Personal Evangelism
We can study a wide variety of practices of those who are active and effective in personal evangelism. But what are the best practices to engage those who are not active? Two practices evident in the teachings of the apostles Paul and Peter are most effective in helping believers begin to engage in personal evangelism.

Entering into God’s work in evangelism
In his first letter to the Corinthians, Paul describes sharing the gospel in terms of planting and watering seed: “I planted, Apollos watered, but God was causing the growth” (1 Corinthians 3:6). In this statement, Paul clearly distinguished God’s work in the spiritual harvest from that of His human servants. The verb tenses Paul uses here are different. When Paul and Apollos planted and watered the seed (the message), the Greek verb tenses indicate that for a period of time Paul planted the seed. For another period of time Apollos watered it. But when Paul describes God’s activity in this process, the verb clearly reveals that God did not just work after the seed was planted and watered, but all along “God was causing the growth” (emphasis mine).

People in our churches need to understand the difference between God’s part in evangelism and ours. Evangelism is, in some respects, a persuasion process. In his second letter to the

Church leaders must address two significant aspects of personal evangelism: education and motivation.
Corinthians, Paul wrote, “Knowing the fear of the Lord, we persuade men” (2 Corinthians 5:11). But evangelism is different from normal human persuasion. Paul also wrote, “My message and my preaching were not in persuasive words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power” (1 Corinthians 2:4, emphasis mine). Though Paul certainly had persuasive ability, he understood that earthly wisdom and human persuasion were inadequate to reach people with the gospel.

Most followers of Christ truly want to be effective witnesses. But many followers feel inadequate, intimidated, or even fearful about sharing their faith in Christ. A significant reason for this is the misconception that we are responsible as believers to persuade nonbelievers to become Christians. While we are responsible to do our part — share the gospel — only God can open a person’s heart to decision (Acts 16:14).

Although God has chosen to involve us in the evangelism process, our part is possible only because the Holy Spirit is already working in people — even before we share the message. Witnessing is not merely a task of human persuasion. Evangelism is God’s work, a work in which we are privileged to partner with the Holy Spirit to reach the spiritually lost.

Response evangelism

Witnessing is not just one-way communication. Again, Paul said, “Let your speech always be with grace, as though seasoned with salt, so that you will know how you should respond to each person” (Colossians 4:6); and Peter: “Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have” (1 Peter 3:15).

Both Paul and Peter, who were influential in the early expansion of Christianity and known for their powerful preaching, taught that communication with nonbelievers involves response on our part — not just proclamation. Response evangelism acknowledges God’s sovereignty and depends on His activity. This allows us to fulfill our role in the evangelism process — responding to people while depending on the Holy Spirit’s help.

In every witnessing encounter I have experienced where a nonbeliever received Christ, I found that God had already prepared the person’s heart to receive the message. When we understand God’s work in evangelism, it enables us to be bold — depending on His persuasive work. We can also be patient — trusting His timing rather than trying to push people to a premature decision. This frees us from anxiety and allows us to be neither hesitant nor hasty as we relate to people.

In a responsive conversation with a nonbeliever, we cannot always share what we might consider to be a complete presentation of the gospel. Few people make a decision for Christ because of a single encounter. We are “planting” and “watering” the message. God is causing the growth. The Holy Spirit brings people to a decision.

Conclusion

What could happen if the majority of believers learned from God’s Word that their responsibility is not to persuade nonbelievers to become Christians but to “plant” and “water” the message of Jesus wherever God opens doors of opportunity?

American poet and abolitionist John Greenleaf Whittier wrote, “Of all sad words of tongue or pen, the saddest are these: ‘It might have been!’ ‘No greater tragedy exists than spiritually lost people not hearing the gospel because followers of Christ neglected to share the message.”

NOTE


The Holy Spirit enables us in all three of the components of our message: what we say, how we say it, and who we are.

QUESTIONS FOR SELF-REFLECTION OR GROUP DISCUSSION

1. What can I do to be more motivated to engage in evangelism?
2. What are some specific ways in which pluralism and moral relativism dominate Western thought and culture? What challenges do they present to believers in personal evangelism?
3. How can I better prepare my mind and spirit for the task of evangelism?
4. How can I learn to cooperate with the Holy Spirit in evangelism?
5. In what ways does my life (emotions, attitudes, and actions) proclaim the gospel as clearly as my words?
The church and Christianity have lost cultural clout among today’s young believing members. Mosaics, as they are called, believe the church has a bad reputation. They see a legalistic church out of touch with society. They feel disenfranchised because the church has not answered their questions. They see the church as more anti than for something. As a result the Mosaic Generation, those ages 18 to 29, are rethinking their faith and many are leaving the church.

Enrichment journal interviewed David Kinnaman, president of the Barna Group and author of unChristian, and most recently, You Lost Me. In unChristian, Kinnaman deals with those outside the church and their attitude toward the church. You Lost Me directs the church’s attention toward young believers in Jesus who are skeptical over the established church’s long-standing fundamental attitudes. Kinnaman talks about the uniqueness of the Mosaic Generation and how the church should find new ways to minister to them and challenge them in whole-hearted pursuit of Christ.
You have conducted extensive research on the next generation’s attitude toward Christianity and the church. Who belongs to “the next generation”? What cultural forces have shaped their lives?

**KINNAMAN:** We can think about generations in many ways. One is simply a life stage — like those under the age of 30. But we could also define generations in terms of people who are born and raised during a particular cycle of events and during the emergence of specific technologies.

Baby Boomers — those born and raised in the years following World War II — have a unique sensibility because of the times in which they lived. Similarly, this current generation of teenagers and young adults has a particular stamp they are placing on faith and on the world. We call this next generation Mosaics because of their digital dependence and remarkably eclectic profile.

Our research suggests that the forces that shape their views are access, alienation, and authority. Access is the unprecedented ability to get virtually any content from anywhere at anytime. This is largely a technological shift, but it also is changing what these students think they can make of the world because technology gives them access to making their own websites, music, videos, and so on. Alienation represents the struggle people have with today’s institutions, which is being driven by fundamental reshaping of things like attitudes toward marriage and church. Finally, today’s next generation is skeptical of external sources of spiritual authority, such as the Bible, church, and so on. This is especially true as the church and Christianity have lost cultural clout in today’s America.

In *unChristian*, you and coauthor Gabe Lyons argue that Christianity has an “image problem” among unbelieving members of the next generation. How do they perceive Christians and the church?

**KINNAMAN:** Young people think of present-day Christianity primarily about the things it is against, rather than the things it is for. In this way, Mosaics consider Christianity to be hypocritical, judgmental, sheltered, too political, too focused on getting converts, and antihomosexual. In most cases there is a clear biblical reason these perceptions exist. From a scriptural view, there are reasons that non-Christians misunderstand and misperceive Christianity. Isn’t that what Jesus himself predicts?

On the other hand, I am always struck that these perceptions are more like the views we have of the self-righteous leaders of Jesus’ time — of people who know the right answers but have forgotten their true underlying motivation and message. Instead, I think the negative perceptions of the earliest Christians would have been about their crazy, cult-like, sacrificial, community-first living. I wonder if we have the courage to be known for those kinds of things again.

**How do these perceptions set up obstacles to the church’s desire to evangelize the next generation?**

**KINNAMAN:** Jesus told the story of the Prodigal Son, which is also the tale of the older brother. These negative perceptions are as much about how we, in the church, are comfortable as “older” brother Christians. This does not excuse younger brothers from their sinfulness. But our perceptions today are akin to what an objective bystander might say about the older brother. And Jesus is just as concerned about self-righteousness as He is about unrighteousness.

A friend, Mark Matlock, says that the purpose of judgment is not to reject and humiliate; it is to guide and restore. It is inevitable that human beings want to be identified with people we want to be like. And we want to be around people who love and accept us. I am not saying we should make church a club where people feel warm and cuddly. People will choose to reject Christ for a lot of reasons, but it should not be because we misunderstood and misapplied the church’s role to demonstrate a proper view of judgment.

**What practical steps can the church take to better evangelize the next generation?**

**KINNAMAN:** First, I hope we increase our commitment to disciple those who have accepted Christ. The most significant challenge to evangelism is that much of our discipleship efforts with children, youth, and young adults get lost. I wish I could say why this happens. I really do not know. But I think our passion for evangelism needs a greater parallel commitment to the development of these young believers. Otherwise, we are not really doing...
The most significant challenge to evangelism is that much of our discipleship efforts with children, youth, and young adults get lost.

In You Lost Me, you state that 18- to 29-year-olds dropping out of church is “the black hole of church attendance.” Are there different kinds of dropouts? Haven’t people in this age group always dropped out of church? Won’t they come back when they settle down and start a family? Why do you consider the dropout problem to be so severe?

KINNAMAN: I wrote a whole book on this subject. This, in reality, is a broad subject; but, yes, millions upon millions of young people drop out of church. There are different kinds of dropouts: most are leaving church, but some lose their faith entirely. We cannot hope to help those who have left — and those who remain — without understanding their spiritual journeys. So we invested nearly $200,000 in new research and 4 years of hard work on understanding these faith trajectories.

The most important thing is that we cannot miss the enormous social and spiritual changes that are taking place. Young people are getting married later, having children later, and are generally less institutionally oriented. So, this generation is looking very different, which requires that we minister in new ways.

For those who simply say, “Let’s wait until they have children,” presents a poor excuse. We do not think this about our own children — well maybe in a moment of weakness. We hope that having children will help them understand the classic angst of parenthood. But I know of no well-meaning Christian parent who excuses his own child’s spiritual wandering by simply saying, “Well, they will go someday.”

Finally, the dropout problem is so severe because — in my opinion — it creates the conditions for most of Americans’ superficial connection to Christianity. Most American adults say they are Christian. When does this commitment begin? As children and teens. When do they drop out? As young adults. So, addressing our collective problem of young adult dropouts creates a pathway to be more effective at solving the nation’s problem of embracing a cultural Christ rather than a personal Savior.

You write that people who drop out of church commonly cite at least one of six reasons for doing so. What are these reasons? And how do they set up obstacles to discipling the next generation?

KINNAMAN: We live in a complex time. Every year life seems to get more complicated. Our research shows that many young Christians do not believe Christianity offers deep, thoughtful, or challenging responses to complexities of modern life.

As a consequence, when we ask young Christians to describe their experiences in churches, they use the terms: overprotective, exclusive, repressive, antiscience, rigid, shallow, and unfriendly to doubt. This is not a picture of robust Christianity, but a faith that comes across as incapable of dealing with the thorniest issues of life.

What’s so sad about this is that Christianity does offer a rich, deep, and thoughtful response to life’s complexities. But that does not become clear to the vast majority of today’s young Christians. This not entirely the fault of today’s churches. But we are certainly not off the hook either.

A common next-generation perception of Christianity, of both nonbelievers and church dropouts, is that the church is antisex. In unChristian, unbelievers perceived the church as antihomosexual. In You Lost Me, church dropouts perceived the church as sexually repressive. In light of the Bible’s clear teaching about sexual morality, can the church do anything to overcome these negative perceptions? Don’t these perceptions reveal the next generation’s hardened hearts?

KINNAMAN: Yes, it is quite likely that these
negative perceptions reflect the hardened hearts of a generation. I think this is true, to a certain degree. This is a sexualized generation — our media has seen to that.

But on whose watch has this happened? And whose responsibility is it for the problem? Sexuality is an area in which we desperately must work together as generations on how to live faithfully. I do not mean by this that everything should be a free for all, as we glibly try to work out what to do next. But older generations are too quick to dismiss the fact young adults are, by God’s design it seems, the ones who really do influence sexual values and actions.

In other words, we need to enlist their help in trying to address issues of sex, sexuality, rules, relationships, restoration, and what the Bible says about all this. We need to work together as Christians to do this. It is no use preaching values to the young, but we must work out purity and formation as the body of Christ. In many ways the next generation is more conservative about sex and marriage; in some ways, they are more liberal.

You argue that one kind of church dropout — “exiles” — may actually help the church be more faithful to Christ and more effective in discipleship in the postmodern era. Why?

KINNAMAN: The best biblical metaphor for the complexity of our times is that of exiles in Babylon. Exiles are people like Daniel. People who are able to practice faithfulness when the world changes. Or more to the point, when culture is incredibly complex. In Scripture, we learn about Esther, Daniel, and other exiles who had to learn faith and faithfulness in the midst of enormous complexity. This is less like passing a test and more like learning a new language. It is a holy skill set, not mastery of a certain piece of content.

I love hanging out with and learning from today’s digital generation. Their intelligence, their longing for more, their passion for life and meaning, their desire for nuance make me proud to know them. Yet, their brokenness and brittle lives make me concerned about how well they will fare. But in the midst of all this, they are just awesome when they learn to live as exiles, a holy skill set that gives them a foot in culture and a heart in the community of Christ followers. Exiles are true “in, but not of” people. And they inspire me.

What can the church do to more effectively disciple next-generation believers?

KINNAMAN: In light of their unprecedented access, we need a stronger theology of vocation. We need a better way of helping them understand what God is calling them to do.

One characteristic of complexity is that we have enormous amounts of choices. But we cannot define this next generation of disciples — like all disciples of every time period — by all the choices they have, but by the decisions they make.

And as I said earlier, one of the decisions we need to make with this emerging generation is that we are committed to spiritually guiding and caring for them as mothers and fathers. We do not disciple them by their being a part of programs. We disciple them by being in real relationship with them. By apprenticing them.

You have performed extensive research on the attitudes of the next generation toward Christianity and church participation. Based on your research, are you optimistic or pessimistic about the future of American Christianity? Why?

KINNAMAN: I am neither optimistic nor pessimistic. I am hopeful. I am also very sobered by the reality of the present condition of the church in America. Our world is changing so fast. Islam is an enormous threat to Europe and will be soon in our society. Economic uncertainty is going to be the new normal for nonprofits. Many clergy will need to think of bivocational efforts (i.e., tentmaking). And I do not anticipate that today’s generation is going to warm quickly to Christianity.

Still, despite these headwinds, we have a biblical obligation to be hopeful. I describe this as a decision to be hope-filled about the next generation. God is not surprised by cultural trends and none of this is new to Him. It is a privilege to be serving Him during this era of change. We get to love and serve Jesus in the midst of a true global era.
also:

In Context
The Family of Jesus, by Marc Turnage
The Gospels plus language and culture provide a window into the family Jesus grew up in and its influence on His adult life.

Dealing With Doubters
Is God Just a Psychological Crutch for the Weak?, by Paul Copan
Rather than humans made in God’s image, skeptics claim humans have made God in their image. What is the flaw in this argument?

Lead Long ... Lead Strong
Has Your Wall Become a Fence?, by Scott Hagan
It is frightening to feel as if you have spent your whole heart but arrived only halfway.

Managing the Mayhem of Ministry
Improving the Part of Your Ministry You Cannot See or Hear, by Cal LeMon
A part of your ministry that may remain ethereal and elusive. It is noticeable when present and especially when absent.

Well Connected
Five Ways to Build a Professional Ministry Network (Without Losing Your Soul), by Justin Latrop
A professional ministry network can yield connectedness and community bringing strength, encouragement, and satisfaction.

Ministry & Medical Ethics
Treating the Whole Person: Spirituality in Medicine, by Christina M.H. Powell
Increasingly, doctors are realizing that spiritual care is vital to a person’s complete health care.

QA for Ministry Wives
I Don’t Feel Accepted at Church, by Gabriele Rienas
Rejection by the group is extremely painful. Consider some possibilities about what might be going on in your church.

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The Family of Jesus

The New Testament provides little information on Jesus’ family. Outside the Nativity stories, the Gospels hardly mention Jesus’ family. Christians historically have struggled with the reality of the Incarnation — God becoming man. While they have had little problem looking at Jesus as divine, the struggle comes in viewing Jesus as a man — the principal point of the Incarnation. His family, however, ties Jesus to history, joins Him to humanity, and connects Him with the Jewish people. His family makes the Incarnation real and, like any other person in human history, His family shaped who He became as a man. Although the New Testament offers little detail about Jesus’ family, reading the Gospels and being sensitive to issues of language and culture provides a window into the family Jesus grew up in and its influence on His adult life.

Jesus’ Pious Jewish Family

Luke records (2:22–24) that after Jesus’ birth, Joseph and Mary observed two customs commanded in the Law of Moses: Mary’s offering of the sacrifice for her purification (Leviticus 12:1–8), and Joseph’s ransom payment for his first-born son (Exodus 34:20; Numbers 18:14–16). The manner in which Joseph and Mary observed these commandments attests to the strict degree of Jewish piety within Jesus’ home. According to Leviticus, a mother was impure for 40 days after giving birth to a son. At the conclusion of her impurity, she had to bring a sacrifice of a lamb or young doves to complete her purification. In the first century, it was impractical for a mother to travel to Jerusalem and the temple after the birth of every child, so women commonly waited until the family made a pilgrimage to Jerusalem and after bearing several children to offer the sacrifices for her purification (t. Keritot 2:21; m. Keritot 1:7; 2:4). Mary, however, performed this rite at the end of 40 days (Luke 2:22) in strict observance of the commandments.

The redemption of the first-born son (ברא) could occur from the 30th day after the child’s birth (Numbers 18:14–16). A father could pay the redemption fee to a priest anywhere within the land of Israel; this did not need to take place in Jerusalem or the temple (t. Halah 2:7–9). Some very devout parents read the law of the redemption of the first-born, “All the first-born of your sons you shall redeem. And none shall appear before me empty,” and realized that the phrase, “And none shall appear before me empty” (Deuteronomy 10:19) occurs in Deuteronomy 16:16 (cf. Exodus 23:15) where Moses instructs the Children of Israel concerning their obligation...
Jesus’ parents strictly adhered to the Law of the Lord, and without a doubt, they influenced and shaped their son, His faith, His education, and His teachings.

Luke describes in another episode the strict devotion of Jesus’ family: “Every year Jesus’ parents went to Jerusalem for the Feast of the Passover” (2:41). The Law of Moses required Jewish men to appear before the Lord three times a year (Exodus 23:17; 34:23; Deuteronomy 16:16). For someone living outside Jerusalem, observing this commandment could prove costly and time consuming. The sages ruled that “to appear” before the Lord did not mean at every festival or every year, but only when one made pilgrimage he must bring an “appearance” sacrifice (cf. m. Hagigah 1:6). Thus, a person may only travel to Jerusalem on pilgrimage once every few years or perhaps only once in a lifetime.1 By Joseph and Mary traveling annually to Jerusalem for Passover (a practice Jesus continued as an adult), they displayed an exceptional devotion to God and His commandments.

Joseph, Jesus’ Father
The most overlooked figure in Jesus’ life is Joseph. Joseph never appears in the Gospels outside of the birth narratives, and most probably, died prior to Jesus’ baptism and public ministry. The New Testament identifies Joseph from the line of David (Luke 3:24). According to Matthew, Joseph was a carpenter (Matthew 13:55). Mark identified Jesus as a carpenter (Mark 6:3). In first-century Israel, a father bore the obligation to his son “to teach him the Torah and to teach him a craft (t. Kiddushin 1:11); thus, sons frequently followed their fathers’ occupation. A father was also responsible for instructing his son in the Torah, i.e., providing his religious education. Many modern readers of the Gospels assume that Joseph’s position as a carpenter somehow identifies him as a simple, manual workman. Within first-century society, carpenters were artisans and regarded as particularly learned. If a difficult problem arose, people in the village would ask, “Is there a carpenter among us, or the son of a carpenter, who can solve the problem for us?”

A recent discovery at Khirbet Qana (Cana of Galilee: John 2:1–12) indicates a certain degree of literacy training and ability among Galilean artisans, like Jesus and Joseph.4 The Jewish sages in the first century were not professional academicians; they required that everyone teach his son a trade (t. Kiddushin 1:11). Many of the sages were artisans; some were fishermen, day laborers, potters, and carpenters. A sage who lived in the generation before Jesus taught, “Love manual labor and hate mastery” (m. Avot 1:10; cf. Matthew 23:6–12). Manual labor ensured that the sage never lost his connection to daily life; manual labor assured that the sage would never become an effete academic. A sage in the generation after Jesus said, “If there is no bread (i.e., work), there is no Torah” (m. Avot 3:17). In fact, work became a means for attaining spiritual elevation (cf. Avot de Rabbi Nathan, version A, 11). Matthew provides an important detail about Joseph by describing him as “a righteous man” (6:19, literal translation). Linguistically and culturally, Matthew’s description of Joseph does not merely identify him as a “good guy.” The Greek term used by Matthew reflects the Hebrew word צדיק (tzaddik), which not only identified Joseph as a pious person, but a learned sage (cf. t. Zevahim 2:17; Kallah Rabbati 6:4; and y. Shekalim 2, 46d–47a; cf. Shimon the Righteous קדוש בראשונה, m. Avot 1:2).

Ancient Jewish sources frequently identify a particular group of individuals within Jewish society in the first century B.C and first century A.D. using the term tzaddik, the group often referred to as the pietists קדוש בראשונה: Hasidim.3 This group was known for its exceptional piety and working of miracles; they healed the sick, brought rain, and rescued people from various troubles. They were active in Galilee, and primarily emphasized a person’s relationship to another, particularly the needy (for them charity was the principal means to worship God), prayer (which they were known to pray for long periods of time), and embracing poverty as an ideology. They stood on the fringes of Pharisac Judaism, and their emphasis on the needs of the human individual above ritual purity placed them in tension and conflict with the Pharisees. The Jewish historian Josephus identified...
Honi the Circle Drawer (m. Ta‘anit 3:8), one of the early pietists, as a “righteous man” (δικαιος: ΔΙΚΑΙΟΣ; Antiquities 14:22; y. Ta‘anit 3, 67a). Matthew’s identification of Joseph as a “righteous man” (δικαιος) identified him as a learned pietist. As Jesus’ father and his status as a learned sage, Joseph was responsible for Jesus’ Jewish, religious instruction, as well as teaching his son a trade. If Joseph belonged to this unique group of Galilean Jewish pietists, Joseph would be responsible for the faith of his son represented in Jesus’ adult life. He undoubtedly had a profound impact on Jesus’ education (cf. Luke 2:46–49).

A careful reading of the Gospels against the background of first-century Judaism, particularly Pharisaic-rabbinic Judaism, leads to the conclusion that Jesus had an outstanding Jewish education. In fact, His training and education surpassed that of Paul’s. Josephus mentions Jesus’ exceptional learning in His testimony concerning Jesus, known as the Testimonium Flavium. Christian scribes have corrupted the Greek manuscripts of Josephus’ description of Jesus. The original version, however, appears in a 10th-century history of the world written in Arabic by the Christian author Agapius: “At this time there was a wise man (Greek: οοφοος)10 who was called Jesus. And his conduct (lit. way of life) was good and his learning outstanding.” Underneath Jesus’ simple language in the Gospels lays a complex current of thought connected to the highest level of academic training — training for which Joseph would have been responsible within first-century Jewish society.

Read within the linguistic and cultural setting of Jesus, the Gospels indicate that Jesus grew up in a very devout Jewish home. His parents strictly adhered to the Law of the Lord, and without a doubt, they influenced and shaped their son, His faith, His education, and His teachings. In the modern church where religious education and teaching children about devotion to God is often delegated to the pastoral staff of the church, perhaps we too can learn from sitting at the feet of Jesus’ parents.  

MARC TURNAGE, director, Center for Holy Land Studies for The General Council of the Assemblies of God, Springfield, Missouri

NOTES

2. Author’s translation.
5. J. Levy, Wörterbuch über die Talmudim und Midraschim (vol. 3; Berlin, 1924), 338.
11. Josephus’ description of Jesus as a “wise man,” a “sophist,” parallels his description of other Jewish sages as sophists (War 1:648, 650; and Antiquities 17:152). Similarly, Lucian of Samosata, a Greek author of the second century A.D., referred to Jesus as “the crucified sophist” (The Passing of Peregrinus 13).
Have you ever met nasty skeptics or hostile atheists who seem to have a chip on their shoulder? Have you considered that maybe something’s gone deeply wrong in their family, often because of a failed (or missing) father figure?

I recently came across one such person. Having grown up in an ultralegalistic “Christian” home, this person’s parents were involved in professional ministry. But his father committed adultery and, as a result, brought alienation, hostility, and humiliation to the entire family.

In a debate with an atheist, Christian philosopher J.P. Moreland told the audience: “If you’re an atheist, I’ll bet you a steak dinner that you’ve had authority issues with a father figure.” Ronald K. Tacelli, another Christian philosopher friend (Boston College), told me of his encounters with particularly cranky, mean-spirited atheists. He made the same connection: “They’ve got family issues.”

But we are getting ahead of ourselves.

**Psychologizing the Believer**

We are familiar with the common challenge to believers that God is nothing more than a made-up or projected idea — an infantile illusion, a pathetic flight from reality to help us through...
life's hardships and cruelties. Rather than humans made in God's image, skeptics claim humans have made God in their image. Atheist philosopher Peter Railton refers to the gods “to whom we have given life.”

The Essence of Christianity by Ludwig Feuerbach (1804–72) asserts, “Religion is the dream of the human mind.” This notion inspired Karl Marx to call religion “the sigh of the oppressed creature” and “the opiate of the people.” Likewise, psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud followed Feuerbach’s line of reasoning, connecting humanists’ religious impulse with subconscious desires. God is the product of such “illusions, fulfillments of the oldest, strongest and most urgent wishes of mankind. . . . the benevolent rule of a divine Providence allays our fears of the dangers of life.”

The poem Invictus (meaning “unconquered”) by William Ernest Henley (1849–1903) captures the spirit of these psychologists of religion: “I am the master of my fate; I am the captain of my soul.” Believers, say skeptics, transfer personal responsibility to a made-up deity rather than being masters of their fate and captains of their souls. (Perhaps one could call such a projection “Captain Crutch.”)

Problems With the Crutch Argument
What is the flaw in this argument? There are a number of problems and concerns.

First, Freud himself acknowledged that his “psychoanalysis” of religion had no supporting clinical evidence. In 1927, Freud confessed to Oskar Pfister — an early psychoanalyst and believing Protestant pastor — that his perspectives on religious projection “are my personal views.” Freud had very little psychoanalytic experience with genuine religious believers and published no analysis of believers based on clinical evidence.

Second, this argument commits the genetic fallacy, which is the error of attributing truth or falsehood to a belief based on its origin or genesis. Just because you learned math from a cranky elementary school teacher, it does not follow that what she taught you (2+2=4) must be false. Or just because a mathematical nitwit luckly happens upon the correct answer to an intricate math problem, we cannot conclude the answer must be incorrect. When the skeptic uses the genetic fallacy against the believer, this turns out to be a kind of insult — an ad hominem (“against the man”) argument; it attacks the person and ignores the argument.

Even if all believers in God held their views for inferior or nonrational reasons, this still does nothing to disprove God’s existence. It may only reflect that one’s beliefs are not properly founded, but not necessarily false.

Third, we need to distinguish between the rationality of belief and the psychology of belief. The psychology of belief (how people come to believe in God) is a distinct question from the rationality of belief (why there are good reasons to believe in God). We can offer good reasons for God’s existence (from the universe’s beginning or astonishing fine-tuning, from consciousness and beauty, from historical arguments for Jesus’ resurrection). To discover whether or not God exists, we should not look at people’s motives, but rather discern what good reasons there are for believing or not.

Fourth, it is odd and arbitrary to claim that whatever brings comfort and solace is false. What is not to like about your favorite soup or a cup of tea on a cold day? We talk about comfort foods like spaghetti, lasagna, or pizza — meals we can count on to hit the spot every time. Clearly there is nothing wrong with such enjoying. Food and shelter are comforting, and healthy families bring security and solace, but this hardly makes not an argument against it.

In a future essay, I will address the related question of whether humans are biologically hard-wired to believe in God simply because it enhances survival. For now, let me say: simply because natural processes contribute to religious belief does not disprove God’s existence. In fact, our being hard-wired for believing in God makes sense if God has designed us to make it easier to believe in Him. These sorts of processes enable us to come to know God personally, and we’re at our cognitive best when our faculties direct us toward true belief in God. So it is possible that (a) a personal God exists who has made humans to relate to Him, that (b) natural processes partly contribute to the formation of religious belief, and (c) belief in God is intellectually on-track, with the mind properly functioning according to the divine design plan.

In light of the third point above (on the distinction between psychology and rationality), we should distinguish between the biology of belief and the rationality of belief. God’s existence is a separate issue from biological or psychological factors, but God can engineer the world to include these factors to make belief in Him easier.

Sixth, a comforting father figure, while unique to the biblical faith, is not at the heart of the other world religions. Jesus’ teaching uniquely introducing God as Abba (a Jewish title for one’s father, used by children even into adulthood) — the believer’s personal Father. We do not find such an intimate, personal term for the Ultimate Reality in the other great world religions; many Eastern religions see “It” as abstract and impersonal.

Furthermore, why make up a God who is trium — Father, Son, and Spirit? And why invent an uncontrollable, messy Deity who sets limits on our impulses and self-centeredness and will even judge us? This is unlike the all-too-human, flawed gods and goddesses of Greece and Rome. Like C.S. Lewis’ Aslan, the biblical God is good, but He is not safe.

Seventh, the attempt to psychologize believers applies more readily to the hardened atheist.

While atheists and skeptics often psychoanalyze the religious believer, they regularly fail to psychoanalyze their own rejection of God.
It is interesting that while atheists and skeptics often psychoanalyze the religious believer, they regularly fail to psychoanalyze their own rejection of God. Why are believers subject to such scrutiny and not atheists? Remember another feature of Freud's psychoanalysis — namely, an underlying resentment that desires to kill the father figure.

The skeptic's father-figure projection argument to disprove God's existence commits the genetic fallacy.

Why presume atheism is the rational, psychologically sound, and default position while theism is somehow psychologically deficient? New York University psychology professor Paul Vitz turns the tables on such thinking. He essentially says, “Let’s look into the lives of leading atheists and skeptics in the past. What do they have in common?” The result is interesting: virtually all of these leading figures lacked a positive fatherly role model — or had no father at all.\(^{11}\)

Let’s look at some of them.

- **Voltaire** (1694–1778): This biting critic of religion, though not an atheist, strongly rejected his father and rejected his birth name of François-Marie Arouet.
- **David Hume** (1711–76): The father of this Scottish skeptic died when Hume was only 2 years old. Hume's biographers mention no relatives or family friends who could have served as father figures.
- **Baron d'Holbach** (1723–89): This French atheist became an orphan at age 13 and lived with his uncle.
- **Ludwig Feuerbach** (1804–72): At age 13, his father left his family and took up living with another woman in a different town.
- **Karl Marx** (1818–83): Marx's father, a Jew, converted to being a Lutheran under pressure — not out of any religious conviction. Marx, therefore, did not respect his father.
- **Friedrich Nietzsche** (1844–1900): He was 4 when he lost his father.
- **Sigmund Freud** (1856–1939): His father, Jacob, was a great disappointment to him; his father was passive and weak. Freud also mentioned that his father was a sexual pervert and that his children suffered for it.
- **Bertrand Russell** (1872–1970): His father died when he was 4.
- **Albert Camus** (1913–60): His father died when he was 1 year old, and in his autobiographical novel *The First Man*, his father is the central figure preoccupation of his work.
- **Jean-Paul Sartre** (1905–80): The famous existentialist's father died before he was born.\(^{12}\)
- **Madalyn Murray O’Hair** (1919–95): She hated her father and even tried to kill him with a butcher knife.

We could throw in a few more prominent contemporary atheists not mentioned by Vitz with similar childhood challenges:
- **Daniel Dennett** (1942–): His father died when he was 5 years of age and had little influence on Dennett.\(^{13}\)
- **Christopher Hitchens** (1949–2011): His father (“the Commander”) was a good man, according to Hitchens, but he and Hitchens “didn’t hold much converse.” Once having “a respectful distance,” their relationship took on a “definite coolness” with an “occasional thaw.” Hitchens adds: “I am rather barren of paternal recollections.”\(^{14}\)
- **Richard Dawkins** (1941–): Though encouraged by his parents to study science, he mentions being molested as a child — no insignificant event, though Dawkins dismisses it as merely embarrassing.\(^{15}\)

Moreover, Vitz's study notes how many prominent theists in the past — such as Blaise Pascal, G.K. Chesterton, Karl Barth, and Dietrich Bonhoeffer — have had in common a loving, caring father in their lives.\(^{16}\)

So the skeptic's father-figure projection argument to disprove God's existence commits the genetic fallacy. To make matters worse for the hardcore skeptic or atheist, the most prominent spokespeople for atheism and skepticism have carried around a lot of psychological baggage themselves.

We should consider the merits of arguments for and against God's existence without dismissing arguments based on this or that person's motives. However, Vitz reminds us that psychological factors (such as wholesome, pleasant childhood memories versus painful ones) may indeed have a bearing on how a person comes to believe or disbelieve; these subconscious factors are not irrelevant and may prove to be psychological roadblocks to belief. They can make trusting in God difficult since those intended to be closest to us have become unworthy of our trust or are no longer present.

When people tell me they have difficulty trusting in God (even if they have good reasons for believing in God and would like to believe), I ask about their family background, particularly the father relationship. In my experience, the typical response is, “How did you know?” or “You are right.” In this case, the security of a loving Christian community can play a significant role in helping restore that ability to trust the ever-loving Father. His trustworthiness is especially evident in Christ’s loving and giving himself for us (John 3:16).

**The Argument From Desire**

We can work these considerations into an argument from desire — one C.S. Lewis made famous. Our deepest needs and longings point us to a transcendent God who can ultimately fulfill them. Lewis speaks of “a desire for something
Humans have all kinds of desires — for sexual satisfaction, athletic success, exotic vacations, gourmet meals. But however enjoyable these experiences are, we are not fully satisfied by them. We yearn for something more — something beyond, something ultimate.

Lewis writes of seeking fulfillment in literature and music: “The books or the music in which we thought we located beauty will betray us if we trust in them; it was not in them, it only came through them, and what came through them was longing. These things — the beauty, the memory of our own past — are good images of what we really desire; but if they are mistaken for the thing itself they turn into dumb idols, breaking the hearts of their worshippers.”

Our earthly enjoyments are not ends in themselves. Our unfulfilled desires can point us to Someone no earthly thing can satisfy. They point us to another realm, which we can begin to experience now in part, but one day in full, unshielded presence of God — our glorious and loving Father.
Addon Robinson, after hearing a sermon as a young boy, thought, He preached for an hour, and it seemed like 20 minutes; others preach for 20 minutes and it seems like an hour. I wonder what the difference is? Great question.

What makes the difference? Alongside the work of the Holy Spirit, it has a lot to do with knowing what you are trying to say, and, of course, the source of the ideas you are saying.

If a sermon is archery, you want the arrow to hit the bull’s-eye. If golf, you want to hit it straight down the fairway, onto the green, and near the pin. A good sermon hits the mark.

A good sermon has a big idea. Robinson was fond of saying, “A mist in the pulpit creates a fog in the pew.”

Every good communication has a central idea. Movies do. Poems, songs, and plays do. Every well-written piece of literature is trying to communicate some specific idea. Good sermons are no exception.

A good sermon simply unfolds the big ideas of Scripture, for every scriptural passage is saying something specific. When Paul writes a letter, he is communicating ideas. David’s Psalms, the Gospel witnesses, and the Israelite prophets do the same. Biblical writers wrote every unique part of Scripture with a big idea in mind.

Bible-based preaching discovers these biblical big ideas and uses the sermon to deliver them. As a biblical preacher, you do not preach your ideas, but ideas straight from the biblical text. When you hear a great biblical sermon, the preacher is inviting you inside and guiding you through a biblical text. Years later, it is okay if you forgot the name of the preacher as long as you remember (and live) the idea of the text.

Before we discuss the big ideas of the scriptural text, let me discuss the nature of ideas and how we form them in daily life. Everyday ideas follow four steps:

**Forming Ideas**

1. **Everybody starts with a topic.** The topic is usually a one-word concept. Your mind starts with a concept. It is a broad concept you will want to shape into a concise statement.

   Let’s say your topic is “airplane.” Airplane is not an idea; it is a topic that will help you form an idea. If you say “airplane” to me, I will be confused because you have not communicated anything about the airplane; you have just given me a lone topic. You need more information to form an idea.

2. **Pick the subject.** To begin shaping your topic into a subject, you must decide how you want to talk about that topic. What kind of questions are you asking about the topic? What aspect of the topic do you want to talk about? You turn a topic into a subject by deciding how you are going to talk about it.

   If “airplane” is your subject, what can you ask about it? What about the topic do you want to know? For example: What kind of airplane is it? Who owns the airplane? How is it used? Where is it located?

   You get the idea: Ask several questions about
the topic to determine a subject. Each of these questions, when answered, will help produce a unique independent idea.

3. Add the complement. The subject demands a complement in the same way a question demands an answer. Together, they are complete. We call it a complement because it completes the subject. A subject is half of an idea; a subject completed by a complement is a whole idea.

Let me complete the questions we asked about airplane: What kind of airplane is it? (Cessna) Who owns the airplane? (Pastor Jim from Tulare) How does he use it? (crop dusting) Where is it located? (behind the church).

4. Bring together the subject and complement, forming the big idea. If you join the subject/question with the complement/answer, you will have a complete independent idea.

Using our airplane example, we can state four independent big ideas: (1) The airplane is a Cessna. (2) Pastor Jim from Tulare owns the airplane. (3) He uses the airplane to dust crops. (4) He stores the airplane behind the church.

Got it? Start with a topic. Find the subject. Complement the subject. Form the big idea.

How do you find the big idea of a biblical text? Use the same principles discussed above, except you are not choosing the nature of the ideas, just interpreting what the original author and the Holy Spirit already wrote. Here are the same four steps, with an additional prestep.

Steps in Forming the Sermon
Prestep: Select the preaching portion (the passage). In proper literary context, select a portion of text (X number of verses) consistent with the logic and structure of the biblical writer’s intention, seeking to find a reasonably coherent unit of thought. This can be one verse, one paragraph, one chapter, or even at times, one book. The issue is not the size of the passage; the issue is of its unity and coherence.

I will choose 1 Corinthians 13, a familiar passage of Scripture. Although it is in the greater context of chapters 12–14 and a discussion regarding spiritual gifts, it has a clear beginning and ending and represents a logical preaching portion with a clear big idea.

1. Determine the topic of the passage. Remember, the topic of the passage is not the big idea but the one-word concept of the passage. In 1 Corinthians 13, the topic is obvious — love. Although “love” is pretty special, it is not an idea. It is a topic — a concept that the expositor needs to shape into an idea.

2. Determine the subject of the passage. Every biblical writer is writing with a question in mind. This is how humans write. Obvious or not, we answer questions when we form ideas. In the Bible, the Holy Spirit guided the ancient questions of the author, and He will help you find them in the text. As you study your preaching portion, and understand the original author’s intent, you will seek to find the question propelling the text.

In 1 Corinthians 13, Paul is asking and answering a question. In the midst of a discussion about spiritual gifts (chapters 12 and 14), Paul is wrestling with the highest priorities in the kingdom of God. The Corinthians have made spiritual gifts, especially speaking in tongues, the highest priority of their expression of faith. Paul takes a whole chapter (13) to refute these religious actions. Looking at the Christian life and what we are called to do, Paul is asking: What kind of life do you have without love?

3. Determine the complement of the passage. After identifying the subject (the overall question of the author), complete it with the complement (the answer the author provides). Remember, just as a question demands an answer, a subject demands a complement.

If the subject (question) is: What kind of life do you have without love? The complement (answer): A life without meaning.

4. Bring the subject and complement together, forming the big idea. If you join the biblical author’s subject/question with his complement/answer, you will have the big idea of the preaching portion (passage). This is what you preach. This becomes the unifying idea of your sermon. Every part of your sermon from beginning to end is about this idea, for this idea is the point of the passage. Preachers do not create a biblical sermon’s big idea, they extract it from the biblical text.

A good sermon simply unfolds the big ideas of Scripture, for every scriptural passage is saying something specific.

Subject: What kind of life do you have without love? Complement: A life without meaning. Big idea: Life without love is a life without meaning. Everything Paul says in every verse of chapter 13 supports this big idea. It represents the whole and it represents the parts. This is what you preach because this is what the Bible is saying. All your illustrations, main points — even your introduction and conclusion — will derive from and will be congruent with this big idea.

The Bible was written as a collection of ideas. Biblical sermons are not opportunities for preachers to create their own ideas (that would be a speech or something else), but the honored privilege of sharing the Bible’s unique and specific big ideas, inspired by the Holy Spirit, written by an ancient author, studied by a modern preacher, and delivered to a congregation needing to hear from God.

The simple strategy to good biblical preaching is to discover and preach the big ideas of the Bible. Think about the freedom that gives you as a preacher! Next Sunday you do not have to figure out what to say, you just have to say what the text is already saying. Say one thing. Say it well. Say it based in the authority of God’s Word.

In so doing, not only will your sermons be rooted in Holy Scripture, but your hour will seem like 20 minutes, and even better, your half hour will seem like 5.

DOUG GREEN, D.Min., founding pastor, North Hills Church, Brea, California
God is the Good Potter. I am often the not-so-good clay. My job is to spin and stay put. The Potter’s job is to design — to bring contour and purpose. At times I hate the speed of spinning or how tightly His skillful hands forge change.

Fitting into Bethlehem’s manger was one thing, squeezing His image into me is quite another. But my job as a leader is to remain willing — to embrace the passionate transfer. But if there is to be an emergence of my leadership shape, I must stay moist and in motion. Dry idleness in leadership is a death spiral. A leader must develop and maintain a lifestyle that is both fresh and growing. There is no exit strategy; formation has no graduation.

I find an eerie parallel between the potter’s wheel and the process inside Nehemiah as he sought to rebuild Jerusalem’s wall (see Nehemiah 2:1–6:15). Like Ezekiel’s bones, soon Nehemiah’s “stones” would be rattling and reorganizing themselves into something new.

“All he could do was weep for the lost dignity of Israel. He pleaded for the cause of rebirth. The once glorious walls that surrounded the city of Jerusalem were both the fortress and the splendor of Israel. Now they lay like lost ruins, the result of Nebuchadnezzar’s militias and their systematic destruction approximately 162 years earlier. With great pleasure Nebuchadnezzar had pillaged the instruments of Israel’s praise, signaling the start of a 70-year captivity.

Now that the captivity was over, King Cyrus granted Israel the freedom to return and rebuild, beginning around 536 B.C. After the rebuilding of the temple in 516 B.C., no discernable improvements followed. By the time Nehemiah arrived in 445 B.C., the people looked more like squatters than conquerors. After approximately 90 years following the return of the first exiles, the best that could be said was that they had rearranged the rubble.

As Nehemiah rallied his people and began to make progress, it became apparent to Nehemiah’s enemies that this was more than wishful thinking. Threatened and angered, Sanballat and Tobiah attacked the Jews emotionally, financially, and physically.

“So we built the wall, and the entire wall was joined together up to half its height, for the people had a mind to work. Now it happened, when Sanballat, Tobiah, the Arabs, the Ammonites, and the Ashdodites heard that the walls of Jerusalem were being restored and the gaps were beginning to be closed, that they became very angry” (Nehemiah 4:6,7, emphasis mine).

When Sanballat saw what Nehemiah was doing, he said, “What are these feeble Jews doing?” (Nehemiah 4:2).

Tobiah chimed in, “Whatever they build, if even a fox goes up on it, he will break down their stone wall” (Nehemiah 4:3).

Nehemiah and the many who joined him now faced an all-too-common crucifix.

“The strength of the laborers is failing, and there is so much rubbish that we are not able to move forward and finish their wall; they found in relationship with one another the inspiration to fight” (Nehemiah 4:10).

In other words, the halfway point was the end of the line. It was time to renegotiate the dream of a wall back down to the reality of a fence. Zerubbabel and Ezra, Nehemiah’s predecessors, were both dynamic in their own right. But, at the end of the day, Nehemiah was nothing more than a partial victor like them.

It is frightening to wake up one day and feel as if you have spent your whole heart but arrived...
only halfway. We will all face at some point the “half-finished wall” and realize we have nothing more to give — when the hard truth of gaps and deficits presents its brutal reality, when we see more openings in our life story than completions, and more partial closures than finished promises.

When these gaps of unfinished ideas and promises combine with a demoralized state of mind, they create an overwhelming sense of defeat in leadership. For Nehemiah, a leadership renewal came in the form of a four-part equation: shovels, swords, trumpets, and family. God honored the restlessness of Nehemiah and unveiled a fresh new way to get things moving again. Let’s look at God’s formula for Nehemiah and his people.

**They found renewal through the shovel.**

“They who built on the wall … loaded themselves so that with one hand they worked at construction, and with the other held a weapon” (Nehemiah 4:17).

Nehemiah called the people back to work. Serving is at the heart of meaning and spiritual progress. The “shovel in one hand” and “sword in the other hand” concept represents the proper balance between faith and works. Many try to shovel with both hands, but real progress requires balance.

**They found renewal through the sword.**

“Therefore I positioned men behind the lower parts of the wall, at the openings … with their swords, their spears, and their bows” (Nehemiah 4:13).

You and I must never forget we are at war over the maturity of our souls. The greater the progress, the greater the attack. The enemies of Nehemiah did not fight fair. They used conspiracy. This meant a combination of several stealth-like attacks that tore at their dignity, finances, composure, and unity.

But Nehemiah understood the necessity for battle readiness. He told each worker to stay engaged with readied sword in hand.

For us today this means being prepared to engage in spiritual warfare. Servanthood alone will not get your wall going again. If you want the kind of progress that presses beyond the normal fatigues of leadership, it will take prayer and spiritual mindedness that stays revolutionary in its intensity.

**They found renewal through the trumpet.**

“Wherever you hear the sound of the trumpet, rally to us there. Our God will fight for us” (Nehemiah 4:20).

As difficult as it may seem, when you feel like abandoning God’s promises at the halfway point, you must rediscover your passion for personal worship. Worship is about relationship, and relationship is about discovering refuge and refreshing from life’s fires — spiritual and otherwise.

The idea of “worship” comes from two Greek words, pros and kuneo. The word pros means “to move forward.” The word kuneo means “to kiss with a sense of awe.” Earnest worship involves both a physical action and a loving intent, both a leaning forward with the body and a reaching out with the soul to touch with both life and lyric the divine magnificence of the Father.

Nehemiah knew the people needed something. He is looking for something else — a community that stands the power, strength, and courage that comes when families grasp their covenant bonds and stand as one.

**They found renewal through family.**

“And I looked, and arose and said to the nobles, to the leaders, and to the rest of the people, ‘Do not be afraid of them. Remember the Lord, great and awesome, and fight for your brethren, your sons, your daughters, your wives, and your houses’ ” (Nehemiah 4:14).

In one of the more stunning yet revelatory moves in Scripture, Nehemiah positions families in the open breaches of the wall. Common sense rejects such a move. Yet Nehemiah understood the power, strength, and courage that come when families grasp their covenant bonds and stand as one.

When the people were at their lowest, feeling too weak and under-resourced to move forward and finish their wall, they found in relationship with one another the inspiration to fight. When the body of Christ chooses to lose its empires and instead find its brotherhood, something miraculous happens. We become like a brick wall before our enemies.

Something wonderful happened to Nehemiah at the halfway point. Maybe something wonderful needs to happen to your leadership and mine as well. Gaps and deficits at the halfway point can look ugly and intimidating. This is why so many leaders lose heart and quit. This is the most vulnerable point of the journey. But it is also the place where men and women find God in new and precious ways.

If you are struggling, first admit the struggle. Nehemiah cried out before one stone was reorganized and then had to cry out again when the wall was only half done.

The fact is, we need God for the entire journey. Remember what I wrote at the beginning of this article? **Formation has no graduation.** God is not after our perfect and complete walls. He is looking for something else — progress.

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**Scott Hagan** is senior pastor, Real Life Church of the Assemblies of God, Sacramento, California.

**Note**

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Pinning Down the Palpable Positive Presence

In his book *The Future of Management*, Gary Hamel carefully examines the nonvisual aspects of doing business. In commenting on the Whole Foods grocery store chain, Hamel pulls apart the company’s mission statement (which is titled a Declaration of Interdependence) and treats his readers to the company’s secret, silent, and sightless weapon-of-choice when confronting its competitors . . . constantly working at creating value for customers. This pragmatically means Whole Foods employees are constantly examining and replenishing their fresh produce and dairy products. In a Whole Foods store nothing can appear to be wilted, withered, or dated. If so, they immediately discard that particular item.

The ultimate result of providing value for the Whole Foods customer is this: Every employee must come to work committed and engaged every business day . . . and every day. In other words, there is a buzz in the air that freshness is never compromised by anyone at Whole Foods. And, their customers come in droves to savor their fanatical commitment to freshness.

If you have read books like *What Would Google Do?* by Jeff Jarvis, *The Southwest Airlines Way* by Jody Hoffer Gittell, and *The Starbucks Experience* by Joseph A. Michelli you know about the Palpable Positive Presence when it comes to making money. Companies that have significant face time with customers and are intent on being No. 1 are committed to PPP. They have no choice. When you are not the only show in town, it is essential that you distinguish yourself from your nipping competitors by establishing an interior atmosphere that makes second place impossible.

So what about your ministry? Do the members of your staff, congregation, board, faculty, janitors, nursery volunteers, or your whatever communicate a Palpable Positive Presence to those who receive your ministries?
Your immediate response to this question will probably be a resounding yes. I am not questioning the veracity of your answer. What I am questioning is whether or not any of us, who often have our personal identity wrapped tightly around our ministry, can be the honest arbiter of whether or not PPP marks our expression of the body of Christ.

Three Questions to Detect the PPP in Your Ministry

Since the Palpable Positive Presence always results in more business for Toyota, Apple computers, or Nordstrom department stores, the conclusion must follow that when the interior atmosphere is right, the marketplace will expand.

So, the first question for your ministry is, “Is there numerical growth?”

The textual touchstone for Pentecostals is obviously the dramatic and visceral account of the violent wind that crashed through the Upper Room and resulted in the attendees speaking the “wonders of God” in languages they had never learned.

The end result of this headline-grabbing event was: “Those who accepted his (Peter’s) message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day” (Acts 2:41). The atmosphere was palpable with a divine invitation to become the Church.

Throughout the centuries the church has written long lists of all the factors that muzzle the declaration of the good news (spiritual competitors, the weather, the government, the spirit of the age, etc.), but none of these factors seem potent enough to keep the church from spontaneously growing when the Palpable Positive Presence of God shows up.

The second question follows on the heels of the first, “Is your best evangelism methodology the irresistible witness of the redeemed?” For the church to grow from the inside out, the word-of-mouth methodology will become a natural public relations asset.

How many times have you heard, “You just have to take a ride in the new Z6 BMW. You will not believe the ride and quality of this car.” Or, “Have you tried Starbucks’ Americano with two shots? Now that is a cup of java.”

The buzz between satisfied customers always trumps a $50,000 print ad in the New York Times. If we bump into confirmed believers who gush with their affection for a particular product, their endorsement is always the best advertisement.

Companies that are intent on being No. 1 are committed to PPP.

When there is Palpable Positive Presence in your ministry, the changed lives will always be showing potential new believers through the front door.

The final question to determine the efficacy of the Palpable Positive Presence in your ministry is, “Are the adherents asking for more?” “More what?” you ask.

More opportunities to be engaged.

You hear it all the time, “We are so busy. Sorry, we cannot help right now.” With iPhone immediacy, our lives move to the beat of new drummers who tweet, scan, and download their way through another exhausting day.

And, at the same time, we admit we always have time for our passion (mountain biking, surfing the Net, soccer practice, international travel, etc.). The legacy of participating in a ministry marked by Palpable Positive Presence is a large appetite for more exegesis of God’s Word, more venues to give away God’s grace, and more time to celebrate Christ among us.

The Pragmatics of the Palpable Positive Presence

The Palpable Positive Presence can be episodic in a worship setting. There are those moments when the Holy Spirit drives us to our knees as we suddenly whisper to each other, “We are on very holy ground.” I am also convinced the Palpable Positive Presence becomes the buzz in a ministry when churches follow the following disciplines:

First, churches create PPP when there is a determined effort to keep the language in its spiritual community positive.

Here is an assignment: Have someone put in hard copy the verbiage spoken during a public worship event. How many times were the words not, never, cannot, difficult, except, We don’t do that here, I cannot help you unless . . . and We are not that type of . . . said?

What is the reward for returning to a community that spends the majority of its time and energy wagging a finger in a face telling people what they absolutely cannot do?

Second, we augment the PPP by positive facial cues and the legitimacy of laughter. Arrange with a parishioner or friend to videotape your leadership in a public ministry setting. Remember, this could be a worship service, leading a monthly elder meeting, teaching a class, etc. Sit in a room by yourself and turn on the video but mute the audio. What are the emotional messages your face and body are communicating? Oh, and to keep you humble, invite someone who loves you to also evaluate your nonverbal messages. After observing the videotape, are you a resonant person who draws people in and makes your presentation irresistible?

Third, Palpable Positive Presence is the direct result of refreshing your relationship with your God, whom you represent.

The best sermons are the ones that the preacher first preached to himself. Francis Schaeffer in his infamous book, The Mark of the Christian, constantly reminds his reader the world is looking for Christians who have personally stood at the mouth of the empty, gaping tomb and found a future. The buzz, atmosphere, and presence will always be palpable when the messenger has first experienced the message.

The Power of What You Do Not See or Hear

Do you remember Circuit City, Washington Mutual Bank, Lehman Brothers Investment Bank, your grandfather’s Oldsmobile? The landscape of American commerce is pockmarked with empty dreams that failed, not because of what someone saw, but what remained invisible. And, when these companies figured out they needed to decipher the silent messages they were receiving from their marketplace, it often was too late. The same principle is true for the church.

There is immense power, both positive and negative, in what you do not see or hear in your ministry. The Palpable Positive Presence of God is the ultimate attractor and sustainer of our ministries. What initiatives do you need to take today to make sure the Palpable Positive Presence arrives before your congregation walks in? ©

CAL LeMON, D.Min., president, Executive Enrichment, Inc., Springfield, Missouri, a corporate education and consulting firm
Trust is the currency of leadership. If leadership is a relationship between those who lead and those who follow, then trust cements the relationship. When trust collapses, the relationship crumbles. When trust is strong, change, growth, and mission fulfillment stand on that foundation.

On August 1, 2007, the Interstate 35W bridge in Minneapolis collapsed, bringing attention to the relationship between increased truck weights and bridge stress. The result of the National Transportation Safety Board investigation cited several reasons for the bridge’s collapse, including the extra weight of heavy construction equipment combined with the weight of rush hour traffic. The bridge simply could not stand up under the weight it was carrying.

Engineers design bridges to withstand a certain amount of stress from the weight of cars and trucks that cross it. Any weight that increases the stress above what it was designed to support could possibly cause the bridge to collapse.

Leadership works in much the same way. Leaders build bridges from the present to the future, from where the organization currently is to where the vision demands it goes. To bridge the gap between the present and the future, leaders can only move forward based on the amount of trust they possess with team members and followers.

A limit exists to the amount of trust followers and team members extend to their leader. Just like every bridge has a limit, every leader has a limit imposed by the leader’s relationship with the team.

When leaders make changes with their teams that exceed the weight limit of trust they have established, the relationship often collapses. So how do leaders build trust with their teams? How do they ensure there is enough trust to carry the weight the change demands?

How to Gain Trust
Equifax, Transunion, and Experian are credit bureaus that keep track of who is paying whom and who is not. They tally the record and give every consumer in America a credit score. But they are not the only ones who track credit trustworthiness. Every team member watches and asks questions to see if the leader deserves a good credit score — if the leader deserves to be trusted.

Team members will ask three questions to determine whether or not they can trust you. With the right answers, you can build trust with your team.

What Is His Agenda?
I open every staff meeting by asking if everyone has an agenda. One day someone quipped, “Yeah, but does everybody have the same agenda?”

This incisive comment reveals the fact everybody has an agenda, and leaders should not leave team members in the dark about their agenda. Team members want to know what the leader’s agenda is for the organization, for each team member, and for the team. Is the leader using the team or ministry to attain personal goals, or are the leader and team working together to achieve the organization’s mission? Is the leader using his position as a stepping-stone to another job and substituting short-term results for long-term benefits? What is the leader’s agenda? What is the leader trying to accomplish? What is the vision? And, who benefits from it?

Obviously, a leader’s agenda needs to involve...
fulfilling the mission of the organization while empowering team members to fulfill their potential under God. The effective leader reveals that agenda through every decision that is made, through the respect shown to team members, through the way each team member’s role is clarified, and how the leader confronts the real issues between reality and vision. To make the team trust you, you cannot play tricks or try to hide the agenda. The redemptive leader makes sure everyone knows the agenda, his role in it, and how it benefits the organization and the community it serves.

If the team senses the agenda is personal, self-centered, or off base, trust begins to erode and the ability to lead collapses. So, make the mission plain.

Is There Alignment?
Team members look for alignment of action and agenda on two levels: personal and organizational. Followers want to know if the leader’s walk matches his talk. They also want to know if there is alignment between the leader’s stated vision and values and the reality on the ground in the organization.

First, they look at the leader. Does the leader practice what is preached? Is the leader good at issuing dictates that apply to everyone else in the organization, but exempt the leader? Does the leader demand a strong work ethic and embody it? Does the leader practice the same accountability to which other team members are held? Does the leader talk about transparency and authenticity, but keep essential elements from the team? Is there personal alignment between the leader and the vision and values of the organization? If there is, trust grows. If there is not, trust crumbles.

I heard about a leader of a large ministry who repeatedly told the staff he had an open door policy, but only a few staff members had a card key to the executive suite where he worked. His stated agenda and actions did not match. This undercut the trust the team members placed in his leadership. The gap between agenda and action resulted in a gap between leader and team. The gap came as an unintentional consequence of security concerns, but intentional or not, it was still there. To make sure the gap was closed, the leader reversed policy and gave everyone access to the executive suite in an attempt to match agenda to action.

In your leadership, are there intentional or unintentional gaps between your agenda and actions? If you cannot spot them, ask two or three of your closest and most supportive leaders to help you keep an eye out for them.

Trust is the currency of leadership.

Second, team members look for alignment in regard to the leader and the organizational aims. Team members often look at vision and values exercises as a needless waste of time concocted by an academic in some ivory tower. Why? Because they have been through this before and nothing happened.

In a way this is like the parent who continually tells their child that discipline is coming if behavior does not change — but discipline never comes. The parent’s lack of action deafens the child’s ears to the parent’s words. In the same way, the leader deafens the team’s ears when talk and walk do not match.

I consulted with a church that stated one of its primary aims was to reach the next generation for Christ, but its children’s facility was in horrible shape, while the rest of the campus had undergone a multimillion-dollar renovation. The organizational gap between stated agenda and realized action diminished trust the team members gave the leader.

The primary location for the gap to develop is in the budget. It is easy for the leader to state the agenda is to reach people, create a vibrant youth ministry, or any number of great goals; but, if the budget of time and financial resources does not match up with the agenda, the team will be left wondering if the leader is telling the truth.

Is the Leader Capable?

Every time I board an airplane I look in the cockpit. I do not know what I am looking for. I could not tell an altimeter from an emergency brake. I guess I am checking to make sure it looks like the pilot and copilot know what they are doing. Do they look awake? Do they inspire confidence? Are they capable of getting the plane in the air and then back on the ground?

Similarly, your team wants to know if you have what it takes to get them where they want to go. In the same way, they want to know if you are capable of getting the organization from point A to point B.

Is the leader capable? To answer the question, team members often look over their shoulders to see if the leader has a record of success. This is why it is important in a new assignment to get some small wins under your belt to build trust.

It is not just the big three credit bureaus deciding if you can be trusted — it is every team member and every follower of Christ. When you do your best to answer these three questions, you will increase your trust with your team.

GLENN REYNOLDS is lead pastor of Bethel Temple (Assemblies of God), Hampton, Virginia. He is a doctor of ministry candidate at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, where his degree concentration is redemptive leadership and organizational development.
Social networking existed before we knew how to send a tweet, make an update to our Facebook status, or consider that +1 might suggest something other than a mathematical function. Nothing can replace the God-given desire to connect with others.

Professional networks exist in every enterprise and industry, including ministry. We expect leaders, managers, and executives to interact with peers from other organizations. This is a way to grow into positions of influence. In these networks we learn, grow, and discover more about ourselves.

Pastors Need Community
We can identify people in our past (or maybe our present) who have poured into us the wisdom of being in professional ministry. These individuals guide us through difficult situations and advise us on complex decisions. Sometimes we receive the benefit of this wisdom; at other times we are in a position to invest in others.

Connecting with others is more than a technique to propel you toward some ministry position or goal. Networking provides opportunities to make the world a little smaller. It is not enough that we have networks within the church in which we serve and in the communities in which we live. Without a professional ministry network:

• We isolate ourselves by removing people from our lives who understand the unique challenges we face.
• We restrict our impact by closing the door to new relationships with those who can invest in us and in whom we can invest.
• We limit our growth by refusing to expose ourselves to people and ideas different from those that seem familiar.

With a professional ministry network:
• Those who recognize that our potential is sometimes greater than we might have first thought challenge us.
• We become instruments of change by connecting people and opportunities.
• Others remind us that our ideas, approaches, and experiences are not the same, so we must make room to see and hear things in new ways.

While our unique personalities define our social disposition, those for whom vocational
ministry is our calling are not afforded the luxury of living separated from our peers in the landscape we call church ministry. At some point, we will need to hear a different perspective on a difficult situation, expand our ministry staff, or even find a new place to serve. Our professional ministry networks facilitate these transitions. Our congregations are not the only ones for whom the call to live in community and do life together exists.

Why Networking in Ministry Matters
When I turn a conversation toward professional ministry networking, I often hear that it is mercenary and self-centered. The body of Christ is much larger than our individual church community; therefore our focus needs to be on collective action not local competition among church leaders.

I often encounter those who say that professional ministry networking is a disguised effort to get to a bigger church. This breaks down particularly in difficult and rampant conflict within a body of believers. In whom can leaders confide? Who will give informed advice that speaks from experience rather than speculation? How can we maintain our resolve in the midst of a power struggle? These questions force us to look outside ourselves and our own contexts for help, advice, and insight from pastors we have come to trust. When our networks are working as they should, the feeling of isolation becomes manageable.

Many pastors point to limited time as a way to debunk the need to spend time with anyone outside the church community they serve. We have time, money, and energy to do, buy, and accomplish what we want to.

The benefits of a professional ministry network far outweigh the costs. Given our human desire (and sometimes lust) for power, position, and prestige, the objections listed above are not entirely unfounded. However, if our motives and intentions are pure, building a professional ministry network will yield connectedness and community that become a source of strength, encouragement, and satisfaction.

How to Build a Professional Ministry Network
Here are five things we can do to help better network among other pastors:

1. Learn more than you teach. The best leaders learn from others. Forgetting we have much to learn is a dangerous place for leaders to find themselves. Jesus taught the importance of leadership through service. Sometimes we need to stop talking and teaching and sit under the authority of others.

2. Listen more than you talk. Effective pastors value active listening. There is no better crucible for this than marriage. We need to let the discipline of carefully listening to the requests and ideas of the other person dominate family communication. Before we start offering our advice, insight, or solutions, we would do well to listen and clarify if what we heard is consistent with what the other person has said.

3. Add more than you take. The people God has connected you with are for sharing, cultivating, and developing, not hoarding, exploiting, or abusing. A healthy relationship includes give and take from both parties. Be careful not to earn the reputation of being the pastor who only connects with other pastors for selfish reasons.

4. Care more than you are cared for. Inspirational pastors care for others beyond what others expect of you. Make a phone call, write a note, schedule time for personal conversation, or share a meal. Give your time and attention to others.

5. Connect more than you meet. Connecting with others is more than a technique to propel you toward your next big ministry. Networking is a chance to make the world a little smaller. It is gratifying to connect two people with similar interests who did not previously know each other and watch that relationship grow. The more you do this, the more valuable you become to more people.

But what is the fruit that comes from building a professional network in ministry?

Consider these:
- Unmatched joy of living in community with peers.
- Unexpected surprises hidden within new friends, new perspectives, and new experiences.
- Unlimited opportunity to increase, expand, and multiply your impact.

One Pitfall Pastors Must Avoid
Those who desire selfless connections must guard their hearts against money. People often choose to compromise themselves when they need money; pastors are not immune. This is part of human nature and a dimension the enemy has used to disqualify many from positions of ministry leadership. Do not wait to build your ministry network until you are in need of intervention. In the process of saving souls we must be careful not to lose our own.

If our motives and intentions are pure, building a professional ministry network will yield connectedness and community that become a source of strength, encouragement, and satisfaction.

Professional networking is not just something I do; it is how God has wired me. I can look back and see — even from a young age — that God was teaching me the impact we can have on each other and how small the world really is. The reality is that too many pastors forego the personal enrichment benefits that come along with building a professional ministry network.

Assess the value of your ministry network. Are you building relationships with other ministers? Are you connecting people you have met to match a need with an opportunity? Do people identify you as someone who is connected? If not, you are missing out on a side of your professional life that can greatly enhance and encourage you in your ministry.

My next article will unpack 10 steps you can take to become better at networking. When you enrich other pastors and make that the focus of your ministry, it will change your life and the lives of everyone involved.

**Justin Lathrop**, Executive pastor for strategic development, The Oaks Fellowship, Red Oaks, Texas
In recent years, public dissatisfaction with managed care has sparked the medical community's interest in the relationship between spirituality and medicine. More than 100 of the approximately 150 medical schools in the United States have added spirituality in medicine courses to their training programs. Doctors are learning how to take a spiritual history along with the patient's medical history. Medical students shadow chaplains during an on-call experience. The mid-20th-century shift away from the doctor-patient relationship to disease-focused health care based on technological advances is giving way to a new emphasis on compassionate physicians responsive to the needs of the whole person.

Many current scientific studies demonstrate a connection between spiritual faith and increased mental and physical health. For example, prayer reduces stress, decreases anxiety, and improves a patient's ability to cope with illness. The sense of purpose that comes from faith gives meaning to those suffering from chronic illnesses. Medical professionals also recognize that a patient's religious beliefs affect medical decisions. Hospital visitation, counseling, and praying for the sick remain important aspects of pastoral care. Knowing that young doctors view pastors and chaplains as partners in the patient's health care team should encourage ministers. Understanding how physicians view the role of spirituality in medicine can help pastors minister more effectively in hospital settings and be better prepared to meet the needs of parishioners receiving medical care.

Connecting Faith and Health
A study led by Farr A. Curlin, M.D., an associate professor of medicine at the University of Chicago and an expert on spirituality and medicine, showed that three in four doctors believe spirituality helps patients cope and gives them a positive state of mind. More than half of the 1,144 U.S. physicians responding to this survey believe that religion and spirituality have a significant influence on health, with 85 percent agreeing that the influence on health is generally positive. Contrary to the 20th-century view held by many prominent mental health professionals that religion is irrelevant or even detrimental to mental health, scientific studies demonstrate that faith decreases the likelihood of depression, anxiety, substance abuse, and suicide.

In a study that analyzed the association between regular church attendance and mortality over a 28-year period for 5,286 survey respondents, those who went to church at least once a week were more likely to stop smoking, increase exercising, increase social contacts, and stay married. Another study calculated that those who attend church more...
than once a week gain the equivalent of a 7-year increase in life expectancy at age 20 compared to those who never attend church. A possible physical explanation for this increased life expectancy is the relationship between the immune system and faith. Interleukin-6 (IL-6) is an immune marker that correlates with mood states. Levels of IL-6 increase with stress and depression. IL-6 is produced at any sites of inflammation within the body. Inflammation is a process involved in many diseases such as heart disease, rheumatoid arthritis, stroke, and diabetes.

A study of 557 older adults examined the relationship of church attendance, interleukin-6 levels, and mortality. The researchers found that attending religious services more than once a week correlated with lower mortality rates and lower IL-6 levels compared with never attending religious services. Furthermore, their results were consistent with a role for IL-6 in mediating the relationship between church attendance and mortality.

Of course, the primary motive for church attendance should be obtaining spiritual benefits rather than improved physical health and increased longevity. Yet, these scientific studies function as a powerful apologetic to those who would deride the value of church. If we consider that God created the whole person, we should not be surprised that taking care of spiritual needs results in meeting our mental and physical needs as well.

Stress weakens the body and contributes to the development of many diseases. Prayer reduces stress, making people calmer physiologically as well as emotionally. The admonition in Philippians 4:6 serves as a great prescription for health: “Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.”

**Respecting Patient’s Spiritual Needs**

Increasingly, doctors are realizing that spiritual care is vital to a person’s complete healthcare. A reemphasis on service and compassion in medicine has highlighted the importance of respecting a patient’s spiritual needs. Health care professionals receive training on taking a spiritual history in a medical interview, often using the acronym “H-O-P-E” as a guide. “H” stands for a patient’s source of hope, meaning, and comfort. “O” stands for organized religion. “P” stands for personal spirituality/practices, which includes prayer, reading Scripture, and attending religious services. “E” stands for effects on medical care and end-of-life issues.

By inquiring about a patient’s spiritual needs, doctors demonstrate their respect for the patient and provide comfort. Many patients use their faith to help them cope.

**Pastors can serve an important role alongside the health care team in tending to the spiritual needs of a parishioner.**

Physicians provide a therapeutic benefit when they show an interest in a person’s spiritual journey. The goal of a spiritual history is for physicians to learn more about their patients’ beliefs, not for physicians to share their beliefs with their patients. The physician may uncover spiritual views held by the patient that could impact medical decision making. For example, beliefs about the sanctity of human life can impact reproductive decisions as well as end-of-life decisions. A physician must guard the patient’s privacy, confidentiality, and autonomy while exploring the patient’s spiritual beliefs.

Pastors can serve an important role alongside the health care team in tending to the spiritual needs of a parishioner. For example, pastors can help patients sort through how their faith might impact their medical decisions. Patients may need encouragement to express their concerns with the medical team. Perhaps the most important role for pastors is helping patients find purpose and meaning in the midst of difficult circumstances. The challenges that come from physical illness or injury can strengthen a person’s faith or become a barrier in the person’s relationship with God. The caring presence of a pastor often influences this outcome.

**Resolving Ethical Conflicts**

Integrating spirituality and medicine can lead to ethical conflicts. If physicians force their beliefs on patients, whether religious or not, they are overstepping their boundaries as medical professionals. A doctor and a patient who both share the same faith can certainly discuss medical issues in the context of their shared belief. Doctors can share their faith in response to a patient’s questions. Even though certain spiritual practices contribute to improved health, doctors should not prescribe church attendance in the same way they might recommend increased physical exercise.

When spiritual beliefs prevent a patient from accepting an otherwise beneficial medical treatment, ethical issues can arise. For example, people who are trusting God for a physical healing may decide to forego medical treatment as an expression of their faith. The medical doctor needs to balance respect for the patient’s autonomy with the responsibility to seek the good of the patient by persuading the patient to follow medical recommendations. A pastor or chaplain sometimes can help the physician resolve these types of conflicts.

The potential for ethical conflicts should not cause physicians to avoid addressing patient’s spiritual needs. Instead, physicians should work together with chaplains toward the goal of treating the whole person. Chaplains, in turn, can work with pastors to provide spiritual support for patients. Both pastors and parishioners can take heart that what is good for the soul is also good for the body. After all, when we seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, all other things are given to us as well (Matthew 6:33).
The allegations of child molestation by former Penn State assistant football coach Jerry Sandusky stunned the nation last Fall. Sandusky was employed by Penn State for 23 years as the defensive coordinator of its Division I collegiate football program. While coaching, he started “The Second Mile,” a charity he established to “help children who need additional support and would benefit from positive human interaction.” Through The Second Mile, Sandusky had access to hundreds of boys, many of whom were vulnerable due to their social situations. It was within The Second Mile program that he found his victims, although several of them claimed Sandusky molested them in Penn State locker rooms where Sandusky retained unrestricted access.

A grand jury investigated allegations of child molestation by Sandusky involving 10 minor boys over a period of years, both while he was a football coach at Penn State and after he retired from coaching. This led to the grand jury bringing 52 criminal charges against Sandusky, including several counts of involuntary deviate sexual intercourse carrying a penalty of up to 20 years in prison on each count.

Victims will probably file additional criminal charges against various Penn State officials for failure to report Sandusky’s abuse of children. Within days of the scandal coming to light, one victim filed the first of what likely will be several

Lessons From the Penn State Scandal
civil lawsuits against Penn State and The Second Mile in the court of common pleas for Philadelphia County, Pennsylvania.

The Penn State scandal has opened old wounds in the lives of many victims of child abuse, and has prompted many to disclose their abuse — often for the first time after many years of silence — in an attempt to seek justice and in some cases compensation for emotional suffering. Church and parachurch leaders need to be prepared to respond to claims of abuse dating back years or even decades.

Church employees, like the Penn State officials, often do not know how to report abuse.

The Penn State scandal contains several lessons of direct relevance to church leaders. I address several in this article.

1. Recognize “grooming” behavior
For many years, experts in the field of child-abuse prevention have recognized that pedophiles (persons with a sexual preference for prepubescent minors) often use “grooming” techniques to attract and retain victims. The grand jury report reveals numerous examples of grooming by Sandusky.

Church leaders need to be aware of the potential risks associated with such behaviors, and take steps to stop them. Note, in particular, the following kinds of high-risk behaviors:
- Unrelated adults providing gifts to minors.
- An unrelated adult takes a child or adolescent on an overnight trip.
- An unrelated adult takes a child or adolescent camping.
- A child or adolescent spends the night in an unrelated adult’s home.
- A child or adolescent is transported to or from church by an unrelated adult.
- An unrelated adult takes a child or adolescent to sporting events.
- An unrelated adult enters into a “mentoring” relationship with a child or adolescent outside the context of a recognized program — such as Big Brothers or Big sisters — that conducts extensive screening.
- A child or adolescent has a meal with an unrelated adult at a restaurant.
- An unrelated adult takes a child or adolescent shopping.
- An adult communicates with a child or adolescent via a cell phone or the Internet, including e-mails or social media. Sandusky called some of his victims dozens of times. He called one victim 118 times over the span of a few months.

2. Abuse disguised as “horseplay”
The grand jury report reveals that Sandusky frequently disguised his attempts at sexual contact with minor boys as “horseplay.” This is a common technique among pedophiles, especially in the case of younger victims who are more easily confused and deceived. The horseplay itself creates opportunities for sexually gratifying superficial contact, and often leads progressively to more intensive contact until the pedophile encounters resistance.

The grand jury report is replete with references to Sandusky “horsing around” with minor boys in showers in isolated or vacant locker rooms at Penn State. In many cases, the horseplay included wrestling, which also allowed Sandusky to be sexually gratified. To illustrate, the report cites the numerous examples of Sandusky’s sexual molestation of one of the victims, and notes that he “never asked to do these things but would simply ‘see what the victim would permit him to do.’”

3. The duty to report child abuse — what is reportable abuse?
All 50 states have enacted child-abuse reporting statutes in an effort to protect abused children and prevent future abuse. Most statutes define child abuse to include physical abuse, emotional abuse, neglect, and sexual molestation. A child ordinarily is defined as any person under the age of 18 years.

Some states specifically limit the definition of “child abuse” to abuse inflicted by a parent, caretaker, or custodian. Such a statute, if interpreted narrowly, might not require ministers and lay church workers — who are mandatory reporters of child abuse under state law — to report incidents of abuse inflicted by custodians, associate ministers, adolescents, or volunteer youth workers. It is important for church leaders to be familiar with the definition of reportable child abuse under their state’s reporting law.

4. The duty to report child abuse — mandatory reporters
All 50 states enumerate categories of persons who are under a legal duty to report child abuse to designated civil authorities. In most states, such “mandatory reporters” must report both actual and reasonably suspected cases of child abuse. Failure to do so is a crime (usually a misdemeanor). The grand jury report concluded that certain Penn State employees were mandatory child-abuse reporters, and that they failed to comply with their reporting obligation.

Church leaders need to be familiar with the definition of “mandatory reporter” under their state’s child-abuse reporting law for two compelling reasons. First, mandatory reporters have a legal obligation to report known or reasonably suspected cases of child abuse. Failure to do so is a crime (usually a misdemeanor). The grand jury report concluded that certain Penn State employees were mandatory child-abuse reporters, and that they failed to comply with their reporting obligation.

5. The duty to report child abuse — report to whom?
Some Penn State employees, including head football coach Joe Paterno, claimed they reported Sandusky’s abusive behavior to other university officials. University employees were clearly confused about their reporting obligations, and
Churches can substantially reduce risk by adopting a “two-adult” policy.

6. Criminal liability for failing to report
Penn State officials who failed to comply with the child-abuse reporting requirement under state law are subject to criminal penalties. Pennsylvania law specifies that “a person or official required to report a case of suspected child abuse or to make a referral to the appropriate authorities who willfully fails to do so commits a misdemeanor of the third degree for the first violation and a misdemeanor of the second degree for a second or subsequent violation.” While persons who are legally required to report child abuse are subject to criminal prosecution for failure to do so, instances of actual criminal prosecution are rare. States have prosecuted some clergy, however, for failing to file a report when they were in a mandatory reporting classification, and they had reasonable cause to believe that abuse had occurred. Criminal penalties for failing to file a report vary, but they typically involve a misdemeanor classification that may involve a short prison sentence or small fine.

7. Civil liability for perpetrators of child abuse
The first civil lawsuit to be filed against Penn State as a result of Sandusky’s acts of molestation also names Sandusky as a defendant. He faces multiple civil claims including, but not limited to, assault and battery, intentional infliction of emotional distress, and false imprisonment. One additional basis of civil liability should be noted. In some states, mandatory child-abuse reporters are subject to civil liability for failing to report abuse. This means that a victim of child abuse may be able to sue a mandatory reporter who was aware of the abuse but failed to report it.

8. Civil liability of employers for employees’ failure to report child abuse
Penn State has been named in the first of what will likely be several civil lawsuits seeking damages for Sandusky’s acts. One of the theories of liability may be based on its failure to comply with the child-abuse reporting obligations. Child-abuse victims have sued a few churches as a result of a pastor’s failure to report child abuse. The courts have generally rejected this basis of liability.

9. Civil liability for employers based on negligent hiring, retention, and supervision
Penn State and The Second Mile have been named in the first of what will doubtless be several civil lawsuits brought by Sandusky’s victims. Both organizations are exposed to potentially sizable civil damage awards based on a number of theories, including negligent retention and negligent supervision. Negligent retention means that an employer retained an employee after receiving credible information that the employee presented a risk of harm to others. Lawyers will argue that a number of persons informed Penn State that Sandusky posed a risk of harm to young boys, but it failed to take appropriate steps to monitor him and limit his activities and access. Negligent supervision means that an employer failed to adequately supervise a staff member who the employer knows, or should know, is a risk of harm to others. People frequently assert both theories of liability against churches.

10. Two-adult rule
Sandusky was repeatedly alone with young boys in Penn State locker rooms and other facilities, with no other adults present. He used this isolation and lack of supervision to isolate and molest his victims.

Like Penn State, churches face the risk of child molestation whenever they allow an adult to be alone with a child on church premises or during an off-campus church activity. Churches can substantially reduce this risk by adopting a “two-adult” policy. Such a policy simply says that no minor is ever allowed to be alone with an adult during any church activity. This rule reduces the risk of child molestation, and also reduces the risk of false accusations of molestation.

11. Insurance for intentional acts
General liability insurance policies usually include a number of exclusions. An exclusion is a basis of liability for which no coverage is available under the policy. A common exclusion is intentional or criminal acts. If the Penn State insurance policy contains such an exclusion, then Sandusky will be responsible for retaining and paying his own attorney.
This issue is relevant to church leaders, since such an exclusion in a church insurance policy may expose the church to a potentially significant uninsured and un budgeted liability. Church leaders need to discuss this issue with their church insurance agent to determine what coverage is available to the church in the event of a sexual misconduct claim. If an exclusion bars coverage, find out how you can cover this gap with a special endorsement.

12. Access by former employees
Sandusky’s unrestricted access to university property facilitated his molestation of children. Church leaders need to be alert to the risk that they create when they give former employees access to church property. Churches can reduce this risk in several ways, including the following:

- Require employees to return keys or any other means of unsupervised access to church property at the time of termination. This should be done in a termination interview.
- If access to church premises is by a keypad, change the code periodically.
- Continued access to church property by employees or volunteers who are terminated for sexual misconduct presents a continuing and significant risk to churches. Such persons should be informed at the time of termination that they will have no further access to church property. If they are thereafter observed on church premises they should be confronted and asked to leave.

- If church premises are locked or otherwise secured, inform staff to be alert to “hitchhikers” who gain access by following an employee into the building.

Conclusion
The public revulsion over the Penn State scandal will tarnish the image and reputation of the university for many years to come. People base this revulsion not only on Sandusky’s despicable acts, but also on the willful failure by university officials, including the president, to deal responsibly with credible evidence of Sandusky’s crimes.

There is an important lesson here for church leaders. Treat every allegation of misconduct by a staff member or volunteer seriously, take immediate steps to protect the congregation from being victimized, and in the case of child abuse, make a report to civil authorities immediately.

RICHARD R. HAMMAR, LL.M., CPA is legal counsel for The General Council of the Assemblies of God. This article is excerpted from Church Law & Tax Report, copyright 2012 Christianity Today International. The article also will be available as a special report on churchlawandtax.com.

Are Ministers Mandatory Child-Abuse Reporters?

Ministers are mandatory child-abuse reporters in many states, either because the child-abuse reporting law defines mandatory reporters to include “ministers,” or because the law makes “any person” a mandatory reporter of child abuse. In other states, ministers may be mandatory reporters if they perform the duties of one of the specified categories of mandatory reporter. For example, a minister may be a mandatory reporter because he or she is a teacher or administrator at a church-operated school, or serves as a counselor.

No state clergy-penitent privilege statute or rule specifies that the privileged nature of a communication exempts a minister from complying with child-abuse reporting requirements. However, several child-abuse reporting laws exempt ministers from reporting child abuse if they learned of the abuse in the course of a conversation protected by the clergy-penitent privilege.

Several state child-abuse reporting laws provide that no child who is being treated solely by spiritual means through prayer in accordance with the tenets and practices of a recognized church shall, for that reason alone, be considered to be an “abused” child.
We live in a small community and pastor a small, but tight-knit congregation. We have been here almost a year, but no matter what I do, I cannot seem to break into the social circle at church. A core group of close friends runs everything. They treat me with distant respect, but never reach out to me or invite me to anything they plan as a group. This morning I found out that I was not invited to yet another impromptu social event. I have noticed that visitors to our church do not stick around. I think they feel the same thing I do.

Your situation makes me want to wrap my arms around you for a heartfelt hug followed by a trip to the closest coffee shop for girl-time. Like all women, you crave relationship with other women because God designed you to require it for your emotional health. No doubt, what you are going through is not what you expected when you and your husband accepted this position. Worse, you tried to reach out and you were unsuccessful. Rejection by the group is extremely painful.

First, do something about your isolation. As long as you continue to feel unconnected at church, be especially mindful of reaching out to your extended social network like your family, friends, and community.

Next, consider some possibilities about what might be going on in your church. You may need to challenge your thinking. It would be easy (and discouraging) to come to two conclusions:

1. I am not acceptable.
2. The people are cold and unfriendly.

No. 1 is clearly opposite to what God says about you and No. 2 is a premature conclusion. Consider some other options that would not be as discouraging and final.

Will building relationships take more time and patience?
The amount of time it takes to form bonds varies according to culture, geographical location, or congregation. If the group has been together for a long time or if they have shared life experiences, they have inevitably formed strong bonds. The women naturally feel comfortable with one another and therefore naively do what comes most easily to them without considering other options.

If you suspect this is the case, try as much as possible to avoid taking it personally. Continue to make yourself available in nonforceful ways. Express interest in what they are doing. Reach out to some of the women one-on-one. Invite someone to coffee or lunch. Avoid focusing on what you are not a part of and engage warmly when you are included.

Have they gone through relational trauma together or have they had a bad experience with a previous ministry person?
You may or may not know if there was a difficult situation with a previous pastor, his wife, or church leader. Someone may have been difficult, insensitive, or manipulative causing hurt and self-protection among these women. Unfortunately these wounds take a long time to heal.

In this case it will take patience and consistency on your part to show them over time that you are not the same as this other person and that history will not repeat itself. This requires calling on the bigger person in yourself to reach out in an atmosphere of distrust. Most of us find it easy to form bonds when there
is mutual admiration and affirmation. In this case, however, you will be reaching beyond barriers with time, patience, and love. You will need God’s grace.

Is there a ringleader who is threatened by your presence and manipulates the less confident others to her way of thinking? In ministry we will occasionally encounter women who are competitive, manipulative, and covertly rejecting. Unfortunately, they can also be articulate, competent, and helpful. This sets them up to take on leadership positions where they end up wielding their power in self-serving, hurtful ways. If you have experienced this kind of treatment, then you also know the great pain that can result.

If you suspect this is the case, then acknowledge what you are dealing with to yourself and to some safe others. Deal with your resentment daily and pray for God’s will to be done. Then address your thinking about this. No man or woman has power to alter God’s plan for your life. You can stand squarely in the authority of the call God has given you. Do not get into a tug-of-war or power struggle. Find someone to hold you accountable to responding wisely when drama happens.

Often, the women who follow a person like this are largely unaware, so consider the possibility that some of the women would respond positively if you individually reached out to them. Let them get to know you and make their own assessment of who you are and what you have to offer in friendship.

Are there others who are longing for connection as desperately as you are? If you have been ignored, then assume there are others who have felt the same way. Watch for women who do not seem to be included and reach out to them. Be careful, however. Rather than building a competing group, your goal is to build a cohesive network of women that welcomes, nurtures, and loves others in a mature way.

As you bravely move forward, remember there is no substitute for time in working things out. Having been in the ministry for 30 years, one significant lesson I have learned is that things change if you wait. Relationships that seemed so tight (or so problematic); commitments that seemed so firm (or so flaky); ideals that seemed so entrenched (or so loose) can all change over time. We need supernatural patience. God, however, remains the same: always loving, always present, always caring.

Gabrielle Rienas, a pastor’s wife for 30 years and a professional counselor, lives in Beaverton, Oregon. She speaks at retreats, conferences, and events worldwide. Contact her at 503-705-9230. Visit her website: www.gabrielerienas.com.
The rise in popularity with young people of this centuries-old theological system seems surprising at first, but given the dearth of in-depth biblical and theological teaching in evangelical churches, it is not totally unexpected. Christians long for an intellectually rigorous expression of the faith, and the New Calvinists aim to please.

In *For Calvinism*, Michael Horton offers a thoughtful explanation and defense of what Calvinists refer to as “the doctrines of grace.” At the popular level, these doctrines are known by the TULIP acronym: total depravity, unconditional election, limited atonement, irresistible grace, and perseverance of the saints. Horton grounds each of these doctrines in the biblical text, quotes relevant comments from John Calvin on each topic, and deals with philosophical objections along the way. What emerges from Horton’s presentation is the evangelical character of Calvinist soteriology. That is to say, Calvinism articulates the gospel and the life that flows from it. Horton’s main concern throughout his book is to defend the gracious character of God’s offer of salvation.

Proverbs 18:17 says, “In a lawsuit the first to speak seems right, until someone comes forward and cross-examines” (TNIV). Horton’s case is persuasive, until one reads Roger Olson’s cross-examination, *Against Calvinism*. Olson’s main concern throughout his book is to defend God’s reputation against what he considers the “good and necessary consequences” of four Calvinist doctrines: meticulous providence, unconditional election, limited atonement, and irresistible grace.

Horton notes that Arminians agree with Calvinists on total depravity and disagree among themselves about perseverance of the saints. He argues that a Calvinist understanding of meticulous providence logically entails divine determinism and unconditional election entails double predestination. He denies that the Bible teaches limited atonement, a doctrine that apparently even Calvin did not advocate. Against the monergism of irresistible grace, he argues for synergism, the cooperation of God’s grace and human faith. For each of the controverted doctrines, Olson shows the possibility of a legitimate, Arminian interpretation of the relevant biblical texts.

I found Olson’s critique of Calvinism the more persuasive of the two books. It is hard to understand how — given Calvinism’s doctrine of meticulous providence — God is not the author of sin. Moreover, it is hard to understand why God would unconditionally elect to save some but not all, when universal salvation is clearly — on Calvinist terms — within His power. If God can save all, then the fact He does not save all seems to indicate a lack of good will toward His creatures. Calvinism, thus, harms God’s reputation.

Regardless of which author one agrees with, both Horton and Olson are to be commended for their thoughtful, irenic debate. At the end of the day, Calvinists and Arminians are colaborers in the Great Commission. If we cannot come to agreement on doctrine, we should at least learn to disagree agreeably. Horton’s and Olson’s books model the way such debate should take place. I highly recommend reading both books. Watch my interview with Roger Olson about his book, *Arminian Theology: Myths and Realities*, at: http://agtv.ag.org/meet-roger-olson.

— Reviewed by George Paul Wood, executive editor of *Enrichment Journal* and director of Ministerial Resourcing, Springfield, Missouri.
From Belonging to Becoming: The Power of Loving People Like Jesus Did

MIKE CLARENSAU (Influence Resources, 261 pp., paperback)

What if churches put belonging before believing and becoming? In From Belonging to Becoming: The Power of Loving People Like Jesus Did, Mike Clarensau shares his personal journey of when he and his church did this and how it changed their lives and community forever. Clarensau’s advice is not just academic. His church grew from 180 to 750 when these principles were put into practice.

Clarensau roots the context for his book in the story of the sinful woman anointing Jesus. The book is honest and transparent and written from a humble perspective. Addressing issues such as exclusivity, diversity, authentic relationships, and more, Clarensau paints a picture of a church driven by loving people — with no strings attached — and the effect it has on the church and community.

The book is simple and pragmatic without sacrificing passion and conviction. Clarensau offers practical ways for churches to evaluate themselves and their church’s culture, see people as Jesus does, engage their communities, assimilate people, and more. Each chapter concludes with questions aimed toward individual reflection and group discussion. Though this concept of belonging before believing is not new, something the author acknowledges, it is a refreshing reminder to all involved in churches today.

From Belonging to Becoming is a great resource for the church to equip Christ followers and pastors with encouragement and confidence to love people like Christ and be a church with arms wide open.

—Reviewed by Tim Lord, ordained Assemblies of God minister, Springfield, Missouri.

Christ’s Empowering Presence: The Pursuit of God Through the Ages

GARY TYRA (Biblica, 208 pp., paperback)

Many Christians find their faith to be a rote observance rather than the empowering relationship they desire it to be. For those longing for a deeper, more intimate walk with the Lord, Gary Tyra’s Christ’s Empowering Presence is an excellent starting place. Tyra’s goal is the continual awareness of Christ’s presence before us, which will then provide us with strength against temptation and the ability to live closer to the ideals expressed in passages such as Colossians 3:1–17.

Rather than writing a new work on this classic topic, Tyra (associate professor of biblical and practical theology at Vanguard University) has provided us with a survey of devotional writers throughout the centuries. In his book, we read quotes from Brother Lawrence alongside John Ortberg; Thomas à Kempis rubs shoulders with Dallas Willard. This wide view of devotional literature shows there have been individuals in every age who made pursuing Christ’s presence the highest goal in life. Their wisdom, combined with Tyra’s thoughtful applications to contemporary life, make this text a motivating and encouraging resource for those who desire a more vibrant experience of Christ.

Tyra divides the text into three parts: the first two describe how various devotional authors through history have engaged in the pursuit of Christ and how this pursuit is revealed in Scripture. The final section of the book offers practical guidance for living in Christ’s presence from some spiritual masters, as well as from Tyra’s own experience.

Christ’s Empowering Presence will benefit new believers who desire to learn what it means to live as Christians, as well as seasoned followers who have never delved into the classics of Christian literature. It whets the appetite for more and can start you on a new journey of learning from giants of the faith and pursuing Christ’s powerful influence in your own daily activities.

—Reviewed by Nik White, college pastor, Central Assembly of God, Springfield Missouri.

Hungry for God: Hearing God’s Voice in the Ordinary and the Everyday

MARGARET FEINBERG (Zondervan, 208 pp., paperback)

In a fast-pace world, even Christians experience difficulty in finding time for God. Between the activities of school, work, home, and church, who has time for one more thing — like devotions — to add to their day? Margaret Feinberg shares her journey in learning how to feast on God.

Feinberg challenges readers with the question of whether or not they are hungry for God. She explains that just as physical hunger leads people to search for food, spiritual hunger compels people to search for God. The problem is that most who recognize this hunger do not know how to “taste and see” beyond the “first course” of salvation.

Feinberg explains the only thing that can satisfy the spiritual hunger of those seeking God is the voice of God himself. To illustrate this, she uses experiences from her life to show the significance of maintaining an open ear to the voice of God, even through ordinary tasks of the day. Noting the unchanging nature of God’s character, Feinberg asserts it is humans who must position themselves to feast on God in the midst of the ordinary, for He is always leading, speaking, and directing, but people are not always listening.

Hungry for God takes the reader on a journey from understanding the divine invitation to feast on God to preparing your heart to hear God’s voice to ultimately understanding...
the various methods through which God speaks (as well as practical safeguards to help ensure you are hearing God’s voice). The inclusion of discussion questions accompanying each chapter aids in using this book in a small group setting where people in community can continually satisfy their divine hunger and “taste and see the Lord is good.”


Church Diversity: Sunday, The Most Segregated Day of the Week

SCOTT WILLIAMS (New Leaf, 192 pp., paperback)

Many books make a theological case for having an ethnically diverse church. This ideal is especially called for as ever-increasing demographic changes and shifts affect every community in America.

In the first half of Church Diversity, the author makes his case with an engaging style referencing his Oklahoma upbringing and his journey as a prison warden, black Republican activist, and church staff member. He calls on all churches to have leadership and membership that mirror the community the church is called to serve.

The second half of the book is an important read for everyone hungry to have relevant ministry. This book is for those who believe the church is God’s antidote for racism — that the church should be more diverse and that nothing happens without unwavering intentionality and courageous implementation.

Williams provides references and examples from the “Top Ten” most diverse corporations in America, as cited on the diversityinc.com website. He gleans quotes and practices from Johnson & Johnson, Merck, AT&T, PricewaterhouseCoopers, Coca-Cola, et al.

Williams also presents eight case-study churches showing how they have grown into increased diversity. The first case study is an Assemblies of God church, a nice counterpoint to the criticism leveled at the Assemblies of God earlier in the book. He provides some helpful insights in a chapter on diversity in worship.

The author writes, “I never realized that doing a few small things could make a big difference in who we could reach with the gospel of Christ.” This is what we are about — reaching more people. Every reader will take away two or three small things that will make a big difference in winning people to Christ.

Every chapter concludes with several “Church Diversity Challenges.” These challenges make Church Diversity a great resource for staff or small groups to read and discuss.

— Reviewed by Scott Temple, director, Office of Ethnic Relations, Springfield, Missouri.

Erasing Hell

FRANCIS CHAN and PRESTON SPRINKLE (David C. Cook, 197 pp., hardcover)

The publication of Love Wins by Rob Bell has reopened the discussion on hell and prompted a publishing run on books about hell. One of them is from the pen of a prolific evangelical writer, Francis Chan (Crazy Love and Forgotten God). Chan, and his researcher and coauthor Preston Sprinkle, present an argument for the existence of hell, populated by those who reject God’s offer of forgiveness.

The book moves along a fairly logical course for the first two-thirds of the book. Chan begins by refuting universalism, arguing that in biblical teaching, unbelievers do face hell after this life. The logical progression moves then to study the teaching of the intertestamental period that gives the backdrop for the times of Jesus, Jesus’ teaching on hell, and the teaching by Jesus’ followers. Chan concludes that these give clear evidence of the belief in and teaching about the existence of hell.

A point at which some might have concerns with Chan is his ambivalence about whether hell means annihilation for the wicked or eternal torment. He correctly identifies both positions in the intertestamental period and biblical passages that people interpret to support either. Chan tentatively asserts his belief in eternal torment, but cautions against being dogmatic.

The latter third of the book powerfully challenges the reader with the sovereignty of God, using the question raised by Paul in Romans 9:22,23, “What if God . . .?” Chan reminds readers that it is wise to let God settle the ultimate questions while we accept His revelation without always trying to bring Him into compliance with our reasoning.

Erasing Hell is an important read. The author’s research and writing are well done. The real value of the book, however, is the author’s challenge with a genuine concern for the lost. His compassion for those facing hell is compelling. May we catch some of that and renew our efforts to win people for the Kingdom.

Kingdom Calling: Vocational Stewardship for the Common Good

AMY SHERMAN (InterVarsity, 256 pp., paperback)

One of the great challenges pastors face is mobilizing their congregations for ministry in the marketplace. In Amy Sherman’s, Kingdom Calling, she beautifully illustrates the opportunity for pastoral leadership to improve the vocational stewardship of their people. People in nontraditional ministries play a crucial role in moving the kingdom of God forward.

Pastors may wonder how to find people to fill positions in church ministries. While this book does not answer this question, it does provide some alternatives for integrating people into the community that may result in greater church health. A pastor could effectively lead a congregation into opportunities of influence through applying this book’s content. Pastors could immediately implement this material as a sermon series, a serving campaign, or small group studies.

One idea I liked was that Jesus is looking for people to trust with His power. Sherman quotes Dallas Willard: “Only constant students of Jesus will be given adequate power to fulfill their calling to be God’s person for their time and their place in this world.” God can do great things through people if they partner with Him in their vocational assignment.

Sherman’s book covers the theological aspects of Kingdom work, practical implementation of how to do it, and testimonies of where it is working. Now is the time to mobilize scores of people into ministries that reflect the heart of God for a generation. This book is a must read for pastors and church leaders to equip and empower their congregations into a “Kingdom calling.”

— Reviewed by Jason Bachman, outreach director, Convoy of Hope, Springfield, Missouri.

Passionate Conviction: Contemporary Discourses on Christian Apologetics

PAUL COPAN and WILLIAM LANE CRAIG, eds. (Broadman & Holman, 288 pp., paperback)

Every pastor struggles to juggle many responsibilities. In this struggle, it is common to lose contact with the ideas and arguments that attack and affect the church. Many ministers have taken courses in apologetics or philosophy years ago in an educational setting, but that may have been the end of their training. In 10 or 15 years of ministry, even a young pastor can lose contact with the ideas and discussions in modern philosophy and apologetics.

The discourses and articles that Copan and Craig have compiled result from the Evangelical Philosophical Society’s desire to keep Christians informed of the latest thoughts and concerns in apologetics. Additional helpful publications may be forthcoming coming from this group. For each chapter, the editors chose an individual who excels in his or her field. The information is clear enough for every pastor to understand. The entries are also cutting edge enough to be important for an academic to consider reading.

Topics discussed include: the need for apologetics, the latest in arguments for God, the life and ministry of Jesus, comparative religions, and current cultural issues. If you want to keep on the cutting edge of current philosophy and apologetics, this book will be a great source.

— Reviewed by Paul Schepeler, senior pastor, First Assembly of God, Washington, Missouri, and adjunct instructor of humanities at Missouri Baptist University.

Radical Together

DAVID PLATT (Multnomah, 167 pp., paperback)

David Platt has done it again. In Radical Together Platt reissues the challenge he threw down on the American dream in Radical. Writing with refreshing candor, Platt takes his case to the church for following the teachings of Jesus. Whereas Radical issued a soul-stirring challenge to the individual, Radical Together makes no bones about “unleashing the people of God for the purpose of God.”

Platt gives the impression he is on a mission to lead himself and others to know God better and obey God more. His sincerity and passion shine through every page. With words that fit quite nicely in Jim Collins’ Good to Great, Platt states, “one of the worst enemies of Christians can be the good things in the church.” Those things, Platt argues, might keep a community of believers from using their resources in the best possible way for God’s kingdom. Other than “biblical essentials and theological non-negotiables,” Platt proposes to put everything on the table for consideration in this context of pursuing God’s higher purposes.

Platt’s reverence for God’s Word is readily apparent. His call for less style and more substance goes right to the heart of what we need to sustain change in the lives of believers and the church today. In a day where churches dish out more lattes than your local Starbucks, Platt reminds us that God is the one doing the seeking. This puts a different spin on being “seeker-sensitive.”

Platt’s philosophy guides the ministries at his Church at Brook Hills in Birmingham, Alabama. Radical Together is a fantastic book. Following its principles will change the focus of your church.

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ASSEMBLIES OF GOD TRUST

CALIFORNIA CHURCH PLANT RECEIVES MATCHING FUNDS

George Hovsepian pastors First Armenian Assembly of God in Glendale, Calif., a church plant launched in July 2009 with 300 people in attendance. He is one of 186 church planters who have received $30,000 in start-up funds through the Perpetual Matching Fund, sponsored by Assemblies of God Trust and AG Church Multiplication Network.

“Each time CMN approves a prospective church planter, that person raises $30,000 and AGTrust matches their $30,000 to give them an adequate base for planting a church,” says Dr. George O. Wood, Assemblies of God general superintendent and AGTrust chairman.

“Over time each church plant replenishes the initial $30,000 they received to the matching fund for planting more churches. To date $987,993 has been replenished by the 186 church plants.”

Pastor Hovsepian was born to Christian parents in Iran and called to ministry at age 18. He planted three churches in Iran before moving to the United States as a refugee in 2007. “It was very difficult to serve the Lord in Iran because of the persecution,” he says. “Open witnessing is banned, and several pastors have been murdered.” George’s brother, Haik Hovsepian, former general superintendent of the Iran Assemblies of God, was martyred for his faith.

After arriving in California, Pastor Hovsepian and his wife fasted and prayed for several months for God’s direction. God laid it on their hearts to start a church for Armenian refugees. California is home to the largest number of Armenians outside the Republic of Armenia. After months of preparation, workers announced the launch to their neighbors and on Facebook. On launch day, the church had an overflow crowd.

Hovsepian understands the Armenian refugees’ struggles. “We know their situation is hard,” he says, “but that’s when the power of the Holy Spirit leads us to go and serve them.”

Church planting is one of four major initiatives set forth by Dr. Wood and AGTrust in an effort to empower future generations to fulfill the Great Commission. To make a donation to AGTrust or learn how you, your church, or your district can become a member, go to www.agtrust.org.

The Network for Women in Ministry Website

The Network for Women in Ministry website (www.wim.ag.org) provides regular, original content to help women ministers grow spiritually and professionally. The website is a ministry of the Ministerial Resourcing and Enrichment journal. A team of women ministers coordinates and develops new theme material that is posted bimonthly. The articles, interviews, videos, and other resources are directed to those in traditional and nontraditional ministries, bivocational ministers, and those preparing to enter ministry work. Some of the content is also available in Spanish.

The Network for Women in Ministry also offers a biweekly e-letter, Women in Ministry Mobilized. The e-letter delivers fresh stories from women in various ministry fields, including pastoral and missional, with news items of interest to all women ministers.

A ministry mentorship program, “Meaningful Connection,” is also available through the site. Those interested can fill out a form on the website and be connected with a mentor for a month.

To subscribe to receive site updates and event notices, and to receive the biweekly e-letter, go to wim.ag.org.
Jacob's Hope: Assemblies of God International Jewish Ministry

Jacob's Hope is the first Assemblies of God World Missions ministry to minister to Jewish people around the world. It is the vision of Jacob's Hope to bring the blessings of God to Jewish people. This is accomplished in a variety of practical ways by feeding needy Jewish people in Russia, renovating apartments for elderly Holocaust survivors in Ukraine, bringing medical teams and job training to the Ethiopian Jewish community, and bringing resources to Jewish believers in Belarus. In Israel Jacob's Hope distributes food and clothing through six compassion ministry centers touching the lives of thousands of Jewish people every year. Jacob's Hope's goal is to have 30 centers around the land of Israel in the next few years.

The needs of Jewish people around the world are great. In Israel more than 25 percent of the population live below the poverty line. Those living in deepest poverty must often choose between buying food, paying rent, or purchasing medicine.

Worse than the physical poverty is their spiritual poverty. In Israel more than 99 percent of the population does not know Jesus as their Messiah. The most important function of Jacob's Hope is to bring the Jewish people the one true hope, Y'shua, Jesus the Messiah of Israel. Blessing the Jewish people with material goods often opens the door for the gospel. When people ask us to pray with them, we give them a Bible, share the good news, and connect them with other Jewish believers in their area.

AG General Superintendent George O. Wood said, “This is the first time Assemblies of God adherents have a chance to invest in humanitarian, evangelistic, and discipleship efforts to reach the Jewish people around the world.” For more information visit: www.jacobshope.com/index.php.

Assemblies of God Bible Alliance

“The Fire Bible in the Amharic language is a huge blessing to the entire church in Ethiopia,” says Pastor Yonas Arefaine Gebrehiwot, general secretary of the Ethiopia Assembly of God.

The second-most populous country in Africa, Ethiopia is home to 88 million people. Amharic is the official language. The church there has continued to experience growth even during persecution and civil war. Today Ethiopia has about 5,000 churches, according to Pastor Yonas, and almost every local church, regardless of denomination, believes in practicing the gifts of the Holy Spirit.

Pastor Gebrehiwot continues, “The Pentecostal notes and study helps give Ethiopian pastors enlightenment and understanding of the personality and work of the Holy Spirit — in the believer and in the church — that will help them maintain the fire and power of the Holy Spirit in their ministry and keep them from false practices.”

Because of the donations of Assemblies of God Bible Alliance supporters, Life Publishers was able to launch the Amharic Fire Bible during a special ceremony in the Ethiopian capital Addis Ababa. Pastors and church leaders representing Ethiopia Assemblies of God and several denominations were in attendance to celebrate the dedication and distribution of this Pentecostal study Bible.

AG Pastor Fisseha Feyissa, a member of the Amharic Fire Bible translation team, said: “This Bible will be very helpful to our pastors, especially to those serving churches in the countryside who cannot attend Bible school. I personally am so happy to have this Bible in Amharic. I can study it in my own language. I can teach it. I can preach it. I can share it, and I can read it at home with my wife and my children. Hallelujah.”

The Fire Bible is now complete in 38 language editions with 28 more in progress, according to Guy Highfill, director of Life Publishers International, publisher of the Fire Bible.

LIFE PUBLISHERS SENDS 1,200 SUNDAY SCHOOL KITS

In Pakistan, more than 30,000 children are attending nearly 2,000 newly opened Sunday Schools.

Life Publishers International, a ministry of Assemblies of God World Missions, is helping provide Sunday School materials. To date Life Publishers has sent teacher training materials; curriculum lessons; and 1,200 Sunday School kits, that include 5,000 puppets, 1,200 flannel graph sets, and 1,200 tool kits full of pens, pencils, glue sticks, crayons, and more.

Christian workers from a neighboring land started the Sunday School project. They felt a burden for the people because most of them had never had a clear presentation of the gospel. The Christian workers believed God was asking them to move to Pakistan to train teachers and start Sunday Schools for children. The workers left their homeland following months of preparation and training. They learned the Urdu language, became self-supporting, and made contacts with Christian believers who became part of the project and were trained as teachers.

“The Sunday School program is very well-developed,” says Guy Highfill, director of Life Publishers. “Christian men and women are learning how to teach God’s Word, lead worship, and do handcrafts with the children. They are being taught faithfulness and diligence in this new responsibility.”

The leaders of the Pakistan Sunday School outreach have asked Life Publishers to send at least 1,800 more Sunday School kits. They believe they will soon have 3,000 Sunday Schools in operation.
HealthCare Ministries is hosting their annual international Medical Evangelism Forum, Sept. 19–21, 2012, in Springfield, Mo. The MEF is for individuals and churches desiring to conduct their own medical evangelism outreaches. HCM’s objective is to provide VIP training for medical evangelism. There will be a special pre-forum session called “The Role of the RN in International Medical Evangelism” on Sept. 17, 18. This pre-forum will explore how nurses can specifically use their skills on medical outreaches. Topics will include Cultural Sensitivity, Tropical Medicine, and Worldwide Perspective on AIDS. Visit HCM’s website, www.healthcareministries.org for more information on registration.

Sustain Hope is a Christ-centered, best practice approach to improve lives through community initiated sustainable solutions. As we consistently and compassionately share the message of Jesus Christ alongside the local church, we will spiritually, physically, and socially impact lives, providing a holistic response to the felt needs within individuals and their communities.

Partnering with local missionaries and responding to the identified initiatives of national churches and communities, Sustain Hope provides on-site consulting, research, training, assessment, program design, and evaluation.

Sustain Hope, with El Salvador missionaries Victor and Lynn Diaz, held workshops to teach sustainable technologies such as: 1) improved gardening techniques; 2) solar dehydrators; 3) solar ovens, which the Royal Rangers of El Salvador have replicated and sold to help support a medical clinic; 4) safe drinking water methods enabling families to forgo the purchase of bottled water; 5) the many uses of the Moringa tree. People planted numerous Moringa trees at the clinic site and are harvesting the highly nutritious leaves as a micro-enterprise.

It is encouraging to see the results of this teaching. In the picture, Hermana Centeno harvests the leaves from the Moringa trees. She dried and packaged the leaves and sold them at a recent retreat, netting $74, about 2 weeks average pay in El Salvador.

In another instance, after completing the training on Solar Water Disinfection (SODIS), one mother said she would now have money to send her children to school because she would not have to buy water to drink.

As we reach out with Christ’s compassion to the whole person, we rejoice in the changes we see both physically and spiritually. Knowing true transformation is only made possible through a relationship with Christ.

For more information, contact: Sustain Hope, P.O. Box 8374, Springfield, Mo. 65801; phone: 417-866-1292; E-mail: info@sustainhope.org. Visit Sustain Hope’s website: www.sustainhope.org or on Facebook, www.facebook.com/SustainHope.
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www.enrichmentjournal.ag.org
My wife and I took our youngest son, a high school junior, to Florida for his spring break this past March, along with two of his best friends. In spite of a little sunburn, we all celebrated a memorable week of fun in the sun. My spring breaks as a high school and college student were also memorable — but not in the same way. They were the typical self-absorbed, narcissistic trips that non-Christian youths take to southern beaches and points elsewhere.

My most memorable spring break came after I came to Christ in 1979. Soon after, I enrolled in Central Bible College to prepare for ministry. Each spring the college launched outreach teams across the U.S and abroad. I was privileged to lead a team of 20 ingenuous students to the University of Wisconsin in Madison. Most members of the team lived their faith in secret and identified as life-long, orthodox Christians. The University of Wisconsin was widely recognized as a place that tolerated immoral behavior by its students, but not Christian thought and ideals. The university had rightfully earned the moniker: Berkley of the Midwest. Because I earned my first undergraduate degree on a similar campus in Michigan, I felt qualified to lead the team — or so I thought.

Team preparation consisted of training and prayer that included cursory studies in comparative religions, cults, apologetics, personal evangelism, and philosophy — all the necessary tools of the trade for spiritual warfare — before being thrown to a pride of hungry, leftist, liberal lions. I was confident of the team's readiness to invade this heathen campus with the life-changing message of Jesus; the team's foolhardy bravado did not suggest otherwise. Unbeknown to us, the narrative that would emerge from this week of ministry would completely reorder our lives — the scandalous human heart raised its ugly head and smacked us on the face.

Our well-conceived and orchestrated strategy consisted of boldly proclaiming the Word of God from an elevated podium in the heart of the campus, to strategically placing book tables in the Student Union, to performing sidewalk dramas and music, to classroom discussion and debate, to personal evangelism and tract distribution. To conclude the week, we planned a Friday night celebration concert in anticipation of the scores of people who would come to Christ. If there is a foundational missions strategy to reaching a university campus, surely this was it.

Equipped, empowered, and encouraged, the team invested serious time and energy working the campus. However, the events of the week sullied the team’s expectations and tarnished its anticipation of what hoped to be a grand celebration of new Kingdom converts. Instead of a fruitful harvest, daily university students cast aspersions and heaped maledictions upon the team. We were served a platter of persuasive arguments and stinging assaults, all denying God’s existence and loving nature. Rock-filled snowballs hurled past us as we boldly proclaimed the gospel from the campus podium. The amount and depth of hostility we encountered weakened our resolve and drove us to complete despair.

Following the Friday night concert, attended only by team members and a few meek Christians from campus, a Christian professor from the university spoke to us. His encouraging words about planting spiritual seed for a future harvest did little to rouse our spirits. Our colossal failure dissipated our confidence in the gospel’s power to change lives. We choked. We hit a brick wall — or had we?

The testimonies that emerged in the months and years following this trip tell a surprisingly different narrative. They tell of a God who launched individuals out of their spiritual complacency, broke their hearts for the lost, and gave them a fresh vision to reach their world for Christ. They tell of students driven to their knees in prayer and later called to the mission field. Hardly a wasted week of ministry, to be sure.

The reality of the world we experienced that week, over 30 years ago, is now the hyper-reality of the world we know today. With the rise of new atheism books, increasing hostility to Christianity, and other powerful new cultural currents running counter to our Judeo-Christian tradition, our nation’s moral and religious conscience is quickly eroding. As Christian leaders and pastors we must be on our guard to confront this seductive secularism and other challenges to the gospel. We must ready our students, our church members, and ourselves with a sharp sword to defend against those who desire to delegitimize the gospel message. That is your call; that is our mission.

RICK KNOTH, managing editor, Enrichment Journal, Springfield, Missouri.