

An Indistinct Sound

By L.L. (Don) and Joy A. Veinot

In 1 Corinthians 14:8, the Apostle Paul drew a word picture for the Corinthian believers when he wrote: **"For if the bugle produces an indistinct sound, who will prepare himself for battle?"** This passage has been on my mind quite a bit lately. "But why," someone may ask, "this short passage?" That is a very good question, and one which I have asked myself. It isn't the *Prayer of Jabez*. No magic incantation with a big (phony) promise if it is done repeatedly. It isn't really even just a passing thought, either for me or for the Apostle Paul. It was a word picture he used to demonstrate a particular problem in the Corinthian Church. The direct context of 14:8 is that of speaking in unknown languages (tongues) which are not interpreted for the benefit of others. The Apostle had developed in three chapters the manifestations and consequences of the problem, which were chaos, pandemonium, and spiritual arrogance. To the detriment of the body,

some were pushing their particular spiritual gift and passion to be the most important thing in the Christian life. The result was church splits, division, spiritual pride, and arrogance. The Corinthians had developed a sort of "spiritual myopia" and, as a result, focused almost exclusively on one thing—their passion, while everything that did not reflect *their* passion became fuzzy or non-existent and, therefore, unimportant. Paul employed the analogy of a body in chapter 12 to demonstrate that there are many things *necessary* to the life of the body and, by way of example, to the life of the church and individual believers. As we step back and look at the whole of 1 Corinthians, we can see a common thread in the problems associated with the Corinthian church—spiritual myopia. The noise, din, and confusion rose to a cacophony of "My way is the anointed and appointed way of doing church!" which, in the end, resulted in the bugle producing **"an indistinct sound."** The tongues issue was but a symptom of the problem which Paul diagnosed in the very first chapter:

For I have been informed concerning you, my brethren, by Cloe's people, that there are quarrels among you. Now I mean this, that each one of you is saying, "I am of Paul," and "I of Apollos," and "I of Cephas," and "I of Christ." (1 Corinthians 1:11-12, NASB)

For when one says, "I am of Paul," and another "I am of Apollos," are you not mere men? What then is Apollos?

And what is Paul? Servants through whom you have believed, even as the Lord gave opportunity to each one. I planted, Apollos watered, but God was causing the growth. So then neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but God who causes the growth. (1 Corinthians 3:3-7, NASB)

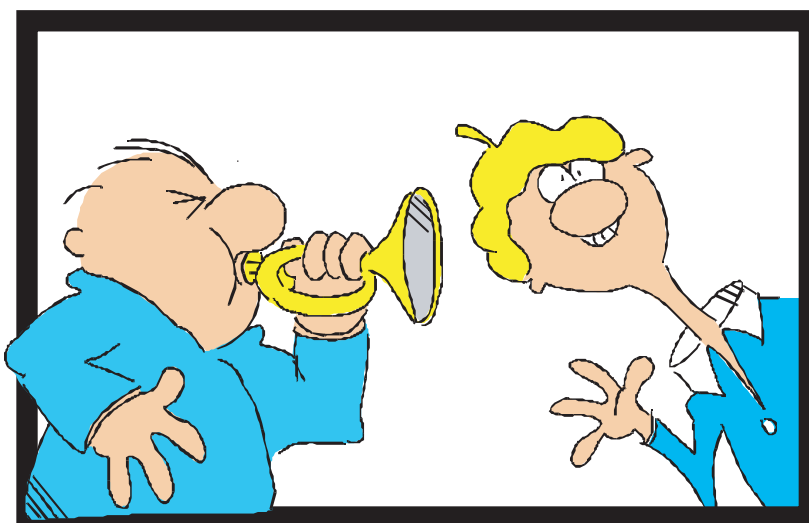
Spiritual myopia isn't a problem exclusive to the first century or only to the church in Corinth. It has resurfaced from time to time throughout Church history to varying degrees

and with varying consequences. The questions which are asked of us at MCOI (especially over the last several months)—questions such as: "What do you think of the Seeker-Sensitive church?" or "What do you think of Rick Warren and *The Purpose Driven Life*?" or "What do you think of the Emergent Church?"—are persuading me that what we are encountering is a high degree of spiritual myopia across the church in general which is greatly damaging the Body of Christ.

The Good, the Bad, and the Crippling

Early in my Christian life, Joy and I attended a small church in our area. We loved that little church as they were very good at teaching the Bible. I learned a tremendous amount about context, hermeneutics, and how to really understand the Word of God. However, something was lacking. Joy and I often felt like square pegs in a round hole. We really had a passion for reaching lost

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people, but the church did not seem to place a high priority on that. "Sound doctrine" was their theme. It wasn't that they didn't care about reaching the lost, but they seemed defeated in that area. Upon reflection, it seems that this defeat stemmed from their conviction that no one outside of their very small group cared about "truth"—the truth being their particular set of denominational doctrinal beliefs. The church was located in a predominantly Roman Catholic area, and when we would raise the issue of evangelism, I sometimes felt like I was with Joshua and Caleb after they returned from spying out the land. To paraphrase their compatriots in this setting: "There are giants in the land, and they are all Catholic!"

One man, Frank Peters who began attending this little church with his family, agreed with their doctrinal positions but continually attempted to persuade them there was far more to the Christian life than merely their particular doctrinal position. One concept he espoused, that was very compelling to me and has stuck with me to this day, was his view of the church. He suggested that a healthy church is like a three-legged stool, and the legs are all the same length to prevent the chair from wobbling. The legs of this "chair," he called the "3 'E's'". They were Evangelism, Education, and Edification. This church excelled at education. They had very limited edification and nearly zero evangelism. Sadly, some years ago the church closed its doors and sold the building to a false religious group—the Christadelphians.

As I have thought on these things in recent days, it occurs to me that Frank was almost correct on his "3 'E's'" but not quite. I believe the church needs another "E" to keep from falling over. I would go with a four-legged stool instead.

Education – Training believers in how to think, develop a Christian world view, study the Scriptures, and defend the faith.

Edification – Create an environment where believers can get to know and care for one another intimately and deeply. The result is that they will actually pray for each other, and bind up the wounds which result from living in a fallen world. They will rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep, and worship the God of the universe together.

Evangelism – Being prepared, built up, and prayed for, to go out and defend the faith, share the Gospel, and reach the lost as something that is an integral part of being who we are in Christ. The Holy Spirit does the work; we simply need to be available and knowledgeable.

Empathy – Good works and social concern. When Jesus sent out the 12 to proclaim the Gospel, He gave them instructions to "**Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons. Freely you received, freely give**" (Matthew 10:8). These 12 had spent time being educated and edified and returned frequently to Jesus for both during His earthly ministry. They were then sent out to evangelize and minister to those in need.

I don't think we are doing too much damage to Scripture if we view these four elements, or legs of what we might call the "Church Chair" or possibly even the throne on which our Lord sits, as the core elements of a healthy church. Notice, *none* of these things particularly concern "nickels and noses." A healthy church could be large or small, financially well off or struggling; but if it has these four elements, it will be a spiritually alive and healthy church. I suspect that, perhaps, the majority of churches focus on just one or two of these essential elements. Some may have three, but it is rare to find one with all four.

Myopic Faddism

If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? (1 Corinthians 12:17)

In looking at this issue, I think we need to acknowledge that it seems to be inherent in human nature to focus on what is most important to us, either individually or corporately, in a local body. In the case of the local church, that tends to be the area which is the primary focus of the pastor and elders. In many cases where the spotlight is on "church growth" (however that is defined), the local church will jump on various church growth fads that wind up not "working" for their particular body, leading to great frustration both to the leadership and the "followship." ☺ Whatever the current church fad, it is viewed as "the thing"—the silver bullet which will solve the church woes and make them "successful." Much of the time, "successful" has to do with "nickels and noses" rather than a biblical view of success. Attracting the lost, which may be the ostensible rationale for "growing the church," is not the primary *result* of the process; by far, *most* of the nickels and noses attracted by these fads come attached to people who are already a part of another Christian church which deprives this sister church of much needed resources and people!

Paul's teaching about the exercise of spiritual gifts within the body at Corinth is an

important one and again reaffirms the idea that although there may be levels of importance, *all* of the core elements are necessary for good health. In an article such as this, we cannot comment on every nuance of each issue we will address; we can only look at them in generalities. Because we don't mention something, doesn't mean we are unaware of it, nor are we saying any such unmentioned issues are not important. However, with limited time and space, we will focus in on very core areas.

This is scary stuff, friends. Are many evangelicals actually *leaving the faith* and unaware of that fact? It may be time to perform a bit of LASIK surgery on the churches.

Emergent Church

This new movement's attraction can probably be summed up in one word: Edification. Those drawn to it are desirous for relationships. They want deep, intimate relationships with one another and with God. Meaningful worship and intimate relational communion with God are of paramount importance. Gathering to share hurts and happiness, sadness and victories within the safety and acceptance of a caring community is their passion. They don't believe they are finding this emotional satisfaction in the evangelical churches across the spectrum—be they fundamentalist, seeker-sensitive or purpose-driven churches.

I can understand the attraction of the Emergent Church to people whose church experiences didn't provide deep, intimate, and safe relationships. My friend and pastor, Ray Kollbocker, and I have talked about this ourselves. Neither one of us grew up in church. We didn't understand church culture before becoming believers, and our understanding hasn't seemed to improve over the years. Think about it: The church is the one place where someone has to admit they are a sinner to join. Yet for the rest of one's life, the congregant must pretend he or she is not one and hide who they are lest someone "find them out" and expose them as a sinner and question their salvation or toss them from the church. As J. Vernon McGee used to say (by my recollection), that if you knew me as I know me, you wouldn't listen to me; but then, if I knew you like you know you, I wouldn't preach to you! It seems humorous, but it really is not.

All people long to know and be deeply known. We should not be afraid to open ourselves up to our fellow Christians; but the reality is we are afraid, which has often led to false piety, lack of real intimacy, and loneliness within the one group of people with whom we should be the most comfortable—the ones who could share our load. After all, we are *all* sinners saved by grace. (And no our children aren't perfect either.) Sadly, many of us are closer to non-believers whom we feel may not be as quick to reject us for our faults and sins.

As important as Edification is to the Body, the dangers of this type of spiritual myopia quickly become apparent when listening to or reading the material from the Emergent Church leaders (such as Rob Bell, pastor of Mars Hill Bible Church in Grand Rapids, MI), as they blithely disconnect themselves from nearly 2,000 years of Church history:

"This is not just the same old message with new methods," Rob says. "We're rediscovering Christianity as an Eastern religion, as a way of life. Legal metaphors for faith don't deliver a way of life. We grew up in churches where people knew the nine verses why we don't speak in tongues, but had never experienced the overwhelming presence of God."⁵

Rob is at least being honest that what the Emergent Church offers is *not* the "same old message with new methods," but something entirely different. The Bible, in this movement, becomes important not for what it says or demonstrates, but rather how it "relates." It is less about receiving truth to understand and apply and more about "being." It is not about understanding what God has said, but rather admitting that we have no idea what God truly says—and being comfortable in that ignorance—as long as we are developing close relationships within a body that "works" toward that end:

"Life in the church had become so small," Kristen says. "It had worked for me for a long time. Then it stopped working." The Bells started questioning their assumptions about the Bible itself—"discovering the Bible as a human product," as Rob puts it, rather than the product of divine fiat. "The Bible is still in the center for us," Rob says, "but it's a different kind of center. We want to embrace mystery, rather than conquer it."

The more I talk with the Bells, the more aware I am that they are telling me a conversion narrative—not a story of salvation in the strict sense, but of having been delivered from a small life into a big life.⁷

The majority view, however, is that the fundamental issue in the move from modernism to postmodernism is epistemology—i.e., how we know things, or think we know things. Modernism is often pictured as pursuing truth, absolutism, linear thinking, rationalism, certainty, the cerebral as opposed to the affec-

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tive which, in turn, breeds arrogance, inflexibility, a lust to be right, the desire to control. Postmodernism, by contrast, recognizes how much of what we "know" is shaped by the culture in which we live, is controlled by emotions and aesthetics and heritage, and can only be intelligently held as part of a common tradition, without overbearing claims to being true or right. Modernism tries to find unquestioned foundations on which to build the edifice of knowledge and then proceeds with methodological rigor; postmodernism denies that such foundations exist (it is "antifoundational") and insists that we come to "know" things in many ways, not a few of them lacking in rigor. Modernism is hard-edged and, in the domain of religion, focuses on truth versus error, right belief, confessionalism; postmodernism is gentle and, in the domain of religion, focuses upon relationships, love, shared tradition, integrity in discussion.⁸

The sad result of this spiritual myopia—the emphasis of edification over truth—is it must conclude with the view that, as Dr. Carson points out, "The old, old story may not be the true, true story." In commenting on David Bosch's book *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*, Dr. Carson lays out eight points of what I would suggest is a sort of "doctrinal statement" of the Emergent Church, although I am sure many emergent leaders would shun such a title, since having a doctrinal statement would smack of actually claiming to know something is true. But here are Carson's eight points—his foundational "truths," if you will:

1. Accept co-existence with different faiths gladly, not begrudgingly. It is not their fault if they are alive.
2. Dialogue presupposes commitment to one's position, so it is surely not a bad thing to listen well. Dialogue should be congruent with confidence in the gospel.
3. We assume that the dialogue takes place in the presence of God, the unseen Presence. In such dialogue we may learn things, as Peter does in Acts 10–11. Similarly, Jesus learns from his interchange with the Syro-phenician woman.
5. Each religion operates in its own world and therefore demands different responses from Christians.
6. Christian witness does not preclude dialogue.
7. The "old, old story" may not be the true, true story, for we continue to grow, and even our discussion and dialogues contribute to such growth. In other words, the questions raised by postmodernism help us to grow.
8. Live with the paradox: we know no way of salvation apart from Jesus Christ, but we do not prejudice what God may do with others. We must simply live with the tension.⁹

Point eight is very telling and is strikingly similar to the views of Raimon Panikkar, Professor Emeritus at the University of California Santa Barbara which D. A. Carson outlines:

Christ, he said, cannot be identified with the historical Jesus; Christ is always more than Jesus and therefore Christianity has no monopoly on Christ, even if it has a monopoly on Jesus. Since every religion develops some sort of link between the absolute God and human beings, it is appropriate to think of that link as "Christ." For Christians, doubtless the historical connection is Jesus, for others, Christ will be manifest as someone or something else. Christ is of course the only mediator, but he operates differently in different religions.¹⁰

We personally may not know of any other way of salvation, but we cannot preclude that another way exists. Jesus is

part of our meta-narrative, but we cannot really determine if our meta-narrative is true in any actual and meaningful way. God may have another way for other people in other faith traditions. As always when dealing with Postmodernists, keep in mind that although they talk a good game about rejecting the notion of absolute truth, they always believe that what they are claiming about truth (and everything else) is absolutely true. Since their view supposes that truth does not exist, then their view of truth, which they believe to be true, cannot be true, since truth does not exist and must, therefore, be false. Confused yet? So are they.

The Emergent Church's spiritual myopia is, by analogy, like putting someone who is so near sighted they can only see the steering wheel, in the driver's seat of a tractor trailer full of explosives on a busy expressway. They may successfully get to their destination without mishap, but it isn't very likely.

The Purpose-Driven Rick Warren

Rick Warren's book *The Purpose Driven Life*, published by Zondervan, arguably has made a very big impression on churches, Christians, and even non-Christians. According to Rick Warren on August 11, 2005, 30-million copies have been sold.¹¹ Warren has become a lightning rod for both praise and criticism. It is difficult to be neutral about Rick Warren. He is either the one person who has answered the question of how to "do church" and is, therefore, to be emulated; or on the other hand, he is vilified as the worst blight on the church today. We cannot, however, evaluate Warren on the basis of the division which his emergence has caused. After all, one greater than Rick Warren said, **"Do not think that I came to bring peace on the earth; I did not come to bring peace, but a sword"** (Matthew 10:34). There are times when division is appropriate and even biblical. The Apostle Paul in writing to the young pastor, Timothy, communicated something in his opening lines that would undoubtedly create division:

As I urged you upon my departure for Macedonia, remain on at Ephesus, in order that you may instruct certain men not to teach strange doctrines ... (1 Timothy 1:3)

Cult groups have almost no division in the ranks, since all must walk in lockstep with the leadership—or else! So division over Rick Warren should not be the important issue, but his teaching, as Paul points out, is what ought to be examined.

Rick Warren would appear to be truly committed to his "purpose," which currently involves solving the AIDS pandemic, and ending world hunger, poverty, and illiteracy. In other words, Empathy with the suffering of others is his main thrust—giving to others in an effort to raise them out of suffering and need on a global scale. Empathy and good works are certainly admirable things—an important part of the Christian life as well as one of the "4 'E's" of a healthy church. However, the way he communicates his passion gives at least the impression that until he came on the scene, churches have not been involved in these issues. It does *come across* as arrogance, and some pastors may take this as an unwarranted slap in the face. One pastor of a church of 200 recently e-mailed me his response:

Last year we raised over \$100,000 for missions and missionaries and that goes out to street work in New York, AIDS work in S. Africa, kids camps, Palestinian kids in Nazareth, church planting in Wales, evangelistic outreach to native Americans and on and on. Multiply that by thousands and thousands of churches and the impact is staggering. Of course no one but Warren is doing anything.

But Warren's laser-beam focus on Empathy and good works, (important facets of Christian living) unfortunately seems to be coming at the expense of other important areas, such as correct and careful handling of the Word of God. As we pointed out in our article *The Purpose Driven Claim*,¹² we have received a number of calls about Rick Warren, which motivated us to read his book in order to formulate an informed response. After reading it, we came to three conclusions, two of which we comment on in *The Purpose Driven Claim*. I will restate all three here in brief but will not treat them in depth.

1.) Rick Warren probably understands exegesis and hermeneutics, but it is not apparent from the book. Even when the points he makes are biblical ones, the passages he uses very often do not support them.

2.) There are some good things in the book. For example, his opening lines in chapter 1, **"It's not all about you"**¹³ is absolutely right on spot! However, the things that are good are so basic that anyone who has been a Christian for more than six months should already understand them, which leads us to the next point.

3.) The popularity of the book probably says more about the state of the church than it does about how good the book is.

In said article, we demonstrate that, although it may be a fine thing to set aside 40 days to God for a particular reason, the premise of Warren's book, **"Whenever God wanted to prepare someone for his purposes, he took forty days,"**¹⁴ based upon the examples he gives, is just plain false. It must be admitted that nearly all if not all pastors, teachers, and writers on occasion will misuse or misapply a passage of Scripture. But Rick Warren does it so often that it leads one to wonder if he is studying God's written revelation to man or using a concordance to find proof texts in an attempt to support an idea about which he is passionate. It is very reminiscent of Bill Gothard's method of Bible teaching. An even more serious problem, it seems to me, is what seems to be Warren's new theme—his call for a **"new reformation."** This is something which seems to come out in many of his television and radio appearances, written publications, and talks. It was the core of his talk, "The Stewardship of Leadership," at the Willow Creek Leadership Summit on August 11-13, 2005.

Rick Warren is indeed calling for a "new reformation." However, it is not one of getting back to doctrinal truth, but one of moving that musty old stuff to the back burner in favor of Empathy and good deeds. He communicates that we have had (in centuries past) the reformation of creeds, and what we need now is a reformation of deeds. His claim is that what the church believes was solved 500 years ago (creeds), and we need to focus on alleviating human suffering (deeds). He states unequivocally, **"We know what we believe."** I don't know if I can state strongly enough how *utterly false this claim is!* The almost utter lack of doctrinal discernment within the church has been demonstrated by George Barna in survey after survey. In fact, what we need now, and desperately, is the same thing that was needed during the first century as indicated by the scores of scriptural admonitions to teach sound doctrine and to be *diligent* in doing so on a regular and ongoing basis in 1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, Titus, and other passages. According to Acts 20:27-31, it is the primary job of the pastor and elders to *guard the flock*. From what? From the savage wolves (false teachers and false world views) that will come in from the outside, as well as from the wolves that will arise *among the brethren*. Paul states, **"... from among your own selves men will arise speaking perverse things to draw away dis-**

ciples after them. Therefore be on the alert ..." (Acts 20:30-31)

Warren's passion for Empathy is so great and so spiritually Myopic that he builds on what he claims is true (Christians know what they believe, and there is no longer a need to address that) and then goes on to misuse Scripture to support the idea that Jesus would have us create alliances with any and everyone who is "a person of peace" in order to solve the sufferings of humanity on a global basis. The proof text he uses is Luke 10:6. Noting the words **"If a man of peace is there..."** Warren points out that at the time this was spoken there were no Christians, therefore, like the 70 disciples, we simply need to find the **"man of peace"** even if "they are a Muslim" in any and all villages in order to make alliances which will facilitate solving AIDS, poverty, hunger, and illiteracy. What about solving biblical illiteracy—beginning with this passage? As we look at the text in context, we observe several things:

1.) Jesus was Jewish and the prophesied Messiah to the nation of Israel.

2.) The 70 (v:1) were His Jewish followers.

3.) They were sent **"in pairs to every city and place where He Himself was going to come."** These were *Jewish* villages containing people who already accepted monotheism and the Old Testament as God's written revelation of Himself to man.

4.) They had been sent out to prepare communities for His coming to proclaim the Gospel. **"The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few..."** (v:2)

5.) When they arrived in a Jewish village, they were to find the monotheistic, Torah-believing Jewish **"man of peace."**

6.) If the **"man of peace"** didn't receive the disciples and their message, they were to leave and shake the dust off their sandals on the way out as judgment against the village.

Am I saying that addressing hunger, poverty, AIDS, and illiteracy is wrong? Absolutely not! Empathy with the sufferings of others is an important part of a believer's responsibility. But does this passage demonstrate Warren's point? Most definitely not! In fact, it would seem to militate against it; for if acceptance of the message (the Gospel) is a qualifier for remaining in the village to minister, then the Muslim, according to this passage, would have to, receive the Gospel message *in order to be* a "man of peace."

This spiritual myopia has driven Rick Warren to make alliances with and promote, for example, Roman Catholicism, as his Purpose-Driven team trains them to fill up their churches.¹⁵ This was surprising to us at first, but it seems in recent years Rick Warren has discovered there is very little difference between Roman Catholicism and Evangelicalism:

And, you know, growing up as a Protestant boy, I knew nothing about Catholics, but I started watching ETWN, the Catholic channel, and I said, "Well, I'm not as far apart from these guys as I thought I was, you know?"¹⁶

Does Warren even realize that the core reason for the Reformation was the irreconcilable difference in the way that Catholics and the Reformers viewed the Gospel itself? Brave people bled and *died* for the great difference that Warren no longer sees.

The Seeker Sensitive Bill Hybels

Understood from a biblical and historical point of view, the idea of a seeker service is a modern adapta-

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Part 2 in a 2-Part Look at Occultic-like Beliefs and Practices in the Church

By John Ferrer

Introduction

In the last *Journal* article “Occultism in the Church” (Part-1),¹ we surveyed what the occult is: how it represents a certain world view geared toward secret knowledge or power and being typically characterized by certain categories of practice. These practices include fortune telling (divination), sorcery (magick), and communication with spirits (spiritism). We also saw how some beliefs that are parallel to the occult are readily found in Christian circles, namely 1) magickal thinking, 2) self-worship, and 3) depersonalization of God. While these beliefs do not necessarily mean someone is practicing occultism, they are not consistent with Christianity and can serve to blur the line between the Christian faith and the black arts. In this sequel, we will look at some practices among Christians that represent an occult corruption, and thus, are very dangerous.

As we advance, it will become obvious that occult practices and Christian practices, while very different, do have some similarities. This fact is no accident. Just as Satan can masquerade as an angel of light, it is to be expected that the occult will try to earn a hearing by counterfeiting its more respectable counterparts (2 Cor. 11:13-15). Fortune telling practices such as astrology, palm reading, and crystal gazing are a counterfeit of God’s omniscience. Magickal practices such as spell casting, incantations, and the use of charms are a counterfeit of God’s omnipotence.² Communication with spirits is a counterfeit of a prayerful relationship with God; the witches coven—a counterfeit of the church; Eastern meditation—a counterfeit of Christian meditation. Most every Christian belief or practice has a corrupted counterpart in the occult. As such, both have similar appeal playing to the same universal human needs such as: love, meaning and purpose, interpersonal fellowship, peace, fellowship with God, security, and hope. The occult, like any false religious system, is a parasite of the truth. While opposed to the truth, it depends on truth for its own existence. It represents shortcut answers to real and pressing questions that every human being needs answered. And it is because these counterfeits are so deceptively close to the original that they are so dangerously alluring.

Magickal Prayer

There is little need to comment on the fact that Christians can and should pray.³ Prayer is a normative practice of the Christian faith. Occultists and Christians agree that prayer can be an effective means of healing, blessing, and affecting change in the world. A core difference, however, is that Christians believe the real power of prayer lies in the object of prayer: God. It is an occult deviation to believe that the power is in the person praying or in the prayer itself. Christian prayer views man as the lesser vessel calling upon the omnipotent person of God. God is the real source of power.⁴ This act of prayer is first of all a relational activity. Neither the words, nor the person praying can coerce or manipulate God into acting. God is wholly independent with no one lording over Him. In contrast, observe how Dorothy Bomar and Robert Bradley, in their book *Psychic Phenomena*, speak of the power of prayer: **“I personally feel that sincere prayer directed toward healing the afflicted can be effective in three ways: first by direct psychokinetic power; second indirectly by telepathy, and third, directly via intercession of the Supreme Being.”**⁵ Only the last route even comes close to Christian thought. The previous two, psychokinesis (direct mental interaction with objects) and telepathy (awareness of a person’s thoughts without sensory aid), put the locus of strength on secret realms of human and natural power. Occult views on prayer tend to lump it in with mental manipulation, psychic energies, and visualization techniques. Prayer, in that sense, is little more than spell casting or mental magick.⁶ It is not the right words that bring a desired answer, but it is a right relationship with God wherein we seek what He wants. Matthew 7:21, for example shows how crying “Lord, Lord” does not obligate God to man. God makes prayer effective, not the words nor the person praying them.

Occult prayer may also error in the form of idolatry. Some occult streams implore the practitioner to call upon spirits such as angels, ancestors, gods, or other forces. But if anyone besides the one Yahweh God is the object of prayer, then that prayer is idolatrous (Ex. 20:3). Prayer is a form of worship; and Scripture shows that when people attempt to worship angels or men they are to be denied, because God alone should be the object of worship (Acts 10:26; Rev. 19:10; 22:8). Of all 150 Psalms, not one includes a prayer to anyone other than God. When Jesus, Himself, is asked about how people should pray, he begins His model prayer addressing God: **“Our Father who art in**

heaven, hallowed be your name.” (Matt. 6:9). In Philippians 4:6, Paul instructs: *“in everything, by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God.”* Scripture nowhere demonstrates nor condones prayer as being addressed to anyone but God. Neither angels nor demons, self nor Satan, dead saints nor dead scoundrels, none of these are to receive or even relay our prayers. Christ Jesus, being glorified man and God, is the lone intercessor between man and God (1 Tim. 2:5; Heb. 7:25; 10:19-21).⁷

So far, what has been described is a difference between Christian prayer and non-Christian prayer. And while any idolatrous prayer is a step away from Christianity, what would make such errant prayer specifically occult is its combination with the pursuit of “hidden knowledge” or the use of “secret power.” All attempts at contacting deceased spirits, angels, or demons are occult in orientation. Likewise, any attempt to cause change in supernatural⁸ ways apart from God’s will and power is occult magick. In summary, occult prayer errs in its locus of power, its non-relational orientation, its presumptions about man, its denigration of God, and in its objects.

Meditation: Strong Minded or Weak Willed?

Like prayer, meditation is a Biblical concept and is a normal Christian practice. It should be a regular spiritual discipline for Christians (Josh. 1:8; Psalm 4:4). Scripture portrays meditation as being a filling of the mind with Godly contemplation such as Scripture, a Godly principle, or thoughts about God Himself (Ps. 1:1; 19:14; 63:6). With the strong influence of eastern thought on contemporary culture, the occult has accordingly incorporated forms of meditation that are Buddhist and Hindu in nature. Occult meditation then refers primarily to eastern forms of meditation where people empty their minds, center themselves, and concentrate their energies. This meditation can be for the purposes of peace and relaxation, religious rites, or as preparation toward other occult practices like séances and spell casting. The idea of emptying your mind may sound permissible, but as Christians a crucial distinction exists between that and the Biblical teaching on peacefulness and trust (see Matt. 6:25-34). Ultimate peace is not found in an empty mind, or in a “centered state of consciousness” but in trusting and obeying God (Isa. 26:3; Phil. 4:6-7). Furthermore, to leave our minds unguarded is spiritual suicide.⁹ Perhaps the most dangerous lie of occultism is the idea that after you open its door, you will be able to shut it. To leave one’s mind empty and open is an invitation to sinfulness, oppression, and demonic possession (the last applying only to non-Christians).¹⁰ Examples of occult corruptions of meditation include Yoga, contemplative prayer, visualization, and centering techniques.

Occult Bible Study

Another normative practice for Christians is Bible study. This too has its occult deviations. Bible study should be a sensible practice of observation, interpretation, and application within a literal historical-grammatical method of interpretation.¹¹ The text speaks as plainly as the morning newspaper, though the Bible’s message is inspired and inerrant. A little consideration for historical, textual, and cultural context usually provides enough equipment to access the meaning of the text. And just as common communication admits the use of symbols, figures of speech, round numbers, and exaggerations, so Scripture is written in the common language of the people and should be allowed the same leeway (Koine Greek–NT; Hebrew and Aramaic–OT).

Symbolism and allegory should not, however, be allowed to run rampant overpowering what would otherwise be objectively discernable literal meanings. It is a huge concession to occultism to assume that God intends to speak through hidden messages encoded in Scripture (*The Bible Code*) or that beneath its literal objective meaning lies a “deeper spiritual meaning.” Scripture is rich enough in its literal meanings and applications to occupy mankind indefinitely. Nonetheless, people can still slip into occult interpretation through several paths.

1) Silence. Scripture does not speak directly on many issues, and those who are determined to find a word from God on such issues may understand that silence to be grounds for occult interpretation.

2) Difficult teachings. Scripture presents numerous hard teachings which conflict with individual conscience, cultural norms, and family expectations. When we prize these positions over the message of Scripture, we may cede to a mystical interpretation to make Scripture fit to our purposes.

3) Bad theology. Some believe that God does not reveal Himself in propositional language; therefore, a subjective experience is needed for Scripture to become the Word of God (Karl Barth, Neo-orthodoxy). Such mysticism is a major step toward occultism. Others think that God is elusive, not wanting to be encountered or known. Therefore, they read Scripture as if God were trying to keep His truths from ever being discovered. By looking under every rock for some key to knowledge, they overlook the bedrock foundation that is Scripture. Still others study Scripture as functionalists, not looking to know God or learn from Him, but rather to extract and reconstruct self-centered principles from its words. They are not looking to submit to the truth and purposes of Scripture, they only want to use Scripture for their self-centered purposes. What usually results is a message that has nothing to do with that of Scripture and commits the sins mentioned in the introduction: depersonalizing God, deifying man, and magickal thinking.

4) Excitement. Still others are looking to be more entertained by Scripture. They see in its pages experiences, puzzles, magical formulas, and mysteries. The plain message of Scripture for all its force and beauty is seen as boring and stuffy, especially since we would expect the Word of God to be “exciting and grandiose.” By viewing Scripture as ultimately enigmatic, they can scour the Biblical text for clues to answer an equation which Scripture in no way proposes. It is true that Biblical stories may involve an element of mystery (the mystery of Christ’s Identity in the book of Mark) or proverbial enigmas (Proverbs 26:4-5). But such riddles are proposed by the text itself. To understand Scripture as boring is to misunderstand Scripture. Just as a baby may prefer to eat a diamond ring rather than wear it, so people out of spiritual immaturity may grossly misuse the Scripture as a puzzle box rather than rightly interpret it allowing its latent relevance and truth to shine with its full beauty.

I Must Be Dreaming

Scripture has numerous examples of God communicating with man through dreams and visions. Much debate exists about whether dreams and visions from God even occur today. Laying that debate aside, we will assume (for the sake of argument) that dreams and visions still occur in the Biblical sense today.¹²

In the book of Ecclesiastes we can see that not all dreams

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are divine. Some are explainable through natural causes (Ecc. 5:3). For the Christian who cannot identify a divine cause for their dream, it may still be explainable in natural terms and be in agreement with Scripture. Scientifically speaking, dreams are a natural phenomenon, and visions are usually explainable as well through natural means such as drugs, sleep deprivation, extreme stress, dehydration, exhaustion, abnormal psychology, or even simple imagination. But when a dream or a vision resists such explanation, several key differences should be born in mind to distinguish a Biblical theology of revelation from that of occult dreams and visions.

First, man of himself cannot prophetically foretell or interpret dreams. The prophet Daniel himself would say to King Nebuchadnezzar about his dream, ***"As for the mystery ... neither wise men, conjurers, magicians, [nor] diviners are able to declare [it] to the king"*** (Dan. 2:27).

Second, it is God who foretells and interprets dreams. Daniel adds, ***"However, there is a God in heaven who reveals mysteries, and He has made known to King Nebuchadnezzar what will take place in the latter days"*** (Dan. 2:28). Joseph would echo this truth when the Pharaoh called on him to interpret a dream, ***"It is not in me; God will give Pharaoh a favorable answer"*** (Gen. 41:16). If a person does foretell someone else's dream or correctly interpret that dream then: it is either explainable by natural causes such as guessing and psychoanalysis, they received their information from God, or they received their information from some other non-human source and it is of the occult. Therefore, whenever a dream or vision disagrees with the greater revelation of God's Word, it can be safely discarded as ungodly since God does not defy Himself (Num. 23:19; Mal. 3:6). And even if a dream is not obviously opposed to God's Word, the burden of proof is on the dreamer since to claim "thus saith the Lord" is a weighty claim meriting weighty evidence and weighty judgment if falsified (Deut. 13:1-5; 18:20-22; 1 Pet. 4:11; see also James 3:1).

Third, Christianity rejects the view common to the occult that dreams and visions come from a living and divine Nature seeking to express itself in supernormal ways. This idea flows out of the commonly occult belief in pantheism (i.e.: everything is God).¹³ Christianity claims that only Yahweh is God, and all of nature, man included, is created and separate from God (Gen. 1-2; Num. 23:19). Only when prophecies come from Yahweh, God do they align with Christianity.

Fourth, Christian prophecy is distinguished from occult prophecy by its purposes. Prophecy is truly a miracle, and as Dr. Norman Geisler explains, miracles are always for the purpose of glorifying God (John 2:11), accrediting certain persons as God's spokesmen (Acts 2:22; Heb. 2:3-4), and providing evidence for belief in God (John 6:2, 14; 20:30-31). Meanwhile, many supposed miracles, while appearing to be supernatural, fail these tests for Biblical consistency. Either they prove to be too petty, too random, or not glorifying to God.¹⁴

Fifth, Christianity reveres Scripture as wholly sufficient for faith and practice over and above any other potential means of revelation.¹⁵ It is adequate for equipping Christians; ***"All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work"*** (2 Tim. 3:16-17). Among the spiritual armor listed in Ephesians 6 are

salvation, truth, righteousness, readiness with the Gospel, faith, Scripture and even prayer. But, prophecy, dreams, and visions do not appear in the list. Even though the warfare for which this soldier is being fitted is, indeed, spiritual warfare, all the armaments mentioned are conventional and otherwise ordinary instruments.

Preoccupations with prophecy tend to survive only by starving people of the plain message of Scripture. As such, it is spiritually dangerous if not deadly to pursue prophetic knowledge apart from what has already been revealed in Scripture. This point I know is a contentious one, but it must be said despite the popularity and prevalence of "prophetic ministries" among many of our contemporary churches. Much of contemporary prophecy is but a mystical replica of what is already known more plainly and more reliably in Scripture. Is there any real question that there will continue to be trouble in the Middle East, that much blood will be shed in religious conflicts leading up to the Last Day, or that America (or the Catholic Church, the Protestant church, the European Union, or any influential force) will face a great judgment for her share of wickedness, or that any given person will have a death in the family? No form of mysticism is needed to arrive at these safe conclusions. Furthermore, much of contemporary prophecy, within the Christian church, has failed which proves it to be an unreliable, and often, dry well.¹⁶ But even when prophecies are not so deceptive, they can prove equally dangerous by being distracting. And here is the occult tie-in. Fascination with new prophecy is indistinguishable from the seductive appeal of hidden occult knowledge. Remember that "occult" refers to either hidden powers or hidden knowledge or both.

Those fascinated with new prophecy tend to find themselves scouring their normal dream life for "hidden messages." They may also make special note of glancing daydreams, mirages or illusions. And they may be quick to draw connections between otherwise unrelated events calling them "signs."¹⁷ Such habits are simply magickal thinking and are fostered by a discontentment with revealed Scripture.

Miracles or Magick?

The last topic brings us to the issue of miracles. Miracles are a reality throughout Biblical history though they are concentrated around a few points in Biblical history: Creation (the biggest miracle of all), the Exodus, the ministries of Elijah and Elisha, and the ministry of Jesus together with the early apostolic ministry. And granting God's sovereignty and omnipotence, the Christian must admit the possibility for miracles today whether or not one agrees that miracles do indeed happen today. But while some parallels do exist between miracles and magick, considered fairly, they are vastly different.

According to Scripture, miracles operate by God's power with or without human agents.¹⁸ There is no "internal divine" power latent to humans which enables them to exercise magick powers. Second, there is no impersonal divine force in nature that can be manipulated in miraculous ways. It is true that God performed many miracles through people using complex rituals (Joshua and the fall of the Wall of Jericho) and through people using simpler unrelated actions (Moses striking the rock for water). And sometimes He does not even use people (creation). But miracles, like prophecy, come by God's prerogative, not from human manipulation of natural forces or from a coercion of the divine. Where no instructions are given to the human agent in a miracle, God is still the identifiable source of power with the

human serving only as a conduit (1 Kings 17:17-24; Acts 3:6; 9:34, 40-42; 19:11-12). Third, the miracles are set within a relational context where the human agents are agreeing with God's character and revelation. The depersonalization of the Divine which is common to occultism defies Biblical miracle theology. Fourth, God is ultimately glorified by this demonstration of His power. Miracles should not deify man, but glorify God. Fifth, in Scripture these miracles occur sporadically and only rarely with repetition such as with the feeding of the multitudes and the parting of waters. And sixth, the sole supernatural element is God, not some impersonal force conjured through a mechanical manipulation of nature's elements. In fact, occultism in many cases denies the possibility of miracles. Occultists often ascribe to pantheism wherein everything is a divine unity. Therefore, nature is viewed as all-encompassing leaving no place for a supernatural realm. Since miracles are sourced in supernature, they cannot exist within pantheistic occult belief.

Having roughly identified a Biblical basis for miracles, we can further clarify the differences between miracles and magic. The foremost distinction is that miracles affirm God. Just because something defies natural explanation does not mean it is of God. Such an event may be an anomaly explainable by random chance, slight of hand explainable upon deeper investigation, or it may be a confounding event revealing our ignorance of nature. Just because something is under the pretense of being "in God's name" does not mean it is of God (Matt. 7:21; Acts 19:13-17). And just because something which seems to be supernatural (or supernormal) affirms belief in the true faith does not mean it is of God. Magic shows (not *Magick*) happen all the time, but these should incite nothing more than entertainment. Sometimes a miracle can be faked so as to incite belief. Taking the wrong road to the right destination does not justify taking the wrong road. The ends do not justify the means, and such practices run the risk of making all of Christianity look like a hoax.

Second, magick is fundamentally fallacious. Magick may achieve desired results. And it may function according to the expectations of the practitioner. But magick is, nonetheless, false in its underpinnings. It is false in the sense of defying Him Who is truth by appealing to power sources apart from and contrary to God. It is false in that it implies man is more powerful than He is. It is a classic lure of the occult to promise power and authority to the initiate only to discover that the forces wielded will later backfire and imprison the practitioner. It is false in that it is built upon a false understanding of reality including any combination of pantheism (God is all), panentheism (God is in all), and polytheism (many gods). The framework wherein Magick is justified is itself unjustified.¹⁹

Third, miracle claims can be found among mutually exclusive belief systems. If one defines miracles as anything that hints at special providence (an anonymous check in the mail when the rent is due) or hints at supernatural intervention (being cured from cancer), then this soft definition leaves open the possibility for mutual exclusion of conflicting claims to truth. The skeptic and philosopher David Hume builds one of his proofs against religion on this line of reasoning.²⁰ The answer to this dilemma, however, is to use a stricter definition of "miracle" and to weigh the different miracle claims against each other (see above: **I Must Be Dreaming**). While most every cult and world religion makes miracle claims, only Christianity stands the full gamut of scrutiny and testing. The Christian Bible, Creation, and the Res-

urrection of Christ, for example, provide an evidentialist smorgasbord by which their respective truth claims can be tested.²¹


Fourth, while miracles do serve to confirm divine truth, God's use of miracles hardly affirms sensationalist fascination with new miracles. In the story of the Rich Man and Lazarus, God through Abraham declines to raise a man from the dead since it would prove no more useful in stirring faith than the prior testimony of the Scriptures (Luke 16:19-31). When tempted by Satan in the wilderness, Jesus did not use miraculous powers but Scripture to rebuke Satan (Matthew 4:1-11; Luke 4:1-13). And Jesus in His ministry usually reserved His miracles of healing for the faithful rather than playing down to doubters who just want a magic show (Matt. 10:8-13; 9:22, 29; 13:58; 15:28; Luke 23:8-11). Jesus would even say, "*an evil and adulterous generation asks for a sign*" thus rebuking the Scribes and Pharisees who sought miraculous confirmations (Matt. 12:38-39; 16:4). God can do miracles, but He also knows our tendency to become captivated by the miracles rather than the miracle-worker.

Fifth, Scripture indicates that there will be false miracles and persuasive deceptions (Matt. 24:24; 2 Thess. 2:9; Rev. 13:13-14). It must be borne in mind that miracles are tangents. True or false, supernatural or supernormal, miracles are secondary to the plain truth of God's established revelation in Scripture. Paul would go as far as to say, "*even if an angel from heaven should preach a Gospel other than what we preached, let him be eternally condemned*" (Gal. 1:8). To have direct revelation from an angel would, indeed, be supernatural, but a supernatural context does not make a proposition true.²² Healings, prophesy, tongues, ecstatic utterances—none of these guarantee the truth of their accompanying message. Supernatural activity does not guarantee truth.

Sixth, whenever tools and instruments are used in Biblical miracles, the greater context sets it apart from a magickal use of

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Do All Paths Lead To God?



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By Rich Poll

The Ambush Of



DISCERNMENT

Half way through college, during the Christmas season of 1974, I first tasted the adventure of life in Jesus. It soon seemed to me that the most difficult resources to find were the ones that answered questions about conflicting world views. In my eyes, the Christian leaders who provided answers in this area became giants.

Little did I expect that the day would come when I would be rubbing shoulders with some of these giants as an equal. At present, besides my main focus on publishing world view research, I own and moderate an Internet discussion list for career apologists. For the past several years, my observation of Christian apologists has been that they tend to have a short fuse. I've noticed that there are few who consider themselves apologists who exhibit evidence in being slow to anger.

We, writing as an apologist myself, have earned a sad reputation outside our circles for being a contentious lot. Many churches are fearful of apologists and budding apologists within their local church and view us as "high maintenance." This does not help any of us who would also be or aspire to be scholars.

One frequently overlooked positive aspect of scholarship is the restraint of emotion in debate. I'm not saying that scholars don't show their temper. However, restraint enjoys more respect in that environment. Then again, I know scholars who appear to have their anger in check, yet they still perpetuate a reputation for being contentious.

The Land of the Giants

I first entered the "land of the giants" when I began a seminary internship in 1983 with Spiritual Counterfeits Project (SCP) in Berkeley, California. The following year I landed a researcher's job at Christian Research Institute (CRI) in Southern California. I was puzzled by what seemed to be an unusually high number of former employees from both organizations who had since gone on to work alone as apologists. As you may have already guessed, I have since concluded that the most common reason for this is our inability to get along with each other.

One of the hats I used to wear at Christian Research Institute was that of interviewing people for employment. Eventually, over the decade of my experience there, I had interviewed most of the staff who had been hired after I came on board. When CRI was serious about a job applicant, I would often sit down with them and discuss what I call the "Five Woes of Ministry."

The ambush of discernment has to do with the fifth of these

woes. But for those of you who are curious, here is a brief run-down of the first four:

Woe #1

Unrealistic expectations - This follows the line of naive thinking that, "Working with Christians will be like working in heaven." All too often we soon discover that one of the things the Christians (including us) brought with them to their jobs is themselves.

Woe #2

Unlimited workload - The problem here is unconsciously submitting to the temptation to operate as if we are omnipotent, e.g., assuming our ministry contribution to be indispensable while failing to trust God with the eventual outcome. Impatience with God's timetable occurs here and becomes a distraction to what we individually are to be doing.

Woe #3

Heightened emotional involvement - Personal sacrifice is common in ministry. Yet, few are prepared to endure thanklessness for long. This is when a martyr spirit kills a servant heart.

Woe #4

Selfish ambition - This is when we repeat the folly behind the question: "Who is the greatest of the disciples?" and its corresponding pride and related insecurity. I would suggest that the Fourth Woe is chronic among apologists.

Woe #5

Woe Is Us - The Fifth Woe is what I call the spiritual warfare wildcard. It is the most complex woe. I call it a wildcard because nobody, short of an angel, qualifies as anything near an expert here. And here is where I will focus on the balance of this article.

The Ambush of Discernment

People have asked me: "In your field of apologetics, you are out to stop the best game Satan has going (e.g., the success-

ful preaching of a counterfeit Jesus). What do you see the Devil doing in response? If anybody sees spiritual warfare, I would think it would be you. What have you seen the Devil doing over the years that has been the greatest hindrance in your field?" (By the way, I don't believe that our field constitutes Satan's primary area of concern. But many people seem to believe that.)

My answer is that I don't think the Devil's primary response is overt. I think it is covert. The best way I know how to describe it is that I think there is one particular verse in Scripture that Satan would most want us to ignore.

And if you ask people in all types of ministry, I sense that you'll find the same answer to the question of what constitutes Satan's most effective offensive weapon. Consider your own experience. What hinders ministry more than interpersonal conflict?

And what verse would Satan most have us ignore? Ephesians 6:12 ***"We wrestle not against flesh and blood ..."***

Most likely, you know the passage. Yet, how rare it is that we think of it when we are ambushed by interpersonal conflict. And this is just one aspect of the ambush.

Consider everything I have to say to you as being a reminder. Did you know that the word *remind* occurs just seven times in the New American Standard New Testament? Each use falls into the same pastoral context:

"... I have written very boldly to you on some points, so as to remind you again ..." (Romans 15:5, NASB)

"... I have sent to you Timothy, ... he will remind you of my ways which are in Christ, just as I teach everywhere in every church." (1 Corinthians 4:17)

"... I remind you to kindle afresh the gift of God which is in you ..." (2 Timothy 1:6)

"Remind them of these things ..." (2 Timothy 2:14)

"These things speak and exhort and reprove with all authority. Let no one disregard you. Remind them ..." (Titus 2:15)

"... I shall always be ready to remind you of these things, even though you already know them ..." (2 Peter 1:12)

"Though you already know this, I want to remind you ..." (Jude 1:5, NIV)

The art of reminding is a primary function of preaching. Even while I write this to remind you, let me assure you that I, too, need reminding.

Question: Why review the obvious? Answer: Because we need to remember or be reminded of the occupational hazards of ministry - and that if only to help us recognize the need for repentance a bit sooner the next time around. Who likes to repent? Who can avoid it? Who wants to avoid it - knowing we can't?

Consider David, the psalmist. Was anybody else in the Bible ever described as a man after God's own heart? Yet, what a seeming poor return on investment! The guy became an adulterer and a murderer. Do you even know anyone who has been both an adulterer and a murderer? Nevertheless, this guy was ***"a man after God's own heart"*** (Acts 13:22).

Some may view this as a paradox, but there is a key which clears this up. When studying his life in Scripture, we notice that David's repenter saw lots of use. And the act of repentance was heart-rending. He was contrite.

When Discernment is Ambushed

As the Apostle Paul points out in Ephesians 6:12, we wrestle not against flesh and blood. Yet our objectives are most commonly ambushed because we do not love one another (cf. 1 John 3:11); we do the opposite. Perhaps, this doesn't bother us enough.

The guardians of the faith of Jesus' day had convinced themselves that they were somehow able to live righteous lives. They were, after all, *the* watchman and guardians. They were seated in the seat of Moses (Matt. 23:2). Jesus addressed this thinking head on by comparing the standard they lived with God's standards of righteousness. In doing so, He was demonstrating that the standard wasn't what they could proudly point to in what they did, but rather it revealed that there was a heart problem. It is most clearly taught in Matthew 5. The higher standard teaching of Jesus has two identifying phrases.

1) ***"You have heard that it was said ..."***

2) ***"... but I say ..."***

Consider the style of presentation and argument used repeatedly by Jesus here in the Sermon on the Mount discourse of Matthew 5. We start with the Beatitudes: ***"Blessed are the ..."*** (1-16). Jesus next calls attention to the Jewish law (17-20). He then presents six sections each of which describe God's standard in contrast to the Jewish law. Standards, by the way, which no one but Jesus has been able to live up to. Each of these six sections has the two identifying phrases.

1) ***"You have heard that it was said ..."***

2) ***... but I say ..."***

21-26 ***"You have heard that the ancients were told ..."***

27-30 ***"You have heard that it was said ..."***

31-32 ***"and it was said ..."***

33-37 ***"Again, you have heard that the ancients were told ..."***

38-42 ***"You have heard that it was said ..."***

43-48 ***"You have heard that it was said ..."***

Every section uses the past tense verb (was said, were told). Every section uses the phrase ***"... but I say ..."*** as the introduction to the actual standard God uses. When there are six uses in a passage, consider the author to be making a significant emphasis. And don't overlook the ironic conclusion. Jesus refers to common standards of the day (not specifically the Jewish law) when He says, ***"Do not even the tax-gatherers so the same?"*** (Matthew 5:46). For our purposes I will paraphrase this as, "Even the non-Evangelicals do that!" And that is His point at the end: "Even the non-evangelicals do that!" How are you and I any different where it really counts? How would it affect your life if you realized that Jesus placed a greater emphasis on your behavior than you do?

Jesus repeats Himself at the conclusion of Matthew 5. The equivalent of my phrase "Even the non-evangelicals do that!" is used in each of the last two verses (46-47). Get it? He expects the behavior of true Christians to stand out. That is His measure.

Now, regarding the expression: ***"You have heard that it was said ..."*** In one example, what they heard was simply, ***"Do not commit adultery"*** (Ex. 20:14). ***"You have heard ...,"*** what an ironically casual reference to the formal Mosaic code that every Jew heard constantly. ("Yeah, we've heard that only about 2- or 3-million times!")

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But what Jesus said, the higher standard, is that ***"if you even look at someone else with lust, you have already committed adultery with them in your heart"*** (Matt. 5:28). This is the most familiar of the six higher standard examples.

Another example: ***"You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'Do not murder, and anyone who murders will be judged.' But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be judged."*** (21, 22a Rich Poll version). This is the first example that Jesus gives us. It is the introduction to the God's standard teaching. He opens with the idea that anger is the equivalent of murder; just as in the more familiar section, lust is said to be the equivalent of adultery. In both cases, the point is that yielding to the evil thought has priority over the more obvious sinful act. It is the thought that must be dealt with immediately.

Don't think it a coincidence that where Paul speaks of ***"the weapons of our warfare,"*** he concludes with the idea of ***"taking every thought captive to the obedience of Christ"*** (2 Corinthians 10.5).

The Real Ambush to Keep in Mind

Anger is less severe than hate. And that yields a serious warning. In multiple places, Scripture equates unrighteous anger with murder. That makes hate even more serious than anger - lots more serious. ***"The one who hates his brother is a murderer; and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him"*** (1 John 3.15). Hate has serious consequences. Like the sin of sexual immorality, which is ***"against your own person"*** (1 Corinthians 6.18), hate brings spiritual calamity down upon your own head. For one thing, you can be blindsided, ambushed by hate.

"... whoever hates his brother is in the darkness and walks around in the darkness; he does not know where he is going, because the darkness has blinded him." (1John 2:9-11)

"The darkness has blinded him." Did you catch that? Discernment is ambushed by hate.

"If someone says, 'I love God,' and hates his brother, he is a liar." (1 John 4:20)

The Apostle John finds that being ambushed by hate is a moral failure of conscience, lying.

"For we also once were foolish ourselves ... hateful, hating one another." (Timothy 3:3) Paul says that being ambushed by hate is to be caught in foolishness.

Perhaps the blind foolishness is most evident when confronted. "I don't 'hate' anyone! Sometimes people just make me angry." How long does it take for a flame to become a fire? Try telling God your personal anger isn't hate, down deep. Don't be so foolish as to justify your anger, thinking it is not hate. Even the non-evangelicals do that.

"... whoever hates his brother is in the darkness and walks around in the darkness; he does not know where he is going, because the darkness has blinded him." (1John 2:11)

The ambush of discernment is a self-perpetuating circumstance. It is one of darkness leading to further darkness. Only an act of God redeems the situation. It begins with sensitivity to His Spirit.

From Bugging to Blessing

The outcome of the ambush depends a good deal on your

attitude when you realize what has happened. The question is, "Does the warning about being ambushed bug you enough now to become a blessing later?"

I hope you have not failed to sense the irony here. As apologists, we are in a field where the name-of-the-game is discernment. Yet, our sin, our frequently common sin, robs us of discernment. Consider the passage: ***"If your right hand makes you stumble, cut it off, and throw it from you."*** (Mt 5.30) It is better to cut off the "offending member" than to live in darkness. That is a drastic measure, isn't it? The ambush is common. All of us better be ready for drastic measures if we want to survive. And each of us needs to apply these drastic measures to ourselves alone.

Again, rarely regarding the subject of hate, will a guilty party quickly admit to their sin when first challenged. ("I don't hate anybody!") It is ironic. While we might all agree that this "ambush of discernment" is common in our field, few of us seem to believe we ourselves are in any imminent danger of being ambushed. We stand around like pins in a bowling alley. ("There is that rolling thunder again. It seems to be coming this way....") I urge you to take drastic measures to insure that you are constantly in fresh pursuit of the Holy One. He gives good gifts, as a loving father to his child. He answers the prayer that is according to His will.

What will this moment's reflection mean for you? Renewed commitment to private time with God? Restitution? (Be responsible to settle disputes that continue to simmer. Let God handle the rest. You are not responsible for another's reaction. You are responsible to "make it right" with the offended party to the best of your ability.)

Re-examination? (Do you love God more now than before? How long has it been since you have seen a change in this area for the better? Is your current life fulfilling His desire? Does your life really count for God?)

Repentance? (Do you know renewed, simple, sweet contrition? David sure did. God loved him for it.)

There is an early-warning signal to remember. Anger yields hasty self-defensiveness, but love is patient. (Proverbs 14.29; 15.18; 16.32; 19.11; 22.24; 29.11)

What is Mt 18 about? Is it your understanding that Mt 18 is about church discipline (i.e., how to handle reproof, correction, and restoration of a brother or sister in Christ)? My bet is that most miss the fact that there is over twice as much said about forgiveness in Mt 18 as anything else. We don't cut each other the slack that we hope God will cut us. We tend to overlook the importance of forgiveness as something required from us for the benefit of others. Do we put justice before restoration?

Have you ever tried to discourage someone from entering ministry? That's what I did with the Five Woes. You may reply that "It is too late. I've gone too far in this direction to turn back now." Have you considered the cost of more pain from going down the wrong path? Make sure of your calling. Do not proceed unless you have counted the cost. This ambush causes the shipwreck of faith for too many. It can mean the difference between:

Calling vs. ambition
Fulfillment vs. survival
Passion vs. emptiness
Purpose vs. indifference

The Larger Context

If you haven't been ambushed lately, plan on it. Be prepared. Paul the apostle writes: *"... for indeed what I have forgiven, if I have forgiven anything, I did it for your sakes in the presence of Christ, in order that no advantage be taken of us by Satan ..."* (2 Corinthians 2:10-11). Here we have the extending of forgiveness, in order that no advantage be taken of us by Satan.

Consider the parallel with Ephesians 4:26-27: *"Do not let the sun go down on your anger, and do not give the devil an opportunity."*

Satan is given an advantage when we are unforgiving. One aspect of this advantage for our adversary, if not the entire advantage, is that we become blinded by our sin. Is it any wonder that interpersonal conflict appears to be the chief problem we face? Make sure your repentance is working. Make sure your repentance is heart-rending, and that you are consistently contrite.

Don't withhold forgiveness.

Beware Of Being Ambushed

Consider the collateral damage of bitterness: James writes: *"... if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your heart, do not be arrogant and so lie against the truth"* (James 3:14).

In Hebrews, we read: *"See to it that no one comes short of the grace of God; that no root of bitterness springing up causes trouble, and by it many be defiled"* (Heb. 12:15). By it, many continue to be defiled.

I have often prayed that we, as a ministry community, would consistently experience the grace of God to walk before Him in humility and godliness. Can humility and godliness happen in someone's life without learning a healthy respect for contrition? Those lessons come hard. The process is called maturing, and it is necessary component of being used by God. At the same time, I pray that, as a result of walking in humility and godliness, we will grow in love and respect for each other.

You may respect someone for their accomplishments, but I'd rather have someone's respect by way of mutual understanding for the common weakness of our flesh and our being prone to wander away from the Master, Jesus, who is our only hope. We apologists are called to contend (Jude 3), but great competence is required to avoid being contentious.

I know, I've been ambushed in this way before, and my sin has hurt others deeply. What qualifies me most to speak also gives me the greatest regret. I, too, need reminding that I may be ambushed and not realize it.

The one who repents often should also forgive often. A healthy appreciation of our own weaknesses should inform our compassion toward others. Remember the parable of the unforgiving servant? He repented, his master forgave, but the servant was unforgiving of his peers and suffered greatly as a result. (Matthew 18: 21-35)

I've come to understand that the ability to extend forgiveness is influenced by the quality of a person's love for God and others. Consider this question: Is your love consistent? The ability to love and forgive is directly related to one's spiritual health. I've noticed a direct relationship between the lack of my love and compassion for others and a decline in the state of my spiritual health, the quality of my love for God at any one time.

Sometimes I am caught up short by my coldness of heart. And at such times I've sensed that my spiritual health is at low

ebb. Your attitude toward others may be a good measure of your spiritual condition.

Taking this a step further than within the context of discernment being ambushed, rarely do apologists reflect on the influence of compassion, and separately, the ministry of prayer in the life of the apologist. Many have reflected on the relationship of compassion to evangelism. Yet, how rare it is that we relate compassion to apologetics and the role of prayer in our field?

Let me leave you with a challenge. Consider the harm which results from the ambush of discernment when it occurs corporately within a group such as us. During my seminary internship, I interviewed Christian leaders to find out what discipline(s) they practiced for the maintenance of their spiritual health. I was alarmed to learn that the subject received little attention on the whole. I have since continued this inquiry. I do not have good news. From what I have found, Christian leaders do not often spend private time alone with God for the purpose of maintaining their spiritual vitality. Where do you find yourself in this matter? Do these words bother you enough to change? "Even the non-evangelicals do that!" - Are you any different? Can we expect change in our field apart from change in your life and mine?

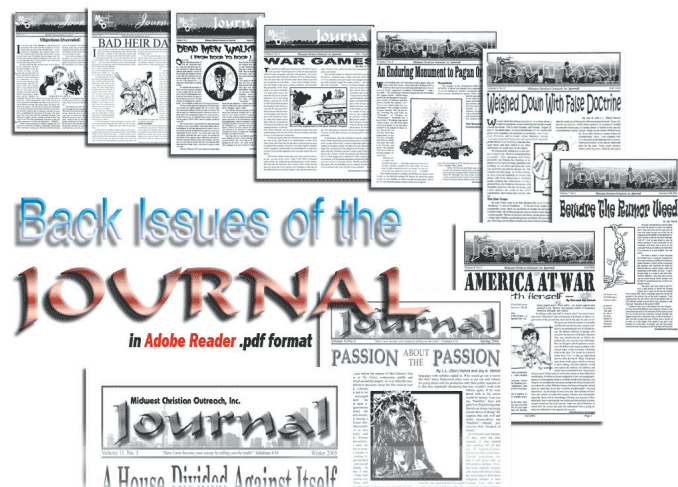
Remember: *"We wrestle not against flesh and blood"*



Besides what you learned about him in the article, Rich founded Apologia in 1995 and in 1997 began publishing a weekly research bulletin, *Apologia Report*. Rich received his Master of Divinity degree in 1984 from the International School of Theology, San Bernardino, California. He also earned a Bachelor of Science degree in Manufacturing from Western Michigan University and worked as an engineer for three years prior to starting his seminary education. In 2004, he earned

a Masters of Library and Information Science and functions as a public librarian when he isn't working on *Apologia Report*. To subscribe to the *Apologia Report* (which we highly recommend) go to: http://apologia.org/html/apol_report.html

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“Feeding Sheep or Amusing Goats”

An evil is in the professed camp of the Lord, so gross in its impudence, that the most short-sighted can hardly fail to notice it. During the past few years it has developed at an abnormal rate, even for evil. It has worked like leaven until the whole lump ferments. The devil has seldom done a cleverer thing than hinting to the Church that part of their mission is to provide entertainment for the people, with a view to winning them. From speaking out as the Puritans did, the Church has gradually toned down her testimony, then winked at and excused the frivolities of the day. Then she tolerated them in her borders. Now she has adopted them under the plea of reaching the masses.

My first contention is that providing amusement for the people is nowhere spoken of in the Scriptures as a function of the Church. If it is a Christian work why did not Christ speak of it? ‘Go ye into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature.’ That is clear enough. So it would have been if he had added, ‘and provide amusement for those who do not relish the gospel.’ No such words, however, are to be found. It did not seem to occur to him. Then again, ‘He gave some apostles, some prophets, some pastors and teachers, for the work of the ministry.’ Where do entertainers come in? The Holy Spirit is silent concerning them. Were the prophets persecuted because they amused the people or because they refused? The concert has no martyr roll.

Again, providing amusement is in direct antagonism to the teaching and life of Christ and all his apostles. What was the attitude of the Church to the world? ‘Ye are the salt,’ not the sugar candy—something the world will spit out, not swallow. Short and sharp was the utterance, ‘Let the dead bury their dead.’ He was in awful earnestness!

Had Christ introduced more of the bright and pleasant elements into his mission, he would have been more popular when they went back, because of the searching nature of his teaching. I do not hear him say, ‘Run after these people, Peter, and tell them we will have a different style of service

tomorrow, something short and attractive with little preaching. We will have a pleasant evening for the people. Tell them they will be sure to enjoy it. Be quick, Peter, we must get the people somehow!’ Jesus pitied sinners, sighed and wept over them, but never sought to amuse them. In vain will the Epistles be searched to find any trace of the gospel of amusement. Their message is, ‘Come out, keep out, keep clean out!’ Anything approaching fooling is conspicuous by its absence. They had boundless confidence in the gospel and employed no other weapon. After Peter and John were locked up for preaching, the Church had a prayer meeting, but they did not pray, ‘Lord, grant unto thy servants that by a wise and discriminating use of innocent recreation we may show these people how happy we are.’ If they ceased not for preaching Christ, they had not time for arranging entertainments. Scattered by persecution, they went everywhere preaching the gospel. ‘They turned the world upside down’. That is the only difference! Lord, clear the Church of all the rot and rubbish the devil has imposed on her and bring us back to apostolic methods.

Lastly, the mission of amusement fails to effect the end desired. It works havoc among young converts. Let the careless and scoffers, who thank God because the Church met them half-way, speak and testify. Let the heavy laden who found peace through the concert not keep silent! Let the drunkard to whom the dramatic entertainment had been God’s link in the chain of their conversion, stand up! There are none to answer. The mission of amusement produces no converts. The need of the hour for today’s ministry is believing scholarship joined with earnest spirituality, the one springing from the other as fruit from the root. The need is biblical doctrine, so understood and felt, that it sets men on fire.

"Occult" Continued from page 9

tools. In the case of the Bronze Serpent in Numbers 21, Moses followed God's direct order in making the serpent. And implied in the scenario was repentance and faith in God's (temporally) salvific power. Indeed, when Israel would retain this serpent for idolatrous purposes, they did so against God's will and to their own detriment (2 Kings 18:3). The same is true of Elijah's ceremony on Mount Carmel with the prophets of Baal (18:20-35). Just before God's majestic demonstration, Elijah would pray saying: **"O LORD, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Israel, today let it be known that Thou art God in Israel, and that I am Thy servant, and that I have done all these things at thy word. O LORD, answer me, that this people may know that Thou, O LORD, are God"** (1 Kings 18:36-37). Here again, the elaborate ritual was ordered by God, and it is for His glory. Further miracles by Elijah and Elisha may appear at first to use tools in a magickal way. But upon closer inspection, the use of tools is shown to be incidental so that God's power is the true source, and God's glory the ultimate objective (2 Kings 2:14, 21; 4:27, 44 cf. 1 Kings 4:29-32).

Seventh, the only humans to wield miraculous powers in Scripture are Prophets (by office, such as Elijah and Elisha), Jesus with the Apostolic founders of the early church, and those possessed by the spirit of the antichrist (2 Thess. 2:9; Rev. 13:13-14). The initial two categories are too exalting to fit contemporary miracle workers. The latter category is too debasing.

Eighth, the pursuit of miraculous powers is implicitly rejected in Scripture (Acts 8:9-24).

Ninth, while Scripture does portray parallel miracles even using replicated formulas, as stated already, Biblical miracles are more often sporadic and diversified.²³ There is hardly ground for the belief that miracles can be deliberately and consistently replicated through formulaic repetition. God's glory is the objective, not the manipulation of reality; hence, diversity is fitting to demonstrate God's creativity and to keep the focus on God and not His manner.

Tenth, even when the occultist calls on the powers of a deity, their understanding of deity is entirely different from Christian theism. In one sense, occultism tends to depersonalize God as a result of pantheistic theology. God is not the Divine other but is rather a principle or force unifying all of reality into a single divine whole. Nature is, therefore, manipulated mechanically (since god is a force and not a person). The personal God and His glory are ignored, and man gets the glory. But occultism may also err by appealing to a lesser god within a pantheon of gods (such as Hecate or the Horned God). This point is where the Christian and the occultist overlap the most because both often call out to wimpy little gods with little mind for the true depth and greatness of the one true God. Whenever Christians pray to God as if He were a cosmic vending machine, a divine Santa Clause, an insecure CEO, or an old man in the sky—they are praying to a false God.²⁴ Poor theology is idolatry and it sets us in partnership with the world of false religions, the occult included.

In summary, miracles and magick are worlds apart. Obviously, the Christian should not participate in magick. To avoid such practice, one should remember: 1) Who is the source of power, 2) Who is to be glorified in it, 3) how it should confirm God's previous revelation, 4) how the message of truth is the filter and judge over impressive displays, and 5) how tools and instruments are incidental. Otherwise, we may end up trying to manipulate reality

in magickal ways seeking power apart from God and glorifying ourselves. But even when operating within a Biblical definition of miracles, one should still be wary of sensationalism and distraction lest the miracle itself steal God's glory.

Christian Superstition

Superstition can be defined as a magickal belief which has outlived the religion or belief system in which it was originally situated.²⁵ But, the more common usage of the term is in reference to "petty" or "small-scale" magickal practices believed to bring good luck or ward-off bad luck. Some superstitions include knocking on wood, throwing salt over your own shoulder, not opening an umbrella indoors, or wearing the same athletic socks for every game of the playoffs. All manners of "luck" fall somewhere under the category of superstition. For the Biblical Christian, there is no such thing as luck since God is sovereign over everything having determined all that is in time, space, and eternity (Acts 17:26-28; Rom. 11:36; Col. 1:16-17). Therefore, all manners of superstition should be crushed beneath the weight of God's sovereignty.

However, superstition persists. Its appeal is the same as that of magick and all of occultism. The *Encyclopedia of Magic and Superstition* explains this point well saying, **"whenever [one's] modern gods fail ... when his faith wilts and he becomes afraid [then] superstition offers the comforting assurance that it is possible to influence one's fate for good and evil by will-power reinforced with ritual."**²⁶ Christians slip into superstition when they pray rote repetitious prayers, without sincerity, thinking that the words alone can conjure protection or blessings. Sacraments such as communion, last rights, wedding ceremonies, and baptism can likewise be misused to try to force a blessing from God—as if God were obligated to respond to man at all, much less to insincere hearts. The use of icons can also fall under the category of superstition when it is believed that God is obliged to protect or bless people who have a religious tattoo, cross jewelry, statuary, religious art, religious artifact, WWJD bracelet, holy water, anointing oil, the *shema* written above their doorframe (Deut. 6:4-5), or any other ornamental change that does not trace back to a genuine relationship between man and God. Certain phrases are also exploited superstitiously such as "in Jesus' name," or "the blood of Christ" (pleading the blood). These words have no latent power. Even demons can profess verbally that Christ is Lord (James 2:19; Matt. 8:29; Mark 5:7; Luke 8:28). Man can do nothing to force God's hand. And even when man is most faithful, tragedies still may happen because God's purposes on earth are not simply to make man happy, healthy, or wealthy but to make him holy (Job; James 1:2-4).

The world is a scary place. Pain and death loom closely over every difficult intersection, bad meal, slick road, dirty doorknob, stray spark, or natural disaster. Apart from God, man is justified in being terrified of the world. Superstition is like a thin security blanket for those who are missing their Papa. However, the security is false—a hollow comfort. The only true source of security in this threatening world is to know that your soul is secure in the hands of the omnipotent God. Superstitions are tiny wedges between man and his only source of true hope and comfort. They are subtle doubts about God's power; and they threaten to undermine man's fidelity to God, since they appeal to forces apart from God. A strong and tested knowledge of God is like an impenetrable fortress, while superstition is a baby's pacifier. The

—Continued on page 18

Who is the Savior?

A Bible Study Examining One Aspect of the Deity of Christ with the Jehovah's Witnesses

Compiled by D.L. McGehee

Jehovah is the ONLY Savior:

Isaiah 43:11

I am Jehovah, and besides me there is no Savior.

Isaiah 45:21

Make your report and your presentation. Yes, let them consult together in unity. Who has caused this to be heard from long time ago? [Who] has reported it from that very time? Is it not I, Jehovah, besides whom there is no other God; a righteous God and a Savior, there being none excepting me?

Hosea 13:4

But I am Jehovah your God from the land of Egypt, and there was no God except me that you used to know and there was no savior but I.

Jesus is the ONLY Savior:

Acts 4:10-12

let it be known to all of you and to all the people of Israel, that in the name of Jesus Christ the Nazarene, whom you impaled but whom God raised up from the dead, by this one does this man stand here sound in front of you. This is 'the stone that was treated by you builders as of no account that has become the head of the corner.' **Furthermore, there is no salvation in anyone else, for there is not another name under heaven that has been given among men by which we must get saved.**

Jehovah is the Savior:

Psalms 38:22

Do make haste to my assistance, O Jehovah my salvation.

Isaiah 43:3

For I am Jehovah your God, the Holy One of Israel your Savior.

Isaiah 49:26

I, Jehovah, am your Savior

Isaiah 60:16

you will be certain to know that I, Jehovah, am your Savior.

God is our Savior:

Jude 24-25

to [the] only God our Savior

Titus 2:10

not committing theft, but exhibiting good fidelity to the full, so that they may adorn the teaching of our Savior, God, in all things.

Titus 3:4

However, when the kindness and the love for man on the part of our Savior, God, was manifested,

1 Timothy 4:10

because we have rested our hope on a living God, who is a Savior of all sorts of men,

Luke 1:47

and my spirit cannot keep from being overjoyed at God my Savior:

Jesus Christ is our Savior:

Titus 1:4

May there be undeserved kindness and peace from God [the] Father and Christ Jesus our Savior.

Titus 3:6

This [spirit] he poured out richly upon us through Jesus Christ our Savior.

2 Timothy 1:10

but now it has been made clearly evident through the manifestation of our Savior, Christ Jesus, who has abolished death but has shed light upon life and incorruption through the good news,

Titus 2:13

While we wait for the happy hope and glorious manifestation of the great God and of [the] **Savior of us, Christ Jesus,**

2 Peter 1:11

In fact, thus there will be richly supplied to YOU the entrance into the everlasting kingdom of our Lord and **Savior Jesus Christ.**

2 Peter 3:18

No, but go on growing in the undeserved kindness and knowledge **of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.** To him [be] the glory both now and to the day of eternity.

THERE IS ONLY ONE SAVIOR!!!

**If Jehovah is called the Savior,
if God is called the Savior,
if Jesus is called the Savior,**

**THEY ALL MUST BE THE ONE AND ONLY SAVIOR!!! or
there would be three different Saviors!**

NOWHERE IS THE FATHER CALLED "SAVIOR."!!!

Acts 16:30-34

And he brought them outside and said: "Sirs, **what must I do to get saved?**" They said: **"Believe on the Lord Jesus and you will get saved,** you and your household." And they spoke the word of Jehovah to him together with all those in his house. And he took them along in that hour of the night and bathed their stripes; and, one and all, he and his were baptized without delay. And he brought them into his house and set a table before them, and he rejoiced greatly with all his household now that **he had believed God.**

*The Apostles told him to **believe on the Lord Jesus** and they would be saved. He and his household were saved because **they believed God.***

John 6:37

(Jesus is speaking) "Everything the Father gives me will come to me, and **the one that comes to me I will by no means drive away.**"

Jesus, Himself, says very plainly, that the one that comes to Him, he will never drive away. He wants us to come to Him.

Matthew 11:28-30

(Jesus is speaking) **"Come to me, all you who are toiling and loaded down, and I will refresh you.** Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am mild tempered and lowly in heart, and you will find refreshment for you souls. For my yoke is kindly and my load is light."

John 6:45

(Jesus is speaking) **"Everyone that has heard from the Father and has learned comes to me ."**

Jesus doesn't say go to the Father, or Jehovah, or God, He says "come to me."

2 Timothy 3:15-17

(Paul is speaking) and that from infancy you have known **the holy writings, which are able to make you wise for salvation through the faith in connection with Christ Jesus.** All Scripture is inspired of God and beneficial for teaching, for reproving, for setting things straight, for disciplining in righteousness, that the man of God may be fully competent, **completely equipped** for every good work.

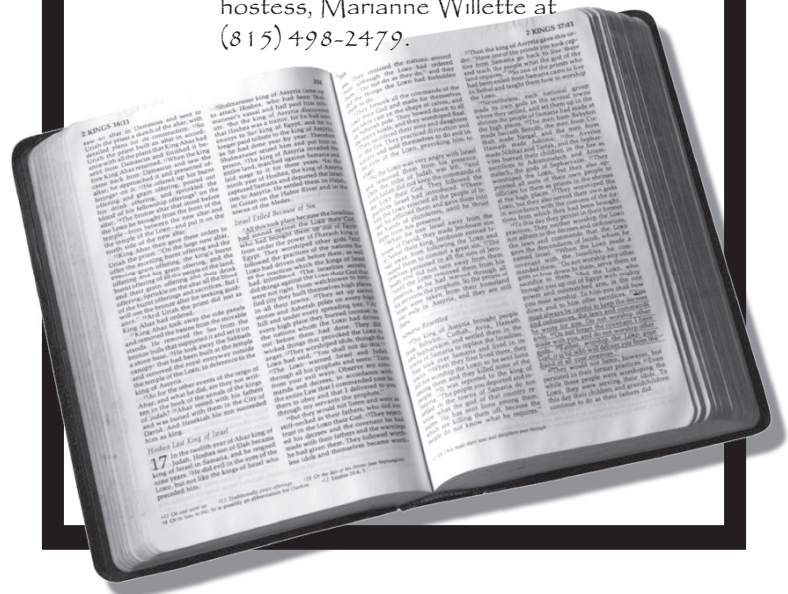
Paul is telling Timothy that the holy writings (at that time this was the Old Testament) makes one wise for salvation (because the Law and Prophets all point to Jesus, see Romans 3:21-22). Also, the Scriptures alone are all that is needed to make the man of God fully competent and completely equipped.

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character of God makes all forms of superstition obsolete.

Entranced with the Spirit

Perhaps, the blurriest line between occultism and Christianity is that of Pneumatology—theology of the Holy Spirit. Deliberate “possession” by the Spirit of God is at least similar to deliberate possession by any other spirit (i.e.: mediumship, demon possession). Biblical examples exist with men such as the Apostle Paul whose spiritual experiences upon hasty analysis seem to be altered states of consciousness and identical to occult trances (Acts 9:1-19; 2 Cor. 12:1-6). Occultism embraces hypnotism, altered states, trances, out-of-body experiences, and astral projection. All of these are dangerously close to some of the practices surrounding the doctrine of the “filling of the Spirit,” which some refer to as a “second blessing” and still others as “baptism of the spirit.”²⁷ To demonstrate this frightening parallel, consider the following example in the evangelical book *Concise Dictionary of the Occult and New Age*. This book defines **“Altered states of consciousness”** as: **“a changed condition of awareness in which the mind seeks to transcend the mundane material reality and enter into ethereal dimensions of time and space.”**²⁸ This definition, coming from evangelicals, should not express any bias *favoring* occultism, yet it defines this notably occult phenomenon in a way that equally suits many ardent evangelicals who seek to escape the mundane material reality and be caught up in a spiritual experience of God. Speaking in tongues, hysterical laughing, passing out, visions, mystical revelations, animal-like behavior, dancing fits, and all manners of erratic, spastic, and “wild” behavior can be found in occult circles and charismatic circles alike.²⁹ It is not enough to say that these features differ widely so that in Christianity they are true while in the occult they are not. Such a demarcation does nothing to help people discern between true Christian practice and errant Christian practice. A person can be a Christian yet unwittingly play the part of an occultist. Therefore, we need to dig deeper. Not everything called “of the Spirit” is Godly or even spiritual. Such a blurry line should be noted by Christians and trod carefully in this regard. Several points can be noted, however, to aid in discerning between these spiritual states.

First, much of what is called “filling of the Spirit” is explainable in natural terms such as self-hypnosis, trances, altered states, subliminal suggestion, and psychosomaticism (psychologically induced states). This point is controversial but, to be fair in our assessment, when a natural explanation is adequate, the spiritual explanation should be questioned that much more. Natural resistances in the mind can be lowered by the use of rote repetition, dim lighting, soft music, soothing speech, sleep deprivation, dehydration, starvation, exhaustion, long hours, and willful participation. When several of these factors are employed, the mind is not at its peak to discern truth and ward off error. A person in that state is highly susceptible to suggestion. Such a person may respond to different kinds of suggestion including:

- 1) Verbal—such as “Do you need to come to Christ?” “Do you want the Holy Ghost tonight?”
- 2) Physical—Pressing on the forehead so that someone is “slain in the spirit,” or touching a sore spot relieving the pain on contact (though not really healing the ailment).
- 3) Visual—Mimicking what is seen on the projector screen, or seen around you.

- 4) Auditory—mimicking noises heard around you (laughing, barking, wailing, etc).

Sadly, a medical hypnotist could boast over how many of our worship services are orchestrated to illicit congregational responses by way of hypnotic suggestion. A long drawn out altar call coupled with 52 rounds of the same chorus, dim lighting, the soft inviting tones of the preacher (“Come to Jesus, He’s waiting for you”), and a congregation hungry for lunch—together these make for a powerfully suggestive combination. The occultist does not have to blush at this knowledge because in that world view, the natural subsumes the supernatural. It’s all divine anyway. If a person can induce a trance-like state at will, by “natural” means, all the better. Such people are adept and skilled for their craft. But, for the Christian, if these experiences can be fully explained through psychology, then they are not of the Spirit. This understanding does not discredit all spiritual experiences set in those kinds of suggestive environments. Will power plays a large part so that a cautious and discerning person is less likely to be taken-in by an entrancing service. Nonetheless, Christian Churches should be aware of these psychological factors and take care not to betray the truth of the Gospel by manipulating their congregations. Nor should the Church slip into the habit of judging spirituality or spiritual success entirely by visible responses such as volume of singing, slayings in the spirit, clapping, claims of healing, outbursts, etc.

Second, even if it is granted that trances are mentioned approvingly in Scripture, they are rare and by no means normative for believers of any dispensation.³⁰ While experiences happen, emotions happen, and strange things can happen, Scriptural truth is the basis of the faith. All else, experiences included, are to be tested by it.

Third, experiences, such as altered states, are never to be the goal in our spiritual pursuits. Scripture has examples of men having little sleep or being hungry having concurrent spiritual experiences (1 Kings 19; Dan. 10; Matt. 4:1-11). But Scripture does not prescribe that people deprive themselves in those ways *so that* they may have an experience, altered state or otherwise. Rather these disciplines should be aimed at expressing repentance, achieving purification, or pleading to God. The effort in fasting or praying long hours is not to achieve a new level of consciousness, but to achieve a new level of holiness.

Fourth, experientialism—the appeal to experience as the sole criterion of truth—is dangerous and objectionable.³¹ Experience does not equal truth and it makes for a poor test of truth as well. A person can have a genuine experience of a lie (Mormonism’s “burning in the bosom”). And a person can encounter the truth with a minimal experience to show for it. Experience is tangential to truth. And experiences can be quite deceptive especially when they overpower our other means of discernment.

Fifth, new levels of consciousness are not suitable pursuits for the Christian. Scripture shows no support for self-hypnosis or deliberately induced trance states. But on a more narrow level, the Christian is not even to pursue God’s will, or a second blessing, or an experience of God, or even holiness so much as they are to pursue Christ. This is a subtle but crucial distinction. The proper object of Christian pursuit is Christ, hence the concept of the “disciple” which means “follower.” A Christian is, by definition, a disciple or “follower” of Christ (see Matthew 28:18-20; Acts 11:26). All other good goals should fall within the pursuit of Christ. Everything worthwhile falls into place within that proper

objective. Jesus would say in Matthew 6:33, ***“But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness; and all these things shall be added to you”*** (see also, Prov. 3:5-6). Some of the most slippery idols are the *things* of God, good things which become enemies of the best by stealing our focus away from God Himself. Of course, it is permissible to speak of “pursuing holiness” or “seeking God’s will” so long as it is understood that we are disciples of the person of Christ, not disciples of holiness or worshippers of God’s will. When these secondary issues take main stage, the Christian risks worshipping a “holier self” or a more “Spirit-filled life” rather than worshipping God. We are to seek spiritual transformation and filling of the Spirit not as ends in themselves, so that we can boast in ourselves, but rather as a means to better follow after Christ as sanctified vessels for His glory and service.

Sixth, it bears repeating that, as with meditation, clearing the mind, and leaving oneself open and volitionally pliable is spiritual suicide. Trance states usually include eastern meditation.

Seventh, the validity of certain “charismatic” phenomena should be questioned, since they have no Biblical support either in precedent, principle, or teaching. Examples include animal noises, pew jumping, and uncontrollable laughter. While these are attributed to the Holy Spirit, the normative witness of the Holy Spirit throughout Scripture and Church history defies such an explanation. These phenomena are easily faked and are more readily attributable to hypnotic suggestion. I am not saying that all such cases are fake, or that the Holy Spirit cannot manifest Himself in odd ways. But I am saying that indiscriminant acceptance of all things called “spiritual” is an insult to Christian intellect and to the very wisdom we are supposed to have through the Spirit (John 14:17; 16:13).

In summary, the danger about the doctrine of the Holy Spirit is that if we do not adhere closely to Scripture in our theology and practice, we risk misrepresenting the ministry of the Holy Spirit and, in turn, under its banner excusing all different manners of experientialism, sensationalism, irrationalism, and ultimately occultism.

Conclusion

Hopefully, you have seen in this survey that occult beliefs and practices are sneaky and pervasive, not always draped in black cloaks and pentagrams. Occultism is not so much an organized religion distinct in all its ways from Christendom, but rather it is a low level of human spirituality to which we sink when we lack the patience and humility to press on for the genuine article in Christ. Occultism persists within us feeding on the same self-exaltation that spoiled Adam and Eve (Gen. 3). It sprouts from there like a weed on our Christian faith and bears wicked fruit by corrupting our practices. Fortunately, a primary focus on Christ, a strong mind, a loyal heart, a little humility and patience, a good grasp of Scripture, and maybe a little Christian accountability are sufficient tools to prevent the slide into occult Christianity. ☐



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Endnotes

1. Since the installment of Part 1 of this article, I have come to realize the phrase “Christian Occultism” may, on the surface, seem like a contradiction in terms. While that article did express how a Christian can have some beliefs consistent with an occult world view, I did not there broach the question of whether a Christian can be an occultist in any formal sense. Clearly there is a marked conflict between Christianity and occultism so that one cannot be consistently both. Christianity is exclusive and permits no contradictory religious belief be it from a cult, world religion, philosophy, or the occult (Acts 4:12; John 14:6). However, the reverse of that scenario, that an occultist can be Christian, would be openly espoused within many occult circles such as in New Age philosophies, the mind sciences, and most any group whose theology is sampled primarily from the pluralistic stream of Eastern philosophy. The occultist coming from a pluralistic world view may say that “all religions are valid.” And since his occultism takes precedence, he may see no conflict between being in the occult and claiming Christianity. Whatever exclusivity Christianity holds will be reinterpreted through a pluralistic filter, and he will thus make room to claim both (albeit inconsistent with respect to Christianity). However, the key question here is not whether an occultist can claim Christianity, but whether a true Christian can knowingly and deliberately be an occultist. To answer this question, permit me one analogy. Can a living person be dead? A living person may die, and a dead person can, theoretically, be resurrected. But a person cannot be both alive and dead in the same sense at the same time. A live person can, however, act as if they were dead. Likewise a Christian cannot be anything but Christian, for as soon as they are adopted into God’s family through faith in Christ (Eph. 1:9; 2:8), they are a new creation in Christ, the old has gone and the new has come (2 Cor. 5:17; Gal. 6:15). The former slavery to sin is no longer binding (John 8:34-36). But just as a freed slave may still be in the habit of acting like a slave, so a person freed from occultism by their faith in Christ may still act like an occultist. Occultism no longer defines them, but they do struggle with occult practice. By this understanding it is necessary to distinguish between being an occultist and practicing occultism. As I believe man is more than what man does, I likewise believe that when a Christian practices occultism that is not enough to make them an occultist. Those practices may have been enough, before salvation, to define that person as an occultist. The occultism lays claim to the spiritual void in his heart and life so that, by default, he can rightfully be called an occultist. But after salvation, their essence is defined by relationship with Christ, their soul is claimed and nothing else can lay claim to that soul (John 10:28-29). With this understanding, a Christian cannot be an occultist though they may play the part (cf. Rom. 7:14-25). Admittedly, this qualified speech of “an occultist” versus “a Christian who practices occultism” may be impractical and pedantic at times, the basic idea is nonetheless indispensable as it addresses the whole issue of sanctification and relates to any category of human sinfulness be it homosexuality (Can a Christian be gay?), lying, greed, gluttony, murder, or any other pet sin we may harbor.

2. I owe this observation on occult counterfeits to Dr. Richard Howe formerly of Southern Evangelical Seminary and currently a writer for Christian Research Institute.

3. Scripture is clear on the importance of the practice of prayer. See, Matt. 6:5-13; Luke 18:1-14; 1 Thess. 5:17; 1 Tim. 2:8; James 5:13-18.

4. Ecclesiastes 5:1-2 illustrates how man should approach God, ***“Guard your steps when you go to the house of God. Go near to listen rather than to offer the sacrifice of fools, who do not know that they do wrong. Do not be quick with your mouth, do not be hasty in your heart to utter anything before God. God is in heaven and you are on earth, so let your words be few.”*** Clearly man is the lesser vessel and God the greater. Man’s prayers do not conjure internal human powers. Instead, man is unworthily calling upon God’s in His abundance.

5. Dorothy Bomar and Robert A. Bradley, *Psychic Phenomena*. 4th printing. (New York: Paperback, 1972), 147.

6. The proper term for this kind of mental magick is “hermetic magick” wherein the belief is that one can manipulate one’s world through concentration and directing mental energies. Amber K. *True Magick: A Beginner’s Guide* [9th printing] (St. Paul, MN: Llewellyn Publications, 1999), 230.

7. Some may argue that an angel serves a mediating position in Revelation 8:3-5 relaying prayers to God. However, this event is made possible only because of the intercessory role of the Lamb of God (Jesus Christ) in Revelation 5:1-10. Second, there is no indication that angel was ever addressed in any of those prayers. Third, just because an angel served a utilitarian role in relaying these prayers does not mean he serves in the

—Continued on page 20

"Occult" Endnotes Continued from page 19

relational mediation of prayers. In other words, the angel may serve only as a tool used by the real middle man. Fourth, this scene in Revelation, while communicating a literal event, is communicating it in such colorful and, at points, metaphorical narrative that it is difficult (if not impossible) to squeeze a reliable theology of non-divine mediation from these few verses. Narrative, being descriptive, should be seen as the application of Biblical truth rather than as a simple and direct prescription. This fact is further complicated by the question of how literal these colorful images are to be understood as they apply to actual eschatological events (last days). One can hardly say, from this single passage, that man is to pray either to non-divine characters or that non-divine characters serve in a truly mediatorial role. And lastly, how God chooses to deal with prayers He has received is His prerogative not ours, especially when our directive in prayer is to aim it directly at God (Matt. 6:9).

8. The term "supernormal" is used here instead of "supernatural" to refer to activity that is "beyond normal." Many occultists object to the term "supernatural" since it implies a distinction from nature contrary to the generally held view in occultism that god is all there is, with no ultimate distinction in "himself." Nature encompasses all there is so supernature is defined out of existence.

9. Here we find a teaching application of Matthew 12:43-45 where Jesus was illustrating the dangers of Pharisaic laws about purity. Jesus gives the story of a man who cleaned out his house after being exorcised of a demon. Yet because he did not fill or guard the house, his house cleaning was merely preparation for a bigger crowd of evil guests. Furthermore, Scripture instructs us to fill our minds with the things of God (Col. 3:2; Phil. 4:8-9) and to "always be prepared" (1-Pet. 3:15).

10. First, Scripture offers no examples of believers being demon possessed. Second, Scripture nowhere teaches explicitly that believers can be possessed. Third, the security of salvation suggests that God guards His own against any such ploy of Satan (John 10:28; Rom. 8:36-39). And fourth, Jesus says that "a house divided will fall" thus indicating that He does not cohabitate in man along with demons (Matt. 12:25-29).

11. Sadly, church history abounds with Christian scholars espousing an allegorical method of interpretation. Origen is perhaps the most notorious of these. But such trusted Church fathers as Saint Augustine and Martin Luther are equally guilty of permitting an unanchored allegorical interpretation. While an allegorical method is not directly occult, it leaves no defense against occult deviation. Only a consistently and literally applied historical-grammatical interpretive method 1) allows for objective interpretation, 2) does justice to the text, and 3) provides a defense against occult corruptions such as mystical revelatory reading and metaphysical allegorism (IE: Charles Fillmore's *Metaphysical Bible Dictionary*). For more on the issue of objectivity see Thomas Howe, *Objectivity in Biblical Interpretation* (Altamonte Springs, FL: Advantage, 2005).

12. My personal opinion is that God can communicate however He so wants, but that dreams and visions do not occur today in the sense of apostolic gifts. The role and status of the apostle has become obsolete, and thus, the need for apostolic gifts to confirm such status is a moot point. If any dream or vision were still to occur today, it may yet be an isolated dream or vision from God not indicating any particular spiritual gifting. But it is more likely explainable in terms of psychology or demonism. For more on this perspective as it relates to charismatic issues, see John MacArthur Jr. *Charismatic Chaos* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992). While I do not agree with or approve of all that MacArthur says in that book, I do agree with him in this limited regard. My cessationist views and my naming of certain charismatic gifts (apostolic gifting, speaking in tongues, prophecy, miraculous confirmations, etc) may seem stilted. But the effort is not at all to "bash" charismatics. The effort is rather to highlight and guard against certain trouble spots within the whole of Christendom where Charismatic, liberal, conservative, or evangelical, Catholic, Presbyterian, or Baptist alike may find themselves slipping into occultism. If certain denominations have more potential hot spots, then they should be that much more Biblical and Godly to guard against the abuse and misuse of those practices. The use of icons within Catholicism is a potential pitfall into occult superstition and magickal thinking. Presbyterian views on the baptism of infants can depersonalize the relationship of saving faith thus permitting one step toward the occult tendency to depersonalize God. At the same time it may border on idolatry with the introduction of a mediator other than Christ, namely, the faithful parents. Likewise Baptists may err in occult Bible Study, together with occult prayer and meditation. No denomination is exempt. The occult urge is a deeply human tendency that respects no denominational lines.

13. Such qualifications are necessary because not all occultists ascribe to pantheism. But pantheistic tones are prevalent in the tapestry of occult belief. Margot Adler in describing modern paganism would say, "there are some basic beliefs that most [pagans] share: The world is holy, Nature is Holy. The Body is Holy ... You are Holy ... Thou art God. Divinity is imminent in all nature. It is as much within you as without." Margot Adler, *Drawing Down the Moon* (Beacon, Massachusetts: Beacon Press, 1986), ix. Kevin Logan agrees in his assessment saying that pantheism, which he terms "one-ism," is "the first step into witchcraft, Satanism and the Occult." *Satanism and the Occult* (Eastbourne, East Sussex (England): Kingsway Publications, 1994), 1994. And with the New Age movement, Marilyn Ferguson, David Spangler, and Shirley Maclaine all agree on this belief in pantheism. Marilyn Ferguson, *The Aquarian Conspiracy* (Los Angeles: J.P. Tarcher, 1980), 100-101; David Spangler, *Revelation: The Birth of a New Age* (Findhorn, Scotland: Findhorn, 1978), 110, 121; Shirley Maclaine, *Out on a Limb* (New York: Bantam, 1983), 347.

14. Norman Geisler, *Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), 480-87. For an elaborated defense and explanation of miracles, see Geisler's *Miracles and the Modern Mind* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992).

15. This point is bolstered when one holds to a secessionist view of the apostolic gifts wherein the prophetic practices of the Church such as those spoken of in 1 Cor. 13-14 are addressed to the church within the first century apostolic era and became moot after that point. But, even if one understands dreams and visions to be a valid means of revelation today, those revelations are to be tested across Scripture and should never take precedence over Scripture. Scripture in its prescriptions, its principles, and its precedents, provides the filter through which we should strain any and all other claimants to knowledge or wisdom. For a good statement of the nature and sufficiency of Scripture, see *The Chicago Statement of Biblical Inerrancy*. Chicago: 1978. Quoted in: *Into Thy Word Ministries [Web site]*. <http://www.christianity.com/partner/Article_Display_Page/0,,PTID34418|CHID137699|CID1418130,00.html>(Pasadena, CA: Into Thy Word Ministries, 1998).

16. See the respective chapters on prophecy in John MacArthur's *Charismatic Chaos* and Hank Hanegraaff's *Counterfeit Revival*. exp. and upd. (Nashville: Word, 2001), 85.

17. For example, Hank Hanegraaff reports on one "prophet" who was given "by God" the verse Isaiah 11:11 which he would later discover to not be a directive toward Scripture but rather a future football record, 11 wins, 1 loss, and 1 tie, IE: 11-1-1. Hank Hanegraaff 2001, 85. Such a revelation hardly carries the weight and import of Biblical prophecies which gave spiritual direction, were directed at achieving change in the present, and were notably glorifying to God.

18. Job 42:2; Gen. 1:1; Ex. 3-4; 1 Kings 17:1 cf. 18:1; 17:17-24; Acts 17:25.

19. For a critique of pantheism, panentheism, and polytheism see their respective sections in Geisler, *Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics*; Norman Geisler and William D. Watkins, *Worlds Apart: A Handbook on World Views* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1989); and James Sire, *The Universe Next Door* (Downer's Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1988).

20. Geisler, 1999, 461-62.

21. For defenses of the Bible see F. F. Bruce, *The New Testament Documents: Are They Reliable?* 6th ed. (Grand Rapids, MI and Downer's Grove, IL: Eerdmans, and Intervarsity [Joint published], 1981); and Walter C. Kaiser, *The Old Testament Documents: Are They Reliable and Relevant?* (Downer's Grove, IL: Intervarsity, 2001). For defenses of Creationism see William Dembski and James M. Kusner, eds., *Signs of Intelligence* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2001); John F. Ashton, *In Six Days* (Green Forest, AR: Master Books, 2001); and Michael J. Behe, *Darwin's Black Box* (New York: The Free Press, 1996). For defenses of the Resurrection see Gary Habermas, *The Resurrection of Jesus: An Apologetic* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980) and *The Risen Jesus and the Future Hope* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowan & Littlefield, 2003); William Lane Craig, *Assessing the New Testament Evidence for the Historicity of the Resurrection of Jesus* (Lewiston, NY: Mellen, 1989).

22. In the strictest sense, angels and demons can be included in nature since they are created things. But for convenience sake, they are here regarded as supernatural because they are immaterial spirit beings unproven by empirical observation.

23. Ex. 17:5-6; Num. 20; 10; 2 Kings 2:8, 14; Matt. 14:13-21; 15:32-38

24. Some good books on Theology Proper to expand your view of God include Stephen Charnock, *The Attributes of God* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1958); Norman Geisler, *Systematic Theology Vol. 2: God Creation*.

(Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003); Arthur W. Pink, *The Nature of God* (Chicago: Moody, 1999); J.B. Philips, *Your God is Too Small* 8th ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1968); A.W. Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1961).

25. *Encyclopedia of Magic and Superstition* (New York: Crescent Books, 1974), 23.

26. *Ibid.*

27. The phrase "second blessing" does not appear in the New Testament. The other two do appear, though they are theologically distinct. Baptism of the Spirit is the spiritual reality symbolized by water baptism and is not necessarily related to spiritual gifts such as the gift of tongues. It is common to all believers and can equally be called "salvation" or being "born again" (Matt. 3:11; Mark 1:8; Luke 3:16; John 1:33; Acts 1:5; 11:16; 1 Cor. 12:13). The "filling of the Spirit" refers to a specific empowerment for proclamation but can also refer to the Holy Spirit's filling believers with His character (Luke 1:15, 41, 67; 4:1, 14; Acts 2:2, 14; 4:8, 31; 6:3, 5; 7:55, 6:10; 9:15-17; 11:24; 13:9, 48-53; Eph. 5:1-4; 18, 15-17). Only once are believers commanded to be filled by the Spirit, and this reference explains what it means by that phrase. It says, "*Do not get drunk with wine, for that is dissipation, but be filled with the Spirit, speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody with your heart to the Lord; always giving thanks for all things in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ to God, even the Father;*" (Eph. 5:18-20, emphasis mine). The altered states typifying much belief and practice about these Biblical phrases do not suit their Biblical meanings. Barry Leventhal, *New Testament 1: The Gospels and Acts* [class notes] (Charlotte, NC: Southern Evangelical Seminary, 2002), 168-73.

28. Lardie, Lioy, and Ingram 2000, 17. The editors express their evangelical stance clearly in the preface and appendices (9-10; 294-301).

29. Richard Cavendish, ed. *Man, Myth and Magic: An Illustrated Encyclopedia of the Supernatural*. Vol. 1 (New York: Marshall Cavendish Corp., 1970). 129-33.

30. It is questionable whether Scripture portrays any believers experiencing genuine trance states. Dreams, visions, induced sleep, prophetic oracles, and the filling of the Spirit are all distinct from trance states in their own respective ways; but the occult claims all of these phenomena too. And the consideration of these issues overlaps significantly in their relation to trance states. Therefore, for the sake of convenience, they will all be addressed in this paper under the broad (but limiting) category of trance/altered states.

31. Craig S. Hawkins, "The Epistemological Inadequacies of Experientialism as a Sufficient Basis for a Worldview" [Online] (Santa Ana, CA: Apologetics in Ministry, 2000), available at <<http://www.apologeticsinfo.org/papers/experientialism.html>> accessed May 12, 2005.

EVENTS CALENDAR

October 14-16

Witnesses Now For Jesus Convention

New Ringgold, PA

For info contact Joan Cetnar @ (610) 381-3661

October 30

Halloween: Christian? Pagan? Does it matter?

Fellowship Community Church

130 Shawnee Drive

Carol Stream, IL

(630) 668-5400

8:20 & 10:45 AM

November 2

A Closer Look at Islam - Part 1

Calvary Memorial Church

931 Lake Street

Oak Park, IL

(708) 386-3900

7:00 PM

November 9

A Closer Look at Islam - Part 2

Calvary Memorial Church

931 Lake Street

Oak Park, IL

(708) 386-3900

7:00 PM

November 16

A Closer Look at Islam - Part 3

Calvary Memorial Church

931 Lake St.

Oak Park, IL

(708) 386-3900

7:00 PM

February 16-20

Various topics

Calvary Chapel

901 E. Best St.

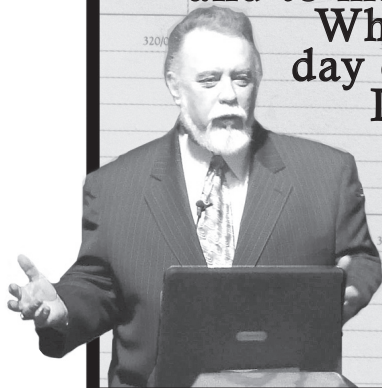
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“Sound” Continued from page 5

tion of Wesley’s open-air meetings, Paul’s discussion in the Ephesus lecture hall, or Jesus’ hillside parables.¹⁸

The result of this neglect of education is that few staff members have substantial Christian knowledge.²⁰ Willow Creek does hold strongly that Christianity is true:

Although pragmatically arguing that Christianity is true, Willow Creek has devalued the place of the mind in the Christian life.²¹

To date, there has been no response to our letter. Again, there are other examples that could be given, but in the majority of cases, in our various dealings with small-group leaders and staff at Willow Creek, the lack of basic theological understanding, basic defense of essential doctrines and discernment is rather glaring. This is not surprising. Followers tend to adopt the attitudes and tendencies of the leaders they follow. If evangelism and social action are the primary focus of the church or its leaders, all who serve tend to get in line with that emphasis and disregard what the leadership regards as unimportant. As effective as the church can be in the spiritual “birthing” of many, it has not been very effective in growing them up to maturity.

Discernment: The Immune System of the Body

Those members of the body which we deem less honorable, on these we bestow abundant honor, and our unseemly members come to have more abundant seemliness. (1 Corinthians 12:23)

Pastor G. Richard Fisher equates discernment with the immune system of the body. It is a useful analogy. How does the immune system work?

The immune system is a complex network of cells and chemicals. Its mission is to protect us against foreign organisms and substances. The cells in the immune system have the ability to recognize something as either self or invader, and they try to get rid of anything that is invader. Many different kinds of cells, and hundreds of different chemicals, must be coordinated for the immune system to function smoothly.²³

This is fairly straight forward and easy to understand. The immune system produces antibodies to fight off invaders which should not be in the body; and when it is functioning properly, it is vital to protecting the body from sickness and potential death. If the immune system becomes weak or compromised, the health of the body is in jeopardy, such as in the case of HIV:

The immune system can mount a variety of responses to attack specific invader organisms. One of those responses is coordinated by the T-helper cell (also known as the T4 cell), which acts as a kind of orchestra conductor. The T-helper cell tells other cells what to do when this response is triggered. We are interested in this immune response because it is the one that is most disrupted by HIV infection of the T-cells. As HIV succeeds in destroying more and more of these important cells, the ability to fight off some other infections gradually declines. If the “coordinator” of the process, the T-helper cell, is no longer functioning, other blood cells cannot perform their functions, leaving the body open to attack by opportunistic infections.²⁴

Autoimmune Response—Reaction of the body against one or some of its own tissues that are perceived as foreign substances resulting in the production of antibodies against that tissue.²⁵

For reasons the medical professionals haven’t been able to

figure out as yet, the immune system can overreact and attack and kill the very cells it is supposed to be protecting. In writing about a woman who has suffered greatly with an immune system that has turned on her, Andrew Pollack states:

The attack was the equivalent of friendly fire. Ms. Perez has lupus and hemolytic anemia. Both are autoimmune diseases, in which the person’s immune system, meant to defend against germs instead directs its fury against the person’s own tissues.²⁶

In the “4 E’s”, Education is the parent of Discernment. Like the immune system, discernment in local churches and parachurch discernment ministries focus on safeguarding, defending and teaching the essentials of the faith to protect the body. Without discernment, the body could develop “spiritual AIDS” (Acquired Ignorance of the Doctrines of Scripture) and become vulnerable to any false teacher or heresy that comes along. We believe this is the state of the church today. Apologists and discernment ministries train and equip believers in how to understand the faith, evaluate other faith claims, and evangelize those in false religious movements. They are in many quarters seen as “unseemly members,” but like the immune system, they play a vital role in the spiritual health of the Body of Christ. Some believers and churches do see the value of what apologists and those in discernment do and look to them to track dangers which creep into the Body. We at MCOI are grateful for the churches, pastors, and individuals who view this ministry as not only a valuable resource and essential part of the body, but also as a mission which they faithfully support with their prayers, time and/or finances.

On the flip side, those in discernment are considered by some to be “high maintenance” or “divisive,” and certainly can be perceived that way because of their concern with truth, proper exegesis, hermeneutics, and application. Apologists generally have little patience for false teachers and false teachings. Many of those who are involved in discernment and apologetics enjoy arguing—will argue at the drop of a hat and at times will gladly drop the hat. That can be a good thing but it can also be detrimental when it goes awry.

In all honesty, there is a dark side to apologetics and apologists that sometimes comes to the fore. At times, with good intentions, they may overreact or overstate the case, thereby causing damage to the body of believers. Even worse, apologists have been known to sometimes twist things or make egregious leaps of logic in order to better “nail” the false teacher, or someone who they perceive to be a false teacher. Recently, for example, I have read a book that implied that Rick Warren is a New Ager, based upon the fact that he uses the word “purpose,” a word that Lord Maitreya, a New Age false Christ, uses frequently in his writings. And???? In Scripture, God Himself uses the word purpose—is He then a New Ager? This type of faulty logic, besides casting unfair aspersions upon Warren, only does damage to the credibility of the apologist, enough so that any valid points that he makes will be lost on the reader. As discussed earlier, there are serious problems with Rick Warren but that does not mean that his reputation should be smeared with untrue allegations.

Apologists have been known to even attack other apologists, “eating their own,” happily destroying (or trying to destroy) other discernment ministries and ministers in their proud zeal to show themselves as “right,” and everyone else wrong. Some people are not satisfied being a tool in God’s service, but seemingly long to be the Pope. Or a pope, at any rate. Since many of

them are gifted debaters, they can be quite destructive at times. We do well to remember that one can win an argument, or shut down (or shout down) their opponent, but still be dead wrong.

As we see it, this type of behavior just shows that apologists are not immune to Spiritual Myopia. We can become so focused on our calling to “root out” false teaching and defend the faith, that we can perhaps justify the means by the end we are seeking to achieve, and run over others in the process. And sometimes we are a bit short on tact, to put it mildly. Christians are to “speak the truth in love,” but sometimes the love part gets lost in the shuffle. We are guilty of it at times ourselves. In the summer of 2003 we did an article on the book *Wild at Heart* by John Eldridge. The article was titled, “Wildly Unbiblical,” which the book demonstrably is. Near the end of the article we wrote:


It is rather ironic that John Eldridge's late, co-author Brent Curtis (The Sacred Romance) fell off a cliff several years ago while mountain climbing, Curtis was being "wild at heart" and left a wife and two boys.²⁷

Within a few days of the release of the Journal, Judson Poling from Willow Creek, someone who I like and respect, contacted me and one of the issues he brought up was this statement. A few days later my son, Lee, who is passionate in serving God, brought to my attention that he was likewise grieved at this line. We spent a fair amount of time in emotional wrangling, but both my son and Judson were right. The statement I made was not germane to the article. It was just mean. Many people suffer losses in a whole variety of circumstances, and speaking of this tragedy in this flippant way was unnecessarily hurtful and unfair to the family which suffered this great loss. For that I am sorry and feel the need to state that publicly. The price that is paid as a result of these sorts of overstatements or mean statements is a loss of credibility. Truth is important but the Apostle Peter framed it well, “...but sanctify Christ in our hearts, always being ready to make a defense to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you, yet with gentleness and reverence;” (1 Peter 3:15). Gentleness and reverence... Apologists must say hard things at times but it can be done as gently as possible, being mindful that there is a real person on the other end of what is being said.

What Is The Answer?

The answer is fairly easy to understand but perhaps difficult to implement. First, fight Spiritual Myopia. Physical nearsightedness cannot be prevented, but it can be corrected with the aid of glasses or surgery. So too, we need to listen to others and be correctable. Second, as the Apostle Paul dealt with the Spiritual Myopia in Corinth he demonstrated that each of the gifts or callings are necessary to the overall health and functioning of the body. Third, and perhaps most important, he demonstrates how love acts in chapter 13. It matters little if we are doing the right things if we are doing them for the wrong motives with bad attitudes. The purpose of discernment and education is to protect the body from false teachers and prepare believers to do the work of ministry and evangelism. It is also core to everything else which we as believers do. What we believe informs how we think, what we give priority to, and motivates us to live as we should. There is more in Scripture on the topic of doctrinal teaching, and guarding the flock from false prophets and false teachers than nearly any other subject. Is that because it is more important than other areas of the Christian life, or is it simply more easily forgotten or

disregarded? The purpose of education in the church is to train the body to think biblically. Addressing the AIDS pandemic may be important but I would suggest the spiritual AIDS pandemic is at least if not more important, because of the eternal consequences. The purpose of edification in the church is to develop close relationships with other believers and God in a community of believers where we can “know and be known.” All of this prepares us to evangelize those outside who need to hear the gospel because we love them, weep over them and desire to see them redeemed. To quote Pastor Bill Hybel’s theme statement, “People matter to God.” They should also matter to us.

We practice empathy by feeding the poor, binding up the wounded, and caring for the sick and imprisoned, out of a grateful heart because we have been given so much. Pastors and church leaders, allow those in your charge to fan the flames of what God has called them to do. God may actually lead the church in a direction different than the one you had planned, but the trip is worth it. This includes everyone—men, women, married, single, college students, teenagers, and even children. Educate them, equip them, protect them and watch them take ownership as they carry out their passion in the areas of Education, Edification, Evangelism and Empathy. As everyone becomes so busy trying to out serve the others, the opportunity to argue over who is more important will vanish. 

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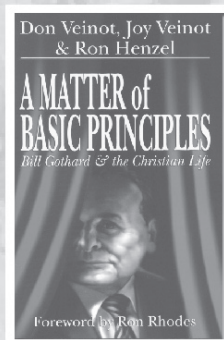
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