

# The Presbyterian Guardian



**SPECIAL ISSUE**



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# Ignorance of the gospel: NO EXCUSE?

J. Al LaCour

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What is the destiny of the person who's never heard of Jesus Christ? Could God, being aware of a man's ignorance of the Christian gospel, hold him accountable for what he has not heard? Will God accept the man who sincerely seeks after him, though in his own way? Is Jesus the only way to God?

You may have just such questions. And they are weighty questions that must be answered, for the stakes are high. The Christian asserts that human life has great worth in God's sight. Even those who proclaim that "God is dead" would not dismiss human life as insignificant. If every human life has value, these questions must be answered.

## Answers that question

In turning to the Scriptures for help, you may find yourself both being answered and questioned on deep and profound levels. The Scripture does give an adequate answer to a genuine concern for one's fellow man. No textbook answer here—these are life and death matters. No uncertainty either—Scripture speaks with the authority of the living God.

But you may find God also questioning you and your motives in asking these questions. You may discover previously unexamined assumptions, hidden behind your questions, now coming under divine challenge. "For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and

spirit, of joints and marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart" (Hebrews 4:12).

Or, we may say with Martin Luther that God's Word is comparable to a lion: you must approach it on its own terms. The premises behind your otherwise legitimate-sounding question may be those with which Scripture would take exception. Let's examine some of these possible assumptions that are often behind such questions and see where God would show them to be erroneous.

## The "ignorant native"

You will search the Scriptures in vain to find any description of man in a blissful state of ignorance. Not even in the garden of Eden do we find a paradise characterized by ignorant unawareness of the living God. No portrait is to be found of an unbelieving soul whose naivete was first shattered and then decision demanded of him by introducing the gospel of Christ. In the Scriptures, ignorance is not bliss, for there are none unaware of the living God.

What of those who've never heard the gospel? Scripture replies that it is not yet speaking of "the gospel." The issue first to be dealt with is that of the "ignorant native." And in Scripture there is, plainly enough, no allowance for any "unaware" creature under heaven.

Even among those who have never heard the name of Jesus Christ from human lips, there are none who are so unaware of the knowledge of God that they would, at best, be "duped" into hell. "The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims His handiwork. Day to day pours forth speech, and night to night declares knowledge. . . . Their voice is not heard, yet their voice goes out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world" (Psalm 19:1-4). There is no silent corner of creation where any creature might remain unaware, where he might be ignorant of the knowledge of God.

## The "convinced atheist"

What of the one who denies God altogether? How can it be said that he

knows God?

The Scripture never addresses "theoretical atheism." The Bible's premise is: "In the beginning, God." There is nothing in it of theoretical proofs of God, nothing of Aristotle's "five ways." The Bible treats the existence and activity of the living God, the Creator of all, as a self-evident truth.

Even if man could close his eyes to the fact that God "has made everything beautiful in its time" and could retreat into himself, even then he would be confronted with God, for "also He has put eternity into man's mind" (Ecclesiastes 3:11). The creature, even in withdrawing into himself, is still awed by his Creator.

The Bible does address the "practical atheist," the one who lives *as if* God did not exist. This is utter folly: "The fool says in his heart, 'There is no God'" (Psalm 14:1). Not only is this folly, it is a denial of reality. All men know in the depths of their God-created beings that

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there is a God, no matter how "rational" and "consistent" one's atheism may appear to be. At rock bottom, every man knows God:

"What can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. Ever since the creation of the world his invisible nature, namely, his eternal power and deity, has been clearly perceived in the things that have been made" (Romans 1:19, 20).

Certainly it is curious that, while "practical atheism" (living in contradiction to this universally revealed knowledge of God) abounds in all cultures, "theoretical atheism" exists mostly in cultures that are quite aware of a Christian gospel. Have you ever heard of an instance of a Christian missionary meeting an "ignorant native" who espoused a consistent atheism as his philo-

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ophy of life? The convinced atheist is in dissenting reaction to Christian theism; few if any are "ignorant" of the Christian message.

### The "sincere seeker"

You may also be assuming that "all men seek after God." You might ask, Would not God accept those who, apart from hearing of Jesus Christ, respond sincerely to the "light from creation" that they do have? Did not even Paul tell the Athenians that "what therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you" (Acts 17:23)?

But a closer look at Scripture presents an altogether different view. This same Paul, speaking to the Lycaonians, urged, "You should turn from these *vain* things to a living God who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and all that is in them" (Acts 14:16). And the psalmist who speaks of the fool in his atheism goes on to include all: "The Lord looks down from heaven upon the children of men, to see if there are any that act wisely, that seek after God. They have all gone astray, they are all alike corrupt; there is none that does good, no, not one" (Psalm 14:2, 3).

The search for the "sincere seeker" in Scripture is just as unfruitful as the search for the "ignorant native." And there is the power of self-delusion even in the "sincere" man who turns out to be "sincerely wrong." Matters of right and wrong, truth and untruth, do not ultimately fall to us as creatures to decide. Nor are we, at this point, comparing the truth-claims of differing religions; we are asking whether any "seek after God." Again, Scripture gives an emphatically negative response.

### The truth suppressor

How does man the creature respond to the universally revealed knowledge of God his Creator? He represses it, holds it under, tries to smother it. "The wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of men, who by their wickedness suppress the truth" (Romans 1:18).

But what, you might object, of the great variety of religions in the world? Are they not evidence that men are indeed responding to the revealed knowledge of God and responding positively in

a universal quest after God? God's answer is "yes" and "no."

Yes, men everywhere are responding to the universally revealed knowledge of God. The existence of many religions does point to a general "religious consciousness" that results when man confronts himself and the rest of the creation, all of which speak emphatically of the Creator. All men are responding.

But, *no*, maintains the Scripture; *none* are responding *positively*. "Although they knew God, they did not honor Him as God or give thanks to Him, but they became futile in their thinking and their senseless minds were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man or birds or animals or reptiles" (Romans 1:21-23).

Now you may understand why Paul told the Lycaonians to "turn from these vain things to a living God," and to the philosophical Athenians that "we ought not to think that the Deity is like gold, or silver, or stone, a representation by the

## SPECIAL ISSUE

The articles presented in this month's *Guardian* were prepared as class papers for the course in Apologetics taught by Professor Harvie M. Conn at Westminster Theological Seminary.

How do you answer the arguments against the Christian faith? That is what these papers were doing. We hope you find them helpful for yourself or for a friend who may need to see these answers to some of the common objections to the truths of Scripture.

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art and imagination of man" (Acts 17:29).

Even as atheism is a "dissenting reaction" to the God of revelation, so men everywhere respond to God's universal revelation, not positively, but by distorting that knowledge and by fabricating "gods" and "philosophies" of their own imaginations. In this perspective, even atheism is a religion.

You may have noticed that this scriptural teaching runs counter to a view commonly held, that all religions are essentially evolving toward truth in a universal quest and sincere search for God. But Scripture indicates that all such "quests" are the product of the imaginations of men. As such, they are not religions of the Creator God who has revealed himself, but are "creations" of the creature who exalts himself.

Many missionaries have found that almost every culture or tribe has a clear sense of the existence of one Supreme Being to whom all other things are subject. But this Supreme Being is given very little attention in the rituals of most primitive religions. Rather than seeing this as evidence of a universal questing for God, as commonly supposed, it would seem rather to corroborate what Scripture so plainly asserts: man is in flight from God and his religious consciousness only reflects his flight.

Man has abandoned the true God, even though he knows him, in order to pursue . . . what?

### An "innocent victim"?

Perhaps you've thought it would be unjust for God to condemn a man who has never been in a situation where he might respond positively to him. Many have conceived their questions on the destiny of man in these terms.

But Scripture would here once again challenge any suggestion of "injustice" or "unfairness" in God. It would indeed

(Continued on page 10.)



## Which Circle Is Yours?

Thomas R. Wagner

Many college students today are annoyed with their "fundamentalist" acquaintances on campus. "Why are they oblivious to what is obvious, that science demolished their fairy tales long ago?" "Are they really serious in holding to such archaic and faulty beliefs?"

But those enlightened by the modern age forget that much of what they hold as unassailably true is also based upon conviction. Take the issue about miracles, for instance. This could be a typical dialog with a Bible believer:

"Do you really believe that miracles have happened?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Because the Scriptures are filled with them. In fact, if you strip away the miracles, you degrade the Bible to a mere human product. This contradicts its claim of absolute authority over us as a divinely inspired book."

"Well, have you ever experienced a miracle?"

"I know that Jesus has redeemed me from my sin and has given me eternal life. And I know that what he says in the Bible is true."

At this point, the skeptic thinks he has the advantage, since he has his own experience and those of countless scholars before him that contradict such radical ideas. All the Christian seems to have is his "faith" in undemonstrable assertions found in a book of moralizing old wives' tales.

So the assumption is that by observation and experience, we are supposed to be able to know what can and cannot happen. The moment the "fundamentalist" speaks about miracles or the God of the Bible, the skeptic regards it as ridiculous. "Don't speak to me about the Bible! It's full of incredible myths. Have you ever walked on water?"

But why are these "incredible myths" not supposed to be true? After one shifts through all the verbiage, the answer is usually this: The skeptic and his friends have never seen a miracle. Thus the Book of the Christian is contrary to what everyone "knows." It does not fit the "facts" of life and experience.

### Circling in a circle

How do the moderns know that by their own experience they can correctly determine what can and cannot happen? What is there to verify this standard? Many today unashamedly believe that in themselves they possess the faculties to know what is true. It is called "common sense."

Yet no matter what one may call it, this basis for "knowing" is still a leap of faith, an improvable conviction! Not only so, but those holding to the absolute measuring rod of experience must interpret *everything* by that principle. Otherwise, it would not be a principle!

If anything against "common sense" is mentioned (such as the totally sovereign God of the Bible, who says that even one's convictions must be made captive to Christ), it is dismissed. No evidence is allowed that violates experience. And so, many either reject or try to "humanize" the Bible to make it agree with modern science and psychology.

For example: The dividing of the Red Sea is rationalized as a strong wind blowing against a shallow marsh; prophecies are seen as hindsight and not predictions of the coming event. Any concept con-

trary to what "everybody knows to be true" is rejected. But isn't this circular reasoning? Let the dialog continue:

"I do not believe in the biblical miracles because neither I nor anyone I know has ever seen one. They are found only in a prescientific book."

"Well, what makes your experience right?"

"Everyone knows they never happened. No one has ever seen any."

No one has ever seen a miracle because they are contrary to experience. Since they are contrary to experience, of course no one has ever seen any. And around and around, *ad infinitum!*

Or someone may object: "Show me a miracle and I'll believe it." But there is no need for that; they have already been recorded in the Bible. If he will not believe that record, why would he acknowledge any that might happen today? As Jesus said to the Jews of his day, "You have Moses and the prophets. If you have not believed them, you will not believe even if one rises from the dead."

The skeptic interprets everything by a faith principle even as does the "fundamentalist." It's only that his object of faith is quite different from that of his friend. It is ultimately based upon himself as the final criterion of judgment, rather than on the Creator who claims to have made him.

### The Christian's circle

The skeptic argues in a circle: It cannot be because I have not seen it; I will never see it because it cannot be. But this is not to suggest that his Christian friend is different because he does not need to think in circles.

The Christian does think in circles if he is consistent with his belief in the biblical witness that God alone is sovereign. If the Bible is correct, God must reveal himself only on his own authority, not through the dictates of his creatures' experiences and observations. No creature can prescribe what God is or is not like—that is for God himself to reveal, since there is no standard of understanding God apart from God.

To accept God because he seems to coincide with our own judgments and experiences is to deny God as he is. God alone is sovereign; he is himself the only criterion of interpreting himself. So, Christians wholeheartedly hold to what God says about himself simply because it is God who says it. We believe in a sovereign God because God tells us what to believe about himself; we know what to believe about God because the sov-

ereign God has told us. The circle again!

### The skeptic's assumptions

The skeptic may still suppose he has the advantage even though he admits that both he and the "fundamentalist" both argue in circles. Surely the learned ones through the centuries have had something more intelligent to say about miracles than someone whose faith contradicts common sense!

The modern mind presupposes that we can know what is real independently of the Bible's God. It is taken for granted (presupposed) that nature works uniformly with the way the modern skeptic thinks. So he reckons that he can learn about nature without God because he assumes that what he studies is inherently understandable. Modern science operates on this principle. And many scientists insist that religious beliefs do not matter for a good scientist — all one needs to do is investigate his field of specialty in a rational way.

"Natural science . . . is exclusively concerned with the detection of 'laws of nature,' uniformities of sequence in the cause of events. . . . Nature is rational in the sense that it has everywhere a coherent pattern which we can progressively detect by the steady application of our own intelligence to the scrutiny of natural processes" (A. E. Taylor, *Does God Exist*, pp. 13, 2, as quoted by C. Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*, pp. 97, 103).

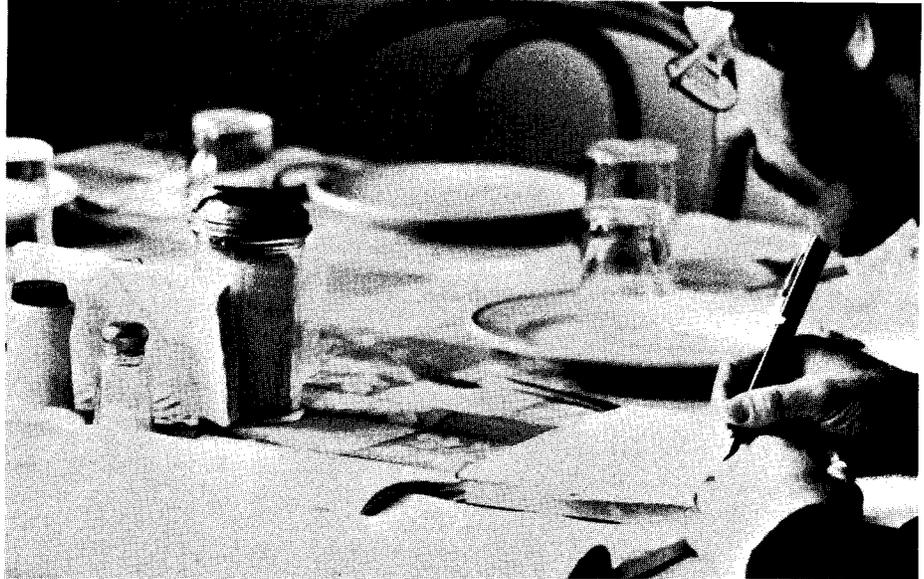
### Breaks in the skeptic's circle

What right does any non-Christian have to assume that nature possesses "uniformities of sequence" or "coherent patterns"? By mere experience?

Actually, it is the sovereign God of the Bible who did create nature with "uniformities" and "coherencies." But if that sovereign God does not exist, the skeptic must admit that fate or chance is the ultimate principle of knowledge. Either things are created and controlled by the God of the Bible (and no other religion has a God who claims all this!), or else they somehow have "uniformities" and "coherencies" by chance.

If it is chance, the skeptic is trying to give order to what has nothing to do with order. What a faith that is! Experience then is ultimately based on what is unrational, and it becomes meaningless.

But the skeptic may say, "Ah, but I do believe in a Supreme Being who made nature." By putting forth this kind of god, he thinks he has given back to na-



ture a logical foundation so that he can continue to learn about it apart from the true God. So, he rejects the sovereign Creator, who has total claim upon him, and replaces the true God with some abstract supreme deity who, he hopes, has enough sovereignty (but no more than necessary!) to make things meaningful again.

This half-sovereign phantom is no god at all! The degree to which he is not sovereign is precisely the degree to which chance is. And if there is any chance at all, the skeptic must give up hope of rationally explaining who he is and what is around him, for he cannot understand the relationship of chance to his "supreme being." The skeptic must confess that his experience, his sensation of order about him, rests upon a superstructure of logical principles resting in turn on a foundation of accidents. If there is no utterly sovereign God, there is no guarantee of any certain thing.

### Showing up the fallacies

Let's put the problem on a more personal level. When you see a tree outside, you do not usually ask yourself whether there really is a tree out there. You take it for granted. But why are you so sure?

Why is it not possible that you are seeing hallucinations? Can you prove that "your tree" is not a mirage? For that matter, how do you know that other people, who may readily affirm that your tree is real, are not themselves hallucinations? Prove that they too are not figments of your imagination.

Finally, look at yourself. Can you prove that *you* really exist? The most brilliant philosophers have never successfully answered these fundamental questions. There is as much debate today about their solutions as there was 2500 years ago.

Now, how dare you say that there are no miracles! You can't even prove that

you yourself exist. Should you try to drive the car before you learn to walk? You must affirm that you are real, that you can accurately perceive what is here, and that what you see has order. Only if you can do all of that can you understand anything, for otherwise everything floats in a boundless morass of sheer accident and illusion.

Man made by chance, surrounded by chance, whose laws of logic are based on chance — your belief that you can get meaning from such a world is too much for me! Because I am weaker, I shall continue to trust in an almighty God, one who clearly reveals himself, reveals who I am and what is around me, and who reveals how I am to act and respond to him who made me.

This God calls you to turn from your sin and blind, empty speculation, and to believe in his Son, who offers forgiveness and deliverance — as well as the only solid basis for thinking about anything. Confess this Lord as the one who cancels the debt of guilt you have run up. And in his glorious holiness and love, he will rescue you from the wrath to come, the eternal destruction, the lake of fire.

Which circle do you stand in? Who is the center of your thinking — your Creator or yourself? "For we do not follow cunningly devised fables, when we made known unto you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty" (2 Peter 1:16). □

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# A Primer for EVANGELISM

Brad D. Evans

## Eric, Mandy, and Joan

Eric was an above average student majoring in geology. His academic achievements were balanced by his active interest in art, athletics, and music. He was a product of a Roman Catholic background who still attended Mass but who disliked church formality.

By the end of their year together, Arnie, his Christian roommate, was frustrated over his apparent lack of success in communicating the gospel. Eric had shown no interest in outright discussions of religion. And Arnie had been unable to capitalize on any felt need in Eric's life since he was mature, self-controlled, and lacked any glaring moral weaknesses.

Nor had Eric shown any interest in Arnie's testimony of personal conversion. Finally, when Eric did talk about Christianity with Arnie, it was usually to point out some alleged, scientific error in the Bible. He assured Arnie that explaining the collapse of the walls of Jericho with reference to intervention by God was quite unnecessary, since archaeology had conclusively demonstrated that an earthquake had rocked Jericho in the time of Joshua. Arnie's best reply had been: "Well, the scientists can't be certain it was an earthquake."

Mandy's only serious academic interest was to make decent enough grades in his business curriculum to collect a diploma and take over the management of his family's large supermarket. He had bored quickly with dorm life in his freshman year and so had begun the process of joining a fraternity. His real major seemed to be parties and bragging about his sexual escapades.

Jeff, a Christian who lived on his floor, knew that he wasn't getting through to Mandy. Mandy spoke of Jeff's Christianity as if it were a matter of obeying a fixed number of moral rules. His lifestyle had little room for the restrictions he envisioned. In fact, Mandy

seemed cynical about the whole of religion, due to his unpleasant courses in "ram-it-down-your-throat" Christianity during eight years of parochial school.

Jeff couldn't get Mandy to attend a Christian lecture on campus or otherwise take any interest in Christian thoughts. He was left with injecting isolated Christian comments into their conversation from time to time.

Joan stayed at the professor's home for a long while after the fellowship meeting had ended. Bob, one of the Christian leaders on campus, was especially puzzled, since Joan had never been to the meetings before.

With several other Christians partially listening in, Bob began to talk to Joan. He soon noticed a real sense of bitterness against God that pervaded her conversation. Apparently she had come to the meeting in desperation. She complained, giving several details, that most of her life's plans had been ruined and wondered why God had allowed it to happen.

Having pointed out the sinfulness of such an attitude, Bob went on to describe how God could give her victory over the problem. A few minutes later Joan bowed with Bob in prayer, making a profession of faith in Christ and promising to meet with the professor's wife for follow-up.

But Joan never returned to the weekly

*The real issue lies in stewardship. What really needs to be asked is, Do Christians make the best possible use of all the resources God has given for effectively communicating the gospel?*

fellowship. Various Christians tried to encourage her when they saw her around campus, but to no avail. Joan's pattern of life did not change at all. Apparently, her profession of faith had not been genuine.

If you've ever attempted to witness on the college campus you probably know something of what it is to be an Arnie, a Jeff, or a Bob—sincere, but frustrated.

Of course, no true believer is absolutely frustrated, because in other witnessing experiences God may give wonderful success in communication and even in converting the listener. Unfortunately, suc-

cess in other instances is not always too comforting when it's your Eric, your Mandy, or your Joan who seem to be eternal losers.

No, the real issue doesn't lie in statistics, it lies in stewardship. That is, what really needs to be asked is, Did the three Christians make the best possible use of all the resources God had given them for effectively communicating the gospel?

For example: Did they intelligently and prayerfully employ biblical methods of witnessing? Now someone will say, "But God can use anyone no matter how ill-equipped he is." I agree. The point is, though, should a good steward of the gospel have to be used in spite of himself when it comes to communicating the world's most important news?

In a sense, of course, this latter question will always be answered "yes" because our sinful nature will always to some extent get in the way of God's holy work. But the real question still hasn't been answered: If the evangelist is a true steward of the gospel, can he ever sit back when it comes to practical methods of witnessing and say, "Go ahead, Lord, use me in spite of my sloppiness"?

Of course, there is no biblical guarantee that correct methods can assure the conversion of hearers. But the Bible does require us to show non-Christians the meaning of the gospel, regardless of their eventual response. So I insist that Arnie, Jeff, and Bob failed to follow some very basic biblical guidelines.

Above all, these three Christians failed to contact their unbelieving friends at the point where God demands they be contacted. And due to this initial failure, the witnessing failed to proceed along biblical lines.

"You've got to be kidding," I can hear you protest. "Isn't this straining at gnats?" No, it isn't. I'll try to make its importance clear.

## Understanding the non-Christian

First, let me break my argument down into four statements I think you'll recognize as clearly biblical:

1. Eric, Mandy, and Joan are in the image of God.
2. They are rebelling against God and his will.
3. They know these first two facts, but deny them.
4. The gospel collides violently with their present position.

I want to go on to show the implications of these truths for your witnessing, and then to suggest some practical ways of implementing them.

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People are not haphazard assemblages of isolated parts, but rather each is an organic whole. What a person is and what he believes are dynamically related to all he does and says. People do not function in a vacuum. Thus, as we draw out the implications of the first three statements above, it should be recognized that they represent an integrated life-system.

1. If all men are created in the image of God, then in one very important respect you don't have to worry about "getting through" to those around you. You can approach *any* unbeliever with the full assurance that God has *already* gotten through to him.

Eric, Mandy, and Joan are directly accessible to the gospel because of who they are. The totality of their lives—inspirations, feelings, thought, will, action, and speech—reveals them to be in the image of God.

For them to recognize themselves as "man" is to recognize themselves as "image of God"; The two concepts are absolutely inseparable. I cannot see the legs of the table holding my typewriter; but the *fact* that the table holds my typewriter demonstrates that the legs are there. So with our three non-Christians: their very human existence demonstrates that they are in the image of God.

We need to realize, however, that the non-believers' knowledge of God as creatures in his image is insufficient to save them. The non-believer needs the Bible to interpret for him exactly why he is what he is and that he needs the grace of God to open his eyes to see the biblical revelation of Christ as Savior.

2. If man is in the image of God, the Bible is equally clear in stressing that man is a rebel against God. I need not belabor this point, but one important implication should be stressed. We cannot expect man the rebel to give the gospel an "objective, neutral" hearing. A rebel will run from God's law and deny his good news unless God is pleased to change his heart. Another case helps illustrate this:

Stan listened intently to the dynamic



Christian lecturer. The speaker discussed over thirty Old Testament prophecies literally fulfilled by Jesus. His closing challenge was that these fulfillments of prophecy demonstrate beyond the reasonable shadow of a doubt that Jesus Christ is truly the Son of God; therefore, the non-Christians in the audience should commit their lives to Christ on this basis.

On the way back to the dorm after the lecture, Scott asked Stan if he was ready to become a Christian. "I'll admit it was a persuasive lecture," Stan replied, obviously deeply affected. "But I just can't make that commitment." Scott returned to his room in deep discouragement.

What had gone wrong? Certainly the speaker spoke truly about Christ's fulfillment of prophecy. And Scott knew his friend well enough to know that he had not rejected the evidence because he was consciously hiding some moral hangup. So what had gone wrong?

Scott had forgotten that as long as Stan refused to alter his rebel stance toward God, he would inevitably reject the "evidence." Stan had not listened "objectively" to the lecture. Long before then he had taken it upon himself to decide what things were possible and what not in the world. Coupled with his deep rebellion against the lordship of God, for Stan the divinity of Christ was simply not possible on *any* evidence. As long as Stan presupposed his own mind to be the lord of truth, Jesus Christ could not also be his Lord.

In witnessing, it will be necessary to take a non-Christian's prior commitments into serious account. (More on this later.)

3. In spite of the fact that Eric, Mandy, Joan, and Stan all know deep within them the truth of these two prior statements, it is equally true that they seek to deny these truths at every point of their

lifestyle. Man the image of God and man the rebel against God is also man the suppressor of truth. It is not difficult to see that the man who seeks to live in direct denial of what he is will be a man in deep distress.

This distress may be intellectual. Eric holds to the orderliness and value of science based upon an irrational theory of the origin of the universe. He ruled God out of the matter of origins and substituted a speculation that the universe emerged as rational out of pure chaos. He holds two irreconcilable positions rather than kneel before God. Eric is in distress.

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Such distress may be more broadly practical. Mandy has enthroned personal pleasure as the ultimate principle of his life. In doing so he has thrown the rest of his image-of-God-ness horribly out of balance. His very being demands that there be more to his existence than parties and success. Mandy too is in distress.

Regardless of what form the distress may take, its basic nature is the same. As long as a person refuses to bow before God as the ultimate organizing principle of life, some areas of his life are going to be agonizingly out of step with the realities of God's universe. To deny the truths of image and rebellion is to deify one's own judgment as the ultimate authority. Anyone who so declares himself king can't expect to live in peace within the true King's domain.

*(Continued on next page.)*

4. It is to this situation of image, rebellion, and cover-up that you as a Christian witness must speak. Above all you must realize that the biblical gospel will collide violently with men in this position.

Jesus spoke no superficial truth when he declared, "You must be born again." In the new birth the Spirit of God brings a person to bow before Christ as Lord and Savior in contrast to one's previous self-lordship. Hence, it is by God's grace that the non-Christian must be made to see that this is exactly what God demands of him in the gospel.

Once Eric, Mandy, Joan, or Stan repent and believe the gospel, their whole life-systems will be radically altered.

Christian, don't sell your certainty for a mess of probability! Every conceivable fact about man and the universe is evidence for the Christian position precisely because God has created these facts and ordained them to bear witness of himself.

As you can see, presuppositions are influential and visible in practical ways. Thus, what was stated at the outset can be reinforced: For the gospel to do its deepest and most powerful work, the witness must contact the non-Christian as he is in the image of God and proceed to bring the message directly to bear against the false presuppositions of his rebellion against God.

Arnie did not do this. He allowed Eric to go on believing that science was some neutral entity on the basis of which Eric had the right to decide either for or against God. Because Arnie did not challenge Eric's basic commitments and the sin that produced them, they were two circles that passed in space without touching. Arnie spun his wheels in the rubble of Jericho.

When you next approach an Eric, a Mandy, a Joan, or a Stan, consider the biblical principles we have discussed. You must reckon on a heart-felt bias against the gospel on their part and be prepared to challenge it. Be confident that God has already been at work in the lives of those who are in his image, and be ready with love and patience to use the full power of the gospel to contest their basic rebellion and to heal their deepest wounds.

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*The incidents illustrating this article grew out of real attempts to communicate the gospel (though the names are changed). Mr. Evans was actively involved in campus evangelism before coming to seminary.*

## The Problem of EVIL

*Albert C. Hitchcock*

Dear Frank:

I understand your problem, and I agree it's a legitimate concern. Every thoughtful person at some time has had to wrestle with the presence of evil and suffering, especially the suffering of the innocent, as we see it all around us.

But I cannot agree with your assertion that this is a problem peculiar to Christianity, nor can I agree with your rejection of Christianity and the God of the Bible because of this issue.

Let's start with the analysis you provided. I agree that Christianity claims that (1) God is infinitely powerful; (2) God is infinitely good; and (3) there is evil present in the world. You claim that one of the three must be false since a good, powerful God would naturally eradicate evil and suffering; since evil is obviously present, God must be either not powerful enough or not good enough to eradicate it, in which case he is not God and Christianity is destroyed. Somehow, the ease with which that analysis dismisses Christianity makes me suspicious, especially since you are then left with the same problem of evil but without the God of the Bible.

### Evil in the world

It seems obvious to you that evil is present in the world. Interestingly, this has provided the answer to the problem for many people. If one can deny that there is really any evil in the world, then the problem is virtually solved (though new ones may have been created).

Historically, various pantheistic philosophies have said that God is all and all is God. Consequently there can exist nothing that is not God and so there is

no such thing as evil. Pantheists are ultimately driven to a concept of necessity that eliminates any distinction between good and evil. Even today the Christian Scientists hold a pantheistic view that dismisses evil as an illusion.

But you have already said it's obvious to you that evil exists, so it won't be necessary to spend a lot of time trying to distinguish between the illusion of pain and real pain.

Even though you feel that evil in the world is an obvious fact, I wonder if you aren't yourself looking for the solution right there. Your whole concept of "doing your own thing" and deciding what's right for yourself will ultimately lead right back here. Though I realize that you wouldn't intentionally cause suffering, yet if someone else burned down your apartment building because he was stoned — doing *his* thing — and thus made you suffer with critical burns, could you really consistently condemn him when he was applying the same principle you live by? It seems to me that no matter how severe the pain, you would have to deny that there was any real evil involved or else you would have to admit to a moral law that would condemn you also.

As I suspected, you have an answer for that: Doing your own thing or living as you see fit is only valid within the bounds of the principle, "as long as it doesn't hurt anyone else." But don't you see what this does? In order for you to apply this principle consistently throughout your lifetime, you must be both omniscient to see the future effects of every action (who knows, your decision now to experiment with your body might cause a birth defect in an unplanned baby years from now, making you the source of its suffering), and you must be omnipotent in order to control the events of your life so that some innocent person doesn't slip into the realm of your influence and get hurt by your private acts.

If you wish to accept the responsibility of living as you see fit, with its implied requirements of wisdom and power, you have just made yourself god and now you must provide the same explanations that you are demanding from the God of the Bible. It's interesting that the things implied in your approach are exactly those that constituted Adam's

first sin in the Bible. He sought to "be like God, knowing good and evil" (Genesis 3:5). He set himself up as the moral authority, ignoring God's command, and in trying to make himself like God he brought evil and suffering into the world.

### The character of God

But let's turn to the second of your propositions. Perhaps God is infinitely powerful and knows that evil is in the world, but is not infinitely good; in other words, God doesn't *want* to stop it though he could.

If this were true, then evil must be in the very nature of God. This doesn't solve the problem though; for if God is evil but infinitely powerful, then we must find an explanation for the good in the world — for the lack of suffering, when it would be so easy for an infinitely powerful Devil to inflict universal pain on all mankind. This explanation simply turns the table and leads nowhere.

Your third proposition is that Christi-

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### *The problem of evil developed when man freely chose to disobey God in spite of God's command and promise of punishment.*

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anity holds that God is infinitely powerful. Perhaps an answer could be found in denying that. Some variety of this approach seems to be the most popular historically. It can be seen in polytheism, deism, and various dualistic systems.

Polytheism would explain evil and suffering as the by-product of many gods both good and evil, great and small, struggling against one another. Though this seems quite distant to twentieth-century Western thinking, millions of people are still bound by the fears and superstitions of many idols. Throughout the history of the Old Testament, God's people constantly struggled with the many gods of the heathen nations around them. The Bible condemns idol worship and in fact ridicules the gods of wood and stone who cannot hear or see or act.

Deism is quite different. Here God may even be thought of infinitely powerful, but he has limited his power in relation to the world. He started it all and then withdrew — if he is even thought of as a personal being.

Now this may appeal to you as an explanation of evil and suffering. Perhaps God made the world, but it didn't turn out quite right, so he abandoned it to run itself out by natural laws. This would explain why God doesn't act against suffering, but what good is a God who won't reveal himself? Can there be such a God, or is this just a projection of man, the creation of a non-personal It who neither cares for or bothers the creation. Such a view must ultimately reduce to humanism, for the whole question of God is irrelevant if he is not immanently involved in the world.

Or you may espouse some sort of philosophical or religious dualism. Perhaps there are two eternal forces, neither of which is infinite, in which case all of life is part of the struggle or interplay between the two. These can be good and evil, mind and matter, idea and object, or God and Satan. These views account for evil — it always has been and always will be. Man should assist in the struggle against evil on God's side, but there is no real hope that evil will ever be overcome since God has already been trying for all eternity past.

The main problem with this view is that there is no basis for it except human speculation. No such God ever revealed himself to man, and even if he did he would hardly be worthy of worship if his record is only "win some, lose some."

Now I know these are all over-simplifications. We could hardly run down every system of philosophy or religion at one sitting. But what I'm trying to point out is that there is no easy, cut-and-dried solution. In any system you are starting with something and trying to work it out to make it meet the needs of the world you live in and in which you are perplexed. But each of these systems, when worked out to its original end, results in absurdity without answering the questions you are asking.

You see, as God's creature you are trying to start apart from God and then borrow God's rational principles to lead you to some other answer than God. It

will not work.

### The biblical solution

But there is an answer. If we start with the God of the Bible and proceed according to his revelation of himself, we discover a system of coherent truth that, while leaving some solutions beyond our comprehension, at least gives us a sovereign and loving God to leave them with.

The biblical view is that in the beginning God created man, the world, and all that is in it, and it was good. When we look around us we tend to think this mess we see is the normal state of affairs, but that is not true. God created the "normal state" of man to be without sin or distortion. Man was made in God's own image and enjoyed perfect fellowship with God and perfect harmony with the rest of creation.

The problem developed when man, enjoying the freedom God had given, freely chose to disobey God in spite of God's command and promise of punishment. Man set himself up as God — separated himself from the creature relationship and tried to act like the creator. For this God, in keeping with his nature, cursed sin in man and the world. Out of this developed the abnormal state we observe today wherein man is alienated from God, the world, and himself.

This was no surprise to God, for in his wisdom he knew that man would sin. Yet in the mind and private counsel of God there was greater value in man's being free, but needing to be rescued from his own sin, than there would be in man as an automaton who never sinned. To question God on this point is presumptuous, as it appeals to some value system higher or greater than God that cannot exist. "O the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! how unsearchable are his judgments, and unfathomable his ways! For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has become his counselor?" (Romans 11:33, 34).

Since man's fall into sin, we see two activities going on in the world — man continuing in his sinfulness and rebellion against God, and God sovereignly in control of every part of history. There is a sense in which man's sinfulness snowballs. In giving the law, God warned that he was jealous of man's worship and that he would "visit iniquity . . . on the third and fourth generation of those who hate me" (Exodus 20:5).

At the same time, God promises mercy to thousands of generations of those who love him. But man continues to disobey and rebel, and sinfulness and the curse (Continued on next page.)

of God take their toll of suffering and alienation in the world. All of which is not what God created man for, but it is man's responsibility.

### God is God

We cannot lose sight of the fact that God is still in sovereign control and "works all things after the counsel of his will" (Ephesians 1:11). Though God cannot be the author of sin, since it is completely foreign to his nature, again and again in Scripture we see that God works out his will even through the wicked wills of men.

Joseph speaks of his presence in Egypt both as the result of his brothers' sinful act of selling him into slavery and of God's sending him there for his good purposes (Genesis 45:5). In Isaiah 10:5-7, God speaks of using the wicked nation Assyria to work his judgment, but still holds them responsible because their purpose was evil. Peter condemns men for

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the evil act of nailing Christ to the cross but still asserts that it took place "by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God" (Acts 2:23).

So, beyond the scope of man's comprehension, the absolutely sovereign God works out his plan even through sinful men who are responsible for their actions. "You will say to me then, 'Why does He still find fault? For who resists his will?' On the contrary, who are you, O man, who answers back to God? The thing molded will not say to the molder, 'Why did you make me like this,' will it? Or does not the potter have a right over the clay, to make from the same lump one vessel for honorable use, and another for common use?"

"What if God, although willing to demonstrate His wrath and to make His power known, endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction? And He did so in order that He might make known the riches of His glory upon vessels of mercy, which He prepared beforehand for glory, even us, whom He also called, . . . as He says also in Hosea, 'I will call those who were not my people, my people. and her who

was not beloved, beloved.'" (Romans 9:19-25).

Here lies the good news of Christianity. The God who can sovereignly work out his will even through men's sinful acts has not abandoned the world to destruction. But God has himself taken the curse of sin on himself in the person of Jesus Christ on the cross.

Now God is calling out of this totally cursed, wicked, destruction-bound world a people in whom he will recreate the image of his Son. This people will enjoy a state better than the first in a new heaven and new earth in which man will be united with God for eternity.

Here is hope. Here is a God who conquered evil and suffering on the cross, who controls it every day, and who ultimately will destroy it. Today God demonstrates his absolute grace by choosing from the midst of the condemned world his own people.

Now I realize this doesn't explain the immediate why of every case of suffering and evil in the world. But the Scripture even speaks to this. Of the terrible destruction brought upon the people of God, Moses writes, "The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but the things revealed belong to us and to our sons forever, that we may observe all the words of this law" (Deuteronomy 29:29).

In other words, there are things we don't understand, and these belong to the secret counsel of God. What has been revealed to us is ours, both to obey its law and claim its promise. Can we really ask more than that? Can we demand more than a God who reveals what we can understand and lovingly controls what is beyond our comprehension?

At times these may seem to be hard words, for they leave some things unexplained. But there is no system of thought that can explain them better, and certainly none that can offer man such hope. Many of Jesus' followers once found his words difficult to accept, and "as a result . . . many of his disciples withdrew, and were not walking with him any more. Jesus said to the twelve, 'You do not want to go away also, do you?' Simon Peter answered him, 'Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. And we have believed and have come to know that you are the Holy One of God'" (John 6:66-69).

There is no further appeal. There is no one to whom God must answer. Where can we turn if we reject him and the sovereign exercise of his will?

So, Frank, think on these things.

With urgent concern,  
Bert

### IGNORANCE : NO EXCUSE

*(Continued from page 3.)*

be unfair of God to play hide-and-seek with the innocent seeker—if there were any—always remaining just out of reach, never allowing our proverbial "innocent native" to "find" him. But Scripture simply does not see the situation in these terms at all.

If anyone is in hiding, it is not God. He has revealed himself from every quarter. "Whither shall I go from thy Spirit? Or whither shall I flee from thy presence? If I ascend to heaven, thou art there! If I make my bed in Sheol, thou art there! If I take the wings of the morning and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, even there thy hand shall lead me and thy right hand shall hold me. If I say, 'Let only darkness cover me, and the light about me be night,' even the darkness is not dark to thee, the night is bright as the day; for darkness is as light with thee. For thou didst form my inward parts; thou didst knit me together in my mother's womb" (Psalm 139:7-13).

Other men's "gods" may be in hiding; but the living God is not. Rather, the God of Scriptures is seeking man even as man is desperately trying to hide from the presence of his Creator. Ever since Adam's sin, the Lord God calls to man and says, "Where are you?" And man's only right response is, "I hid myself. I was afraid, because I was naked" (Genesis 3:9, 10).

Man is never pictured in Scripture as innocent before God. "They are without excuse; for although they knew God, they did not honor Him as God or give thanks to Him" (Romans 1:20, 21). Man's real guilt is seen in the light of God's revelation to man of his own character.

Nor is man ever pictured, therefore, as *unfairly* condemned by God. "The wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all *ungodliness* and *wickedness* of man" (Romans 1:18). Our flight from God is a flight from his purity, holiness and righteousness, because the light revealed from heaven exposes our darkness, unrighteousness, impurity. God does not condemn the innocent, but the guilty. For him to do so is neither unjust, nor comparable to the blind justice of men; rather, it is the impartial and holy justice of God who sees the inmost heart.

The Scriptures represent God as "merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and

sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty" (Exodus 34:6, 7). If God condemns men, it is not in spite of their innocence, nor out of injustice and mercilessness on God's part, but because man is truly guilty before God. The fault is not in God, but in ourselves.

Scripture sees God's judgment in terms of man's receiving just what he has asked for. Man is pictured as giving God up, "suppressing the truth," "exchanging the glory of God" for idols; God, subsequently, is pictured three times as "giving man up"—"in the lusts of their hearts," "to dishonorable passions," "to a base mind and to improper conduct" (Romans 1:24, 26, 28).

All this goes back to the root problem—man's assertion of his self-sufficiency. "You felt secure in your wickedness; you said, 'No one sees me.' Your wisdom and knowledge led you astray, and you said in your heart, 'I am and there is no one besides me'" (Isaiah 47:10). We avoid speaking of hell at all costs. But C. S. Lewis was candid in characterizing hell as the place where man asserts, "My will be done." Hell is a wish-fulfillment of all who have blasphemously and defiantly hurled a creaturely "I am" in the face of the holy I AM.

### Toward an answer

Notice where we have come. Notice that Scripture has challenged some very basic assumptions that often surround the question of the "innocent, ignorant native." Scripture will not allow us to conceive of any man under heaven as "ignorant of God," as "innocent" before God, nor as a "sincere seeker" after God.

But you should also notice that Scripture has said nothing so far concerning the gospel of Christ. Scripture has spoken to us concerning man apart from Christ; but at most, this is just the "context" of the Christian message.

Even when Scripture addresses this question about "those who have not heard," it is referring to those who have not heard the law. "All who have sinned without the Law will also perish without the Law, and all who have sinned under the Law will be judged by the Law. For it is not hearers of the Law who are righteous before God, but the doers of the Law who will be justified" (Romans 2:12, 13). What is in view is the law of Moses where God's righteousness is revealed over against the sin of man.

Just as the Jew could never succeed in keeping the ten commandments, so the Gentile finds it impossible to do that which, in his heart and conscience, he knows to be proper. And it is this con-

science which "bears witness" even as "their conflicting thoughts accuse or perhaps excuse them" at God's judgment (Romans 2:15). Those who knew the law of Moses failed to keep it; those who had only their consciences have even defied what they did have. Yet to all God has revealed his wrath from heaven against all who seek after self. Man is "without excuse."

Do you see the manner in which this "Iion" the Scripture must be approached on its own terms? When you bring your questions before God, you must expect to be challenged on your assumptions. But it is not as though Scripture, in doing this, has kept you from a solution. Indeed, you are being nudged constantly in the direction of one.

### An unconcerned God?

Still one other assumption needs to be challenged. This question about the person who never heard the Christian gospel often hides an underlying attitude about God, that God must be unconcerned about the destiny of men. The assumption seems to be that if God really cared, and if God does insist that men come to him only through Christ, then God would

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*In Jesus' work on Calvary's cross, we find that God's wrath on sin and God's love for sinners meet and both are fulfilled.*

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have seen to it that all men knew Christ. Since many, both now and in generations long dead, never heard of Christ, God must be indifferent.

If God has revealed himself to be so unconcerned, then men could dare to ask such questions about human destiny. On the other hand, if God has revealed himself to be concerned and involved with the destiny of mankind, then you are challenged to share God's concern. This is the very place to which the Scripture has continually been nudging you. You must approach God, not to speak your own mind, but to know the mind of God; not to assert, but to receive; not to defy, but to bow. Otherwise, you do not treat him as God.

The Scripture never pictures God as unjust. God is just in condemning sin; indeed his own righteousness and holiness demands that he condemn sin. Even we creatures, though tainted by sin, know something of a sense of righteousness that demands justice. The parent of a child

who has been maliciously harmed demands justice. Societies demand laws and enforcement to preserve some semblance of justice. Large proportions of the American public expressed outrage over a presidential pardon that held out a mercy considered to be disproportionate to justice. With God, the Governor of all things, there must be complete, unswerving justice. God is unquestionably fair.

Nor does the Scripture ever picture God as unconcerned. God is compassionate, merciful and loving. "God is love" (1 John 4:8). The fullest measure of God's love for sinners is the extent of his concern and involvement, and in it is the Christian gospel: "In this is love, not that we loved God but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins" (1 John 4:10).

And again: "God shows His love for us in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8). Jesus himself claimed to be the sole mediator of God's salvation: "I am the way, the truth and the life; no one comes to the Father but by me" (John 14:6).

In Jesus' work on Calvary's cross, we find that God's wrath on sin and God's love for sinners—his justice and his mercy—meet and both are fulfilled. Jesus bears the wrath of God in order that sinners who repent and believe in him might never experience the same. And this is the free gift of God, for "by grace are you saved, not through works, lest any man should boast" (Ephesians 2:8, 9).

Now, you may object, this is clearly gospel! But we were speaking of those who had never heard of these things. Why, then, speak of them again here? For this very reason: God would never have you question his handling of human destiny apart from a consideration of the cross of Jesus Christ. For it is at the cross that human destiny hinges.

We dare not question God's mercy and love for sinners apart from the fact of what he did for sinners. God gave his own Son, subjecting him to the full outpouring of righteous wrath on sin, all for the sake of those who were justly under condemnation. We must not question God's justice and fairness in dealing with even one rebellious creature until we have come to grips with how God had to deal with his own eternal Son in order to redeem the sinner who believes in him.

God's answer to your question, as the Scripture everywhere attests, is focused on the cross of Christ. It is there that your concern for man's destiny must be weighed by God's concern for this world of sinful creatures. □

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The swallow hath found a nest for herself, where she may lay her young (Psalm 84:3).

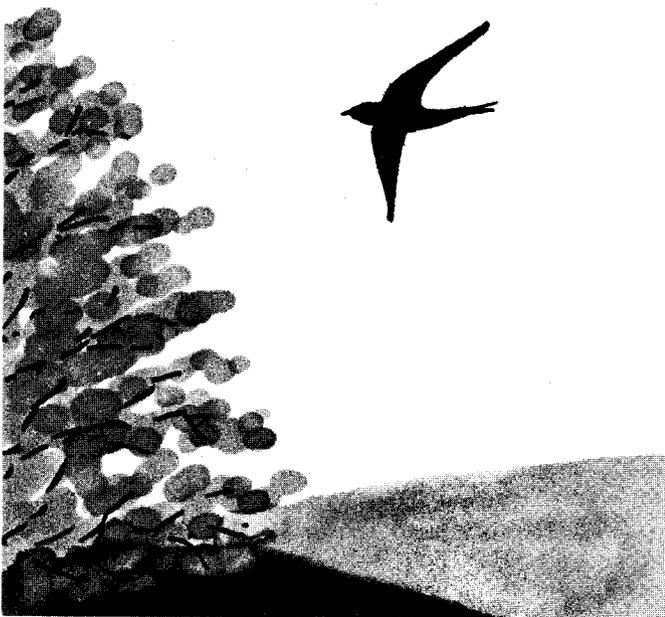
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## The Swallows

I know, I know why the swallows are here—  
Dancing and darting and dipping the sky;  
It's the spring, the spring,  
the spring of the year,  
And they're thinking of where  
to build nests as they fly.

Into and out of again and again  
The winter-old shed where rafters are hung,  
With mud-bits and grass,  
sweeping low as they pass,  
The swallows are building  
new nests for their young.

We watch the swallow in the spring. The psalmist watched the swallow, too. He noticed that all its energies were used to make its nest. Through many dangers and for thousands of miles the swallow had flown northward to the place where it would build. It made hundreds of



trips to put nesting material together. For days it patiently sat on the eggs and for many more days it brought food to growing fledglings. Sometimes the swallow pair would raise two or more families in one season.

Truly, the nest is the longing of the swallow in the spring and its satisfaction in the summer. In the fall it flies away only to return again after the winter to find a nest for its young.

The psalmist rejoiced with the swallow who had found a haven of rest for her young even among the altars of the Lord's house. What is our longing and satisfaction? The psalmist himself longed for the house of God and was satisfied when he had God's presence with him.

May we be able to say from our hearts:

My soul longeth, yea, even fainteth  
for the courts of the Lord.  
For a day in thy courts  
is better than a thousand.  
I had rather be a doorkeeper  
in the house of my God,  
Than to dwell  
in the tents of wickedness.

(Psalm 84:2, 10).

—Ellen Bryan Obed

The Presbyterian Guardian

# LYING

## as 'The Lesser of Two Evils'

### *An Editorial Comment*

The title above belongs to an editorial in the April 23, 1976 issue of *Christianity Today*. In fact, it was the lead editorial.

After introducing the subject, the writer quotes Colossians 3:9: "Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old nature with its practices." He then comments, "The meaning is plain: lying belongs to the old order of life, truth-telling to the new. Christians are not to lie to one another."

"But," he goes on to ask, "is a lie ever justifiable?" And he mentions the case of Corrie ten Boom confronted with the dilemma of either lying to protect the Jews hidden inside or telling the truth and by it contributing to their death in gas chambers.

The editor insists that the question is not to be answered by the situational ethicist, who would argue that any deed may be right if it fulfills the law of love. Rather, he sees it as the choice of the lesser of two evils. To lie is a sin, but not to lie may in some cases involve a greater evil.

The writer goes on to argue that even if a Christian, confronted with such a dilemma, does choose the lesser evil of lying, he "is not free from the guilt of the evil he chooses." He notes that some of the commandments did have certain exceptions, such as works of mercy and necessity on the Sabbath, or of executions for certain crimes in spite of the eighth commandment. Truth-telling, however, had no exceptions whatever; thus any lie carries with it its burden of guilt, no matter what the reason behind the lie.

So the editor concludes: "If the Christian is convinced that he must choose to do a particular evil because the only alternative would be to do a greater evil, then he must do so with the knowledge that he has broken the law of God and must seek forgiveness through repentance and confession. Fortunately for us sinners, God's grace is greater than all our sins—the many we commit selfishly, and the few we commit unselfishly."

Now this present writer makes no claim to perfection in truth-telling, nor does he have such confidence in his own integrity that he would dare to foretell what he would do in Corrie ten Boom's situation. Even so, the approach of the editor of *Christianity Today* is seriously defective.

We do need to agree with him, however, that lying is not permitted by the law of God. We agree too that there are no exceptions. We would go on to point out that those biblical instances sometimes cited as exceptions are not really that at all.

When Rahab lied to protect the Israelite spies, the fact is recorded. The Bible commends her faith, but it nowhere approves the lie as such. So too when Samuel was sent to anoint David and worriedly asked the Lord what to answer if King Saul asked about his mission, the Lord told Samuel to say that he was going to perform a sacrifice. That was no lie, but was true—so far as it went. The point is that Samuel was not obliged to tell Saul everything; neither are we.

We would also agree that the answer of situation ethics is no answer. To argue that a lie may be right if it fulfills the law of love is to deny that God's commandments themselves are given for the very purpose of telling us how best to fulfill the law of love. Just because I may lie with a loving concern does not make it right.

The real question, which the editor of *Christianity Today* overlooked, is, Does the Christian ever have to choose "the lesser of two evils"? To assume that he does is to assume that God is not the God that Paul plainly says he is: "There has no temptation overtaken you except such as man can bear. But God is faithful, who will not permit you to be tempted beyond

what you are able, but will with the temptation also provide a way of escape that you may be able to endure it" (1 Corinthians 10:13).

There is great comfort in those words! God will protect us from ever being put into a position where we must choose "the lesser of two evils." We may think we've fallen into such a bind at times, but that's because we are not thinking in God's terms. What should a Corrie ten Boom do? She should, of course, pray even if it's only a quick, anguished and silent appeal to the Lord for help. But since the Gestapo had the power, if not the right, to demand an entrance, perhaps she should have stepped aside and invited them to check it out for themselves. God is well able to use such openness to persuade a sin-blinded enemy that there is nothing to be found inside after all.

In any case, we are to approach such situations in full confidence that our sovereign God will indeed provide a way of escape—and we are not responsible to develop it for him by choosing to lie. God controls every event of the Christian's life and he is fully able to order it for our good. We have the clear promise of Scripture that never will we be confronted with a temptation to sin from which the Lord himself will not provide an escape, however difficult it is for us to see it in advance or even recognize it afterwards.

Certainly we are not justified in sinning, even in choosing "the lesser of two evils," with the notion that afterwards we may enjoy the grace of forgiveness. Paul plainly speaks about such thinking in Romans 6:1; we are not to sin even in this way "that grace may abound" afterwards.

The editor of *Christianity Today* clearly sees that lying is always a sin; would that all Christians were equally clear. But he fails to take account of other Scripture teaching that is equally important in this matter. As Christians we are to walk with God, obedient to his commandments—all of them—and trusting in his promise and power to keep us from a temptation greater than we are able to bear. For us, with a God like ours, there is no such thing as choosing "the lesser of two evils." We can only choose the right.

—John J. Mitchell

## Bicentennial worship service

On July 4 (Independence Day) congregations of the Presbytery of Philadelphia of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church and nearby congregations from the Presbytery of New Jersey will join together for a service of worship in the context of our nation's observance of its bicentennial year. The service will center on a threefold theme of thanksgiving, repentance, and consecration. It will be conducted by ministers and elders of the Philadelphia Presbytery. An offering will be received for the work of the denomination's committees on home and foreign missions and Christian education.

The service will be held in the Rust Auditorium of Van Til Hall on the campus of Westminster Theological Seminary beginning at 4 p.m. It will be followed in early evening by an informal song service with participation by choirs from the churches of the presbytery.

Between the services there will be opportunity to eat a picnic lunch outdoors on the grounds of the seminary, reminiscent of the time when church members ate together between the morning and afternoon services on the Lord's Day.

*Guardian* readers who will be visiting in the Philadelphia area on July 4 are cordially invited to join in the worship and song services. The seminary is located on Pa. 73 at the intersection with Willow Grove Avenue, about two miles east from the Fort Washington exit of the Pennsylvania Turnpike (exit onto Pa. 309 south, one mile to Pa. 73 east). The seminary is in the Glenside-Laverock section just north of the Philadelphia city limits. Visitors in the area are also welcome to the regular worship services of Orthodox and Reformed Presbyterian Churches.

## OPC General Assembly to consider new Form of Government

The Forty-third General Assembly of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church will convene at 8 p.m. on Thursday, May 27, at the chapel of Old Main on the campus of Geneva College, Beaver Falls Pa. The assembly is expected to last until late in the following week.

The largest single item of business will be the consideration of a proposed new Form of Government. The new Form is the product of over twenty years of study and revision. When the OPC was founded in 1936, it took over as its standards of doctrine, government, discipline, and worship, those that had been in effect in the old Presbyterian Church, U.S.A., with

small modifications in most cases. Over the years, however, the Form of Government has been subject to increasing criticism and the need for a revision is widely accepted.

What is not widely accepted is any one view of what such a revision should be. The committee presenting the proposed new Form is not attempting to settle all the disagreements over various aspects of Presbyterian church order. The new Form rather seeks to permit some variety of viewpoint in several areas.

Though the new Form, for example, clearly speaks of two basic church offices at one place, it proceeds to define three (and then subdivides the office of minister into three categories besides).

In other areas, the new Form charts new ground. It provides for a probationary system for elders in an attempt to relieve the need some congregations have felt for term-eldership (and this provision has received some sharp criticism already) It speaks of a "regional church" with its ruling body the presbytery in parallel with the local congregation and its session.

In a few instances, the new Form does take sharp exception to existing practice. It insists that trustees are not church officers except to fulfill the requirements of the state. (This does not preclude a board of trustees being allowed to do many of the things some boards now do, but it could only be by way of delegation from the session, not by vested right in the trustees.) The new Form also insists that every communicant member has a

right to vote in congregational meetings and that age cannot be a hindrance except as required to fulfill legal requirements.

Much of the new Form is an expansion of the older in order to provide a "handbook" for use in various situations. This approach has generated a lot of repetition, but the final results should be a more useful book.

*The "Kress Case."* It seems altogether likely that the judicial case against the Rev. Arnold S. Kress will also be before this assembly by way of appeal or complaint or both. But the case is still in process in the Presbytery of Ohio at this date and it is too early to predict what form it will have before the assembly.

## CRC Synod urged to extend fellowship to RCA

The Committee on Interchurch Relations of the Christian Reformed Church will propose to the upcoming synod of that church that it extend ecclesiastical fellowship (what is known as "fraternal relations" among most Presbyterian bodies) to the Reformed Church of America.

The CRC dates its origin to a separation from the RCA in 1857, chiefly over lax views in the RCA concerning Masonic Lodge membership, open communion, and neglect of preaching on election and limited atonement. The RCA, or "Dutch Reformed Church," has been a member of the National and World Council of Churches for several years; the CRC has not.

If ecclesiastical fellowship is established between the CRC and the RCA, the effect on the newly formed North American Presbyterian and Reformed Council (NAPARC) is likely to be mortal. There has been concern expressed already within its member churches (the OPC, RPCES, RPCNA, PCA, and CRC) about ties to the NCC or WCC. If the CRC chooses to align itself more closely with the RCA, the long-term result is likely to be a strengthening of ties among the conservative Presbyterian bodies to the exclusion of any improvement in relations with the Reformed churches.

**The New Testament Student and Theology**, (v. III in the New Testament Student Series) is dedicated to the memory of Professor John Murray. Contributors include Murray, Gaffin, Shepherd, Machen, Armstrong, Countess, Van Til, Dilg, Strong, Skilton. List price: \$5 per volume (with a 40% discount to those with a standing order for the series). Published by Presbyterian & Reformed Pub. Co., Box 185, Nutley, NJ 07110.

If you are moving to, visiting, or know of a Reformed family living in

### LaCrosse, Wisconsin,

There is a newly established Reformed witness, Hope Christian Reformed Church, holding regular worship services at 10:30 a.m. and 6:00 p.m., Sunday School at 9:15 a.m., meeting at Fauver Hill School located 0.9 miles north on Highway 16 of the junction of Highways 16 and 157 near Onalaska, Wisconsin. Contact Pastor James Osterhouse by calling 608-783-4591 (office) or 608-783-3337 (residence), or by writing Hope Christian Reformed Church, 1016 Main Street, Onalaska WI 54650.

### Rebel Prince

by

Henry W. Coray

A fictionalized story of Absalom, newly released in the Spire Book series by Fleming H. Revell; paperback; \$1.50. In your bookstore.

## A GOOD MORAL LIFE

(Continued from back cover.)

gated God again to the place of the servant — a dependent subject to your own whims and ideas?

This is not the way the Bible presents the creator God. Since God is the sovereign Lord of creation, he is the one in whom we must find the definition of good. And the criterion God lays before his creatures is absolute holiness. Perfect righteousness is the only standard that God will honor. This standard is seen in the ten commandments, not only as they appear on the surface in the Old Testament, but with all their implications as Jesus develops them in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5).

We may grant that you have never killed anyone. But how long could you stand up to Jesus when he says, "I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother shall be liable to judgment; who insults his brother shall be liable to the council, and whoever says, 'You fool!' shall be liable to the hell of fire" (Matthew 5:22)?

Or we may grant that, unlike many of your friends, you have never outwardly sinned by having sex outside of marriage. But how would you measure up when Jesus says, "I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart" (Matthew 5:28)? What Jesus demands is absolute perfection and purity, even to the inner thoughts and motives.

In looking back at your system, it could rightly be said by any one of your friends that he thought his morality was good enough to merit entrance to heaven. In the same way your parents could claim the same for themselves. For all of that, so could a harlot. There is no limit when the implications of your question are drawn out, and the matter of morality becomes completely relativistic.

### Be perfect, like God

In contrast to this, God's standard of morality is absolute. He demands perfect obedience and loyalty. A lawyer once asked Jesus what was the great commandment in the law. Jesus answered, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the first and great commandment. And a second is like it, You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the law and the prophets" (Matthew 22:37-40).

The whole law of God has its full expression in these two commandments. It must necessarily follow that the greatest offense to the great commandment is not to love God with all one's heart, soul, and mind. Loving God means giving him absolute loyalty and obedience. And when you make your own moral code, you are not honoring God as God, and the wrath of God's just condemnation falls upon you.

But God does not leave us faulty sinners without escape. All who are willing to repent of their evil ways have been shown the perfect righteousness that is given apart from works of the law. And this is the righteousness of God that comes through faith in Jesus Christ.

It is only through the agency of his sinless life and humiliating death that atonement can be made for our sins. On the cross in bearing our sins, he bore also the subsequent wrath of God which was due to us. In being faithful to death, he fulfilled all the law and the prophets on our behalf. Then on the third day God raised him from the dead, in accordance with the Scriptures, and made him sit at his own right hand with all power and authority.

Only as we completely spurn our own filthy works of presumed "righteousness" and cast ourselves unconditionally and fully on Jesus are we made partakers of eternal life and the privilege of heaven. Only when we are found in Christ can

*Only in Jesus would he find  
the one who would do for him  
what he could not do  
for himself.*

we claim membership in the kingdom of heaven, having been born again by the regeneration of the Holy Spirit. So, it is impossible to please God without faith.

### The doing is of God

I appreciate the importance of your question, Joe, and its relevance to all people today. At the same time, it is a very old question. Jesus himself was confronted with it from the rich young ruler (Mark 10:17-22). Indeed, this young man echoes your question when he asks, "Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life" (verse 17).

Jesus first rebuked him for loosely applying the adjective "good" to anyone else but God himself. "Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone" (verse 18). And Jesus continued, "You know the commandments: 'Do not kill,

Do not steal, Do not bear false witness, Do not defraud, Honor your father and mother'" (verse 19). Jesus turned the young ruler's attention to God's absolute morality as it is found in the ten commandments in order to show him what he must do.

But when the rich young ruler arrogantly claimed to have fulfilled all these from his youth, Jesus, knowing his heart, addressed the covetous young man, saying, "You lack one thing; go, sell what you have, and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me" (verse 21). This was in effect to tell the young ruler to repent of his covetous love for money instead of for God.

Not only did Jesus tell him to repent of his idolatrous object of faith, he called the young ruler to faith in himself. "Come, follow me," for only in Jesus would he find the one who would do for him what he could not do for himself. Despite his confrontation with Jesus, the rich young ruler went away sorrowful because he would not forsake the idol of his riches for the eternal blessings that come by faith in Jesus Christ.

"Won't a good moral life get me to heaven?" The answer to your question is given by Paul when he writes to the Christians at Rome:

"Now we know that whatever the law says it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be stopped, and the whole world may be held accountable to God. For no human being will be justified in his sight by works of the law, since through the law comes knowledge of sin.

"But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from law, although the law and the prophets bear witness to it, the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction; since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, they are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as an expiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins; it was to prove at the present time that he himself is righteous and that he justifies him who has faith in Jesus" (Romans 3:19-27).

I am looking forward, Joe, to your next letter and perhaps a time when we might get together to discuss this question and many others in person.

Sincerely,

Mark

# The Presbyterian Guardian

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## Won't a good MORAL LIFE get me to heaven?

*Mark Porter*

Dear Joe:

I was happy to receive your last letter and to hear that you are well. In your letter you said this very important question has been on your mind: Won't a good moral life get me to heaven?

It occurred to me that before I could answer your question properly, I had to consider the implications of what you were really asking. The past few days I have been pondering your query and, as a Christian, I have come to understand — at least in part — the significance of those implications. Let me discuss them now.

### If heaven, then God

Your question could be restated this way: "As long as I try my best to do good ethical deeds, won't God reward me by granting me entrance to heaven?"

The very fact that you have asked the question shows that you have assumed that there is a heaven, an afterlife, and more importantly, the one who makes both of these possible—God. On the other hand, it is apparent from the nature of your question that you conceive of God quite differently from the triune God of the Bible, with a radically different view of the nature of his character and of man's relationship to him.

In the first place, the triune God of the Bible is absolutely sovereign. That is to say, this God is completely self-con-

tained, unique in his being, and distinct from his creation. The God of the Bible has complete control over everything that exists. All things have been brought into existence out of nothing just because he has spoken.

God existed before anything came into being. God said, "Let there be light. And there was light" (Genesis 1:3). God is not dependent upon anything for his own existence. Yet everything else that exists is dependent upon him to uphold and sustain them in their very existence. God has not just created the world and left it as a watchmaker might leave his work to run by itself. God still has the power over his creation and is actively involved as he continually upholds it by the power of his word, ordering it so as to accomplish his purposes.

In assuming heaven as a place for your best welfare, haven't you just also assumed God to be the one who will give you a place there? But your conception of God seems to place him at the mercy of your whims. Your God is not distinct from the rest of creation, but is dependent on you. You control him by per-

forming a certain number of good deeds, which in turn obliges him to do something for you — grant you entrance into heaven.

In contrast to this, the Bible describes the triune God in these terms: "Our God is in the heavens; he does whatever he pleases" (Psalm 115:3). God may do whatever he wishes to do just because he is the sovereign Lord. God is the Creator, men are the creatures. These unique distinctions are crucial.

### None good but God

In the same way, when you say "good moral life," who is it that ultimately determines what is "good"? Does society possess this ultimate criterion? Your parents? Your friends? Or is it your own private code of ethics?

In any of these cases, the standard for "good" has come from a part of the creation and you have subjected yourself to it. Since you are appealing totally to something other than God, will you dare to presume upon him to allow you an entrance to heaven? Have you not rele-

*(Continued inside, page 15.)*

