

CAN CHRISTIANITY

Make Sense?



Preface

This book is a collection of blog posts from the web site Christianpioneer.com over ten years. The web site was originally set up to help those with bad church experiences or even those unfamiliar with Christianity.

It is difficult to imagine how confusing Christianity looks not only to outsiders, but even to those raised in a particular denomination who can also find it incomprehensible. This is perhaps why so many children raised in Christian homes abandon the faith.

The purpose of the blog posts and the web site is to give some clarity to the core of Christianity which has been obscured by many over centuries. It is hoped that the reader might find in Christianity a path to truth and understanding. It is also hoped that those bewildered by a particular Christian tradition or practice might find a way to draw closer to Jesus and mature in faith, truth, wisdom, and love.

Please keep in mind that the author himself is one who, as a pioneer, was trying to cut through the baloney to find truth.

I am embarrassed what I thought five years ago and hope to be embarrassed five years from now by what I think today.—one on a path of learning

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Can Christianity Make Sense?

This collection of blog posts presumes to answer the question, yes. One has to consider that Christianity has been almost made incomprehensible as a result of two problems. The first are the “contributions” made by various humans throughout history that as a result of ignorance, vanity, and even malice have presented Christianity with so many distortions that it is hardly recognizable. The second distortion is the result of Satanic influence that at first persecuted Christianity and then hijacked it.

To understand Christianity, we need to both unravel what has been done to it to make it so confusing and even repulsive. However, we also need to understand the larger world we live in that also contributes confusion. In the process of examining this present world several assertions will be made, some almost brutal, in their challenge to widely held beliefs. This can be useful if it can drive some to question false beliefs that would never be otherwise considered (for example that public education including college is not as beneficial as many assume).

The first assumption to challenge is evolution. Based on the thesis that nothing existed and then blew up to become everything, one might think it unlikely that it would be so widely accepted. How-

ever, the implication that we are the most advanced beings in the universe does have a certain appeal. In addition, the idea that life is ruled by randomness (luck) can fuel ambition for those who want to make their own “luck”.

A key understanding that will shed light on the nature of existence is the idea that what can be called light and dark might also be seen as love (selflessness) in contrast with selfishness. The evolution perspective appeals to selfishness in that the world is seen as an opportunity for one to gain what he can for himself. It can be seen that the darkness of selfishness is critical to understanding how the world came to be so confusing.

If one considers that the world was created by God (that creation including the angles and humans, each of whom was given free will), a more plausible explanation arises for our existence. All of the pain and suffering in the world can be traced back to the free will choice that first Satan made and then Adam and Eve. Each choice was for self. Satan wanted to be like God and suckered Adam and Even to act apart from God and thus took over the dominion of earth,

Many people have a sort of mythological view of God. The pantheon of gods from Mount. Olympus were seen as petty and capricious which people took

as an adequate explanation for their daily vicissitudes. In contrast, today many have difficulty considering a “good” God because they imagine that a “good” God would not allow them to experience difficulty and pain.

To consider a universe created by God, we need to also consider what his objectives are. To create people who are pampered is sort of like the Garden of Eden. However, once people dabble in the darkness of selfishness, indulging their destructive desires only allows them to grow increasingly wicked. Even with the limits placed on Adam and Eve after they sinned (difficulty growing crops for Adam and difficulty with children for Eve) most of the world still grew increasingly worse such that a flood was used to destroy most life on the earth.

One might then ask, what was God looking for? We might consider that God wanted man to walk in the “light” of selflessness. First by choosing to be faithful in the Garden of Eden and failing that to choose to be faithful to him as he lived out his physical life. It might be deduced that God seeks those in his creation who use their free will to choose to emulate him in the light of faithfulness and selfless love.

The bible describes how the failure of man was known from before the world was created and that it had been planned that Jesus would be inserted into

the world and that through his death the sins of the world would be paid for so that redemption could be offered to man and dominion over the world taken back from Satan. This can seem a complicated approach to compensate for the problems caused by the poor use of free will. However, it demonstrates the power of the light of self-sacrifice to overcome the darkness of selfishness.

Fallen Man's Nature

The bible describes man's nature as the "flesh" driven by passions, desires, and ambitions such as;

Now the works of the flesh are manifest, which are these; Adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lasciviousness, Idolatry, witchcraft, hatred, variance, emulations, wrath, strife, seditions, heresies, Envyings, murders, drunkenness, revellings, and such like: of the which I tell you before, as I have also told you in time past, that they which do such things shall not inherit the kingdom of God. - Galatians 5:19-21

Satan's Ambitions

Satan cannot be everywhere at once. As a result, he needs to collectivize the world to leverage his influence. A limit was placed on his attempt to first collectivize the world at the Tower of Babel when God

created the different languages and people could not be so easily harnessed. As a result, Satan has moved more cautiously to advance his plans;

How art thou fallen from heaven, O Lucifer, son of the morning! how art thou cut down to the ground, which didst weaken the nations! For thou hast said in thine heart, I will ascend into heaven, I will exalt my throne above the stars of God: I will sit also upon the mount of the congregation, in the sides of the north: I will ascend above the heights of the clouds; I will be like the most High. Yet thou shalt be brought down to hell, to the sides of the pit. -
Isaiah 14:12-15

The World of Today

Prior to the Industrial Revolution people lived an agrarian life. This included the natural difficulties (raising crops and children) that God instituted to limit our self-destructive tendencies. Steam power began to replace muscle power and soon was supplemented by petroleum power and electric power. These allowed the creation of an artificial world to replace the natural world. In this artificial world Satan could make use of the weakness of the man's flesh to advance his plans. Much of the pain of loneliness resulting from the destruction of family life is masked by the easy availability of entertainment. Working for a corporation is seen as much

easier than trying to run your own business. Medical and dental advances have reduced much of the physical suffering in the world such that we are needed to comfort and support each other much less. Modern education has replaced generational family transmission of culture with the infusion of values prescribed externally which advance the darkness of selfishness through consumerism and shortsightedness.

People freed from the constraints of the natural world will tend towards the self-destructiveness that living by the flesh usually leads. Satan has been able through his systems to get people to arrange themselves to serve his purpose of global collectivism. Now that he is nearing completion of the technical tools he needs, we should expect less need for deception.

The reader intrigued by the title question "Can Christianity Make Sense?" might not agree with the premise that there is a God or that Jesus died for the sins of the world, but should at least get a more clear picture of a frame of reference upon which Christianity rests. Christianity would not make sense if evolution was true. Christianity would not make sense if people used their free will to choose to be kind and loving to each other.

How Christianity makes sense lies in the redemp-

tive work of Christ providing a path back to a connection with God, eternal life, and the transfer of the control of the world from Satan back to God. Christianity might be seen as a lifeline by which we have an opportunity to escape this present darkness (Eph 6:12). For those that love this world, Christianity may make no sense at all.

This book is intended to be useful for those who are questioning their own religious practice, those who have had bad religious experiences, and those who are simply curious about Christianity. Perhaps the first thing to understand about Christianity is that it does not make one a better person, it opens a door that if pursued could make people better if they choose to allow God to work in them through the Holy Spirit. Sadly, this opportunity is seldom pursued. As a result, one might never see in Christians that which seems of compelling interest.

The singular ritual of the Sunday morning church service from the outside can seem pointless as the sermon lecture can seem ineffective except as a sort of cheerleader exhortation to be good. Hymn singing seems often to be less musically interesting than popular music. In addition to an apparent lack of substance, churches seem little different in their mechanical function than many other organizational systems.

Those who attempt to by pass the obvious deficiencies of common Christian practice and tradition often go to the bible and read that. One problem many have with reading the bible (even Christians) is that it can seem boring and confusing. Since most of the book is about the nation of Israel, the problem many have is trying to apply what it says to us today. Even the gospels which describe the life of Christ (the Greek word for one anointed, Messiah in Hebrew) record the words of Jesus to the nation of Israel in fulfillment of prophecy.

The people of Israel had every expectation that their promised Messiah would usher in supremacy over Rome, restore the power of the historical kingdom of David and Solomon, and that those of Israel would prosper in this new kingdom. They had no idea that the Messiah would be put to death in order that he could redeem the world.

But we speak the wisdom of God in a mystery, even the hidden wisdom, which God ordained before the world unto our glory: Which none of the princes of this world knew: for had they known it, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. - 1 Corinthians 2:7-8

There were hints in the Old Testament

Know therefore and understand, that from the going

forth of the commandment to restore and to build Jerusalem unto the Messiah the Prince shall be seven weeks, and threescore and two weeks: the street shall be built again, and the wall, even in troublous times. And after threescore and two weeks shall Messiah be cut off, but not for himself: and the people of the prince that shall come shall destroy the city and the sanctuary; and the end thereof shall be with a flood, and unto the end of the war desolations are determined. - Daniel 9:25-26

Prophecy is an interesting phenomena. While many attempt to predict the future, the bible is the only book that has done so accurately such as with the description of the division of the empire of Alexander the Great over two hundred years before the act.

And the rough goat is the king of Grecia: and the great horn that is between his eyes is the first king. Now that being broken, whereas four stood up for it, four kingdoms shall stand up out of the nation, but not in his power. - Daniel 8:21-22

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There is difficulty with prophecy in consideration of free will. Many of the prophecies regarding Israel have yet to be fulfilled. These depend on a faithful remnant of Israel being used of God to still fulfill them at some future date. The history described in the bible can be seen more clearly in terms of God making changes in his approach to the world to accommodate various human failings as described in the blog article “Plan F”.

What the casual observer can discern about Christianity today is so encrusted with error, traditions, and peripheral assertions that the task of getting to the core can be daunting. It is the hope of the author that the various articles herein will be helpful in cutting out the extraneous and erroneous so that a more clear view of what is essential can be obtained

Plan “F”?

God created heaven and earth perfect. This was plan “A”. When Satan’s pride led him to rebel against God and take a third of the angels with him, God had plan “B”. When Adam and Eve sinned, plan “C” went into effect. However, just a few generations after Adam and Eve people became so wicked (amplified by angelic interference) that the world was destroyed with a flood and only eight people were saved. This brought us to plan “D”. However, with the Tower of Babel, it was apparent that a more direct means of getting people to know about their creation, God, and the need for faith a plan “E” was needed. The nation of Israel was supposed to be a nation of priests who would bring the knowledge of God to the whole world.

God put an awful lot of work into plan “E”. The Old Testament of the bible is almost all about What Israel was supposed to do, promises to Israel about the future, and a continual record of their disregard for God. Sending Jesus as the promised Messiah was the culmination of the plan of God to offer a way back to eternal life that was lost by Adam and Eve. Since Israel did not accept the kingdom offered by Jesus at his ministry to the nation, dramatic circumstances will be brought on earth such that a faithful remnant of Israel will be persuaded to receive the kingdom. However, this cataclysmic

event will not happen until after plan “F” has run its course.

The nation of Israel was supposed to receive the gospel of the kingdom and her king, Jesus, and subsequently bring the knowledge of God to the world. This knowledge instead was spread by those through the gospel of the grace of God introduced by Paul who was called to be an apostle to the gentiles. This might be called plan “F”. When the full number of the gentiles come in, plan “G” would be established where Jesus returns to earth and rules as king from Jerusalem for 1,000 years.

These various plans are not the result of God not having control (being all knowing he knew that we would fall short), but of his allowing humans and angles to have free will. The angels were created all at once and with knowledge. They made their choice all at once. Humans are born sequentially and in ignorance. As a result, God endures the evils that result from bad choices until he can harvest a “crop” of those that surrender to his will.

Some call these “plans” covenants or dispensations. However, these names can be misleading. The world “plan” can also be misleading. It does convey that God is in charge, however, it fails to convey that they might better be called opportunities. Each of these “plans” demonstrate that no matter what the

circumstances, most people will ultimately reject God and seek to go their own way. God structured our redemption to be based on faith (trust). Trust is given to that which is true. Israel would keep their laws when they trusted God as a demonstration of faith. Today with plan “F” those who trust in Jesus and his payment on the cross for our sins are regenerated unto the eternal life that is in Christ, can have the Holy Spirit make them better people, and have access to the wisdom of God..

Rom 11:12 Now if the fall of them be the riches of the world, and the diminishing of them the riches of the Gentiles; how much more their fulness?

Everybody wants to be Hitler

The man who believes in God is like a man who is asleep in the back seat of a speeding car. If he awakes suddenly, he sees someone he trusts driving the car and returns to his slumber.

The man who does not believe in God is like a person who is asleep in the back seat of a speeding car. When he awakes he sees no one driving the car and clambers over the seat to grab the wheel himself.

The problem is that the "car" is the world. A friend once summarized the book, "It takes a village to raise a child" as the federal government is the village and you are the child. There are many reasons people have for trying to gain control over others.

1. Greed. People like to have things. People do not want to work to build things when it is so much easier to take things from others. From plantations and colonial exploitation to illegal aliens and the slave markets of Rome we can find people saying, "How can I screw my neighbor and get rich".

2. Conformity. People do not like to feel uncomfortable. Differences make people uncomfortable. Killing people who are different makes everyone

feel better.

3. Vanity. We all like to think we are the smartest and best people in the world. It is only natural that some of these "best" people would go into journalism so that they can instruct the inferior people as to what they should think and do as well as expose the recalcitrant to public ridicule in order to force compliance.

4. Zeal. Some people give themselves over to a religious, environmental, political, or ideological jihad. For them, there is nothing more important than what can be achieved with a car bomb, crusade, or firmly worded letter to the Times.

Regardless of the motive, the first step is to gain power so that others can be controlled through force. The path to Hitler-hood is not achieved by following the path of truth. It is realized by doing and saying whatever you have to so that you can get control.

There are some Christian denominations that instruct their people to contend for control of the steering wheel. A more Biblical view is to trust that God will sort through the mess the world is in and will straighten it out. For us to think we have to fix the world is a measure of how far we have drifted away from God.

Who wants to be Superman

There is no denying the financial reward to be had by making a movie based on a comic book superhero. The reason is that most people either would like to be a superhero or believe that they are already one. Mutant movies are popular because they hold out the possibility that at any time anyone could suddenly develop a super power. Even though the number of mutations required for even the most meager of super abilities exceed the odds of winning the lottery everyday for a thousand years.

What high school boy hasn't dreamed of being a football star or what teenage girl hasn't dreamed of being so popular that everyone would adore her. If only they could be smart enough to confound their teachers or able enough to live without parental shackles. The imagination is a place of refuge for the teenage proletariat. We have paraded before us an endless number of supermen from Tarzan to Sherlock Holmes and from Bill Gates who was rewarded for harnessing the power of lawyers to Obama who was rewarded for harnessing the power of the press. Who else has received a Nobel prize just for being.

Many laugh at a Trekie clad in costume attending a convention ala Galaxy Quest, where his dreams of exceptionality can be sustained for a few days.

However, what about those further up the corporate food chain. Having a big salary, expensive car, and luxurious apartment may be "proof" to someone that he has indeed achieved superhero status. His "costume" may be more conventional, but he is living the dream. However, "exceptionality" does not require proof. There are many more people who see themselves as "super" with just the confidence of the self-deluded to sustain them.

Dreams of superpowers are not limited just to the imaginary or secular. Religion has had its fair share of those who would soar to new heights in a "balloon" filled with an unhealthy amount of self-esteem. We need not consider just the crusader or jihadist. Religion often finds ways to feed the desires of people who just want to feel special, superior, and show contempt for others.

Religion attracts many who want to tell everyone what to do. However, even more are attracted to show what good they can do. In a way, the tellers and doers have a symbiotic relationship. Like a drug dealer and a junkie, each supports the other. When Christianity is administered as just another religion, it quickly conforms to the "I'm better than you" model. However, instead of the, "I can blow up more people than you can" phenomena, you often get the, "I'm saved and you're just a sinner" declaration. While generally maintaining a lower body

count than Muslims, Christian "supermen" are often just as blind, arrogant, and contemptuous.

If we look at ourselves in a mirror of truth, we should not see a superman, we should see a "failureman".

Luke 18:13 And the publican, standing afar off, would not lift up so much as his eyes unto heaven, but smote upon his breast, saying, God be merciful to me a sinner.

Truth brings humility. Humility opens the door of God's grace so that he is able to work in us to make us more like Jesus. Every time we want to pick up our cape and soar like superman, we need to remember that we are shutting the door to God's work in us and flying off to fantasy land.

An evolutionary idea

One of the biggest handicaps Christians have is being bullied into thinking evolution is true and thus the Bible cannot be trusted. We need to re-visit this idea. Christian kids that go to college are often ridiculed because they believe something as primitive and unscientific as Christianity. It should help these kids to understand how sad this so-called "science" really is.

Darwin had two theories. The first was natural selection. The idea that existence is a contest and only the most fit would survive was attractive to Margaret Sanger (founder of planned parenthood) and Adolph Hitler (founder of WWII). While we can see some support for this idea by the fact that most slow cockroaches have been eliminated from the gene pool, the idea that we can improve ourselves by eliminating "inferior" people or races has begun to fall out of favor.

Darwin's second idea was that continual mutations bring new species to the survival arena. He thought these two ideas worked together to try to explain how dirt became people. What Darwin did not understand was that in the 150 years since his observations not one favorable or advantageous mutation has ever been observed. There have been trillions upon trillions of unfavorable mutations.

The reason for this is that an unfavorable mutation only needs one thing to go wrong. A favorable mutation would need a million things to go right all at the same time in the same reproductive cell so that these mutations would be reproduce-able.

People often point to dinosaur bones as proof of evolution. However, since reptiles get larger the longer they live and people didn't eat meat and lived longer before the flood, we might expect some reptiles to get very large. It should also not be surprising that a world wide flood would cause some species to become extinct. We also might consider that after the flood when people were allowed to eat meat that the mastodon was a little slower than the elephant.

Science has proven Darwin half right. We do lose genetic information and species become extinct. However, there is no source of new genetic information. Randomness only produces cancers, tumors, and decay. It is sad that what passes for science today is not a search for truth, but a complex arrangement of grant money, tenure, sucking up to get graduate degrees, and publishing papers that conform to expectations and political correctness.

There is one source for truth and wisdom in the universe. Once you unplug yourself from that source, you are vulnerable to being tossed to and fro by

every passing fancy. Evolution and its associated ideas are promulgated to provide a snug nest in which those who reject God can feel comfortable. These are not scientists declaring truth but propagandists providing pacifiers. They can achieve high levels of sincerity because they have first deceived themselves.

Romans 1:21-22 Because that, when they knew God, they glorified him not as God, neither were thankful; but became vain in their imaginations, and their foolish heart was darkened. Professing themselves to be wise, they became fools,

The dust on the moon is 1/2" deep, there are no "transition" life forms in the fossil record, and all humans are descended from one female (mitochondrial DNA). To laugh at the Bible for being not "scientific" while declaring that nothing existed and then it blew up and became people is way past sad.

The truth of the matter

"It's not a lie if you believe it" - George Costanza

John 18:38a Pilate saith unto him, What is truth?

Pilate's rhetorical question is one of the most ironic in history considering he said it to He who is truth. Philosophers have argued well past the ability of anyone to be interested on the subject of truth. The problem is that we in our natural state are unable to recognize truth, disinterested in truth, and even hostile to truth should it be forced upon us. Consider how often the following is given us and we can see how little what is really true matters.

1. It never happened.
2. Those who say it happened are just being divisive.
3. It may have happened but it wasn't important.
4. If it happened, it was someone else who did it.
5. Those who say it happened have done worse themselves.

6. My friends wouldn't have done something like that.

7. I did slightly know those who did that.

8. I was forced to do it.

9. I might have done that once, but I have gone through rehab.

10. I don't remember that having happened.

11. Those who suggest that happened are just being divisive.

12. It never happened.

Most people consider whatever gets you what you want to be the same thing as truth. If I tell you its is my birthday and you give me a present, then it must be my birthday. Consider the thinking that goes, "Only a bad person would have said that, I am not a bad person, therefore I never said it". What most people consider truth is upon examination quite flexible.

Real truth is inflexible, absolute, unchanging, and permanent. This describes God, Jesus, and the Bible. We would have no interest in giving up the

comforting delusions we have unless there was something inside of us thirsting for truth. Jesus tells us that no one can come to him unless the Father draws him. This is because we are drawn to truth. Right before Pilate blew off Jesus with his "What is truth" comment, Jesus said that those who were of the truth would hear his voice.

Those who are of the truth resonate with the truth and it burns within us. Those who are not drawn to truth hate the truth because it shows them for what they are.

John 3:19-20 And this is the condemnation, that light is come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil. For every one that doeth evil hateth the light, neither cometh to the light, lest his deeds should be reproved.

Most people are willing to hear the truth about others, but draw the line at having the truth about themselves revealed. Truth about others makes us cynical. Truth about ourselves makes us humble. If we do not seek truth even at the risk of discomfort, are we really "of the truth"?

How to pick a church

A lot of people look for a church to attend by using that most sacred of documents, the phone book. It can be tricky if you are not familiar with the brands of Christianity or the code words. There are Reformed, Catholic, Baptist, and Charismatic churches. They come in liberal, moderate, and conservative flavors.

If you are inclined towards going to a liberal church, ask yourself, "Why bother". You can have more fun at Waterworld. Liberal churches really are ones that have switched over to the religion of secularism (the worship of man in general and self in particular). They still call themselves "Christian" so that they don't have to forfeit the trusts and endowments left by members who died decades earlier and really were Christian.

Many liberal churches are intensively active in social justice, pro abortion, homosexual rights, feminism, and vegetarianism. They make an occasional reference to Jesus such as, "Jesus wouldn't have been a hater". However, you will not learn how to be more like Jesus here, you will only see how Jesus can be made more like Lenin. Liberals can be quite zealous, but it is

usually not for Christ.

Most Main-line (reformed and Catholic) churches are moderate and designed for Christians running on inertia. Jesus doesn't mean much to these people either. They have doctrines that prescribe the USDA minimum requirements to get into heaven which are not too demanding and then they can get on with the rest of their "real" lives. Most moderate churches trend towards the liberal but without the zeal of the liberal evangelists of secularism.

Conservative churches often have a "bunker mentality" in that they see Christianity under attack by a corruptive world. This is not an erroneous view. However, they often respond to this attack by making rules and measuring how well they each keep them. Jesus is often held high, but then you are told that you have to make yourself like him. Conservatives often seem unable to relax. It is almost as if they feel it is up to them to keep an evil world at bay with a dour look and an expression of contempt.

Regardless of the flavor, churches will operate with programs, events, classes, activities, and procedures. It is almost as if someone thought Christianity needed to be streamlined for high efficiency automation. Real Christianity is about truth, love, and humility and surrender to God for the work He has in and through us as He makes us more like Je-

sus. Church Christianity is often about you accepting a package of doctrine and doing what you are told.

In the Bible Christians are told to love one another and they even call each other "brother". This speaks volumes of the relationship nature of Christianity (us with Christ and each other). Organizational systems cannot do relationships. They often try with scripted and orchestrated procedures, but in the end they just fall flat.

Trying to live as a Christian outside the stultifying and restrictive confines of church is a lot like swimming upstream. You might want to cultivate a relationship with another Christian however, they often see Christianity as a matter of herding you into their church corral.

The Christian searching for fellowship with other Christians faces a sea of churches sinking into an ocean of worldliness. Those few churches that try to resist this tidal current often end up going through the door of the Galatians and walking down the path of the Pharisees and ending up imprisoning themselves in a cell of self-satisfaction and smugness.

For those few Christians unsatisfied with "church" type Christianity the only option is to keep searching for other like-minded Christians with whom real fellowship and the deeper Christian life can be pursued. This might require visiting various churches, however, you might want to avoid all the entangling commitments church membership can entail or you might find yourself herded into a religion "corral".

Church as Theater

There are quite a few Hitler wannabes in Christian circles that want to direct the actions of others and quite a few more Superman wannabes that want to show off their ability to accomplish what has been declared. In theater terms the writer / director slot is filled with the Hitler wannabes and the actor slots are filled with the Superman wannabes.

This plays out in a remarkably consistent way. We can see in the description of the Pharisees the very human tendency to parade oneself before and admiring audience;

Matthew 6:5 And when thou prayest, thou shalt not be as the hypocrites are: for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and in the corners of the streets, that they may be seen of men. Verily I say unto you, They have their reward.

Hypocrites = hupokrites = "speak from under a mask" = an assumed role

People were trying to turn Christianity into a managed system of performance right from the beginning such as reserving the better seats for the important members of the audience.

James 2:3 And ye have respect to him that weareth

the gay clothing, and say unto him, Sit thou here in a good place; and say to the poor, Stand thou there, or sit here under my footstool:

The important people in the theater are the good looking, well spoken, and intelligent ones, they are the director and actors. The rest of us end up as stage hands, cooks, costumers, and maintenance people.

Christianity was never supposed to be about performance. Without performance there can be no competition for who is "best". Without performers, there is no division between actor and audience. Christianity was never supposed to be a picture of or approximation of a better life. It was always supposed to be about a life transformed through the power of God.

We live our life through relationships and it is the power of God that can transform a selfish heart to a loving one. This reality is manifest through our relationships. We do not appear better, we are made better.

Church should not be a place where we dress well, and do not use bad language, it should be an assembly of sinners, helpless to make ourselves better and all living in total dependence on our Savior.

The Democratic People's Republic of America - What Tocqueville didn't get

Why does America have to go around the world shoving democracy down people's throats? If you have a good idea, people will steal it. - Dick Gregory

The idea of democracy sounds attractive. Everyone gets to say what they want. However, democracy fails when more than one person is involved. As soon as you have more than one person, there are disparities in ability and temperament such that one person can bully or influence others and that people often differ in their ability to understand the effects of that to which they agree.

Democracy is the means by which otherwise rational people agree to become enslaved by collectivism.

The concept of democracy was resurrected during the historical period called the enlightenment when wealthy layabouts would gather together to impress each other with how smart they were. They did this by reading about ancient cultures where wealthy slave owner layabouts would gather together and impress each other with how smart they were. The system of government these ancients invented for themselves was called democracy because each

slave owner was interested in keeping as many rights for himself as he could.

America was founded on the basic principal of keeping as much money away from the King for the wealthy land owners as possible. The problem with democracy is that people often begin to think that it should apply to everyone. This was tried in France with disastrous results.

True democracy is essentially a melee of everyone rushing about to get as much as they can for themselves. Until street gangs, war lords, or military juntas arise to establish order, true democracy can be rather unpleasant. This aspect of democracy was delayed in America for many years as those who would be discontent were directed towards the advantages of seizing Indian land.

True democracy can be stabilized through the indoctrination of children in school, the homogenization of a culture through media, and the reassuring comfort of complicit religion.

A stable democracy can be made to accept any absurdity by just making them think that what they are doing is in their own interest. In this way doing a body cavity search of an eighty year old woman at an airport is seen as more reasonable than telling people from Saudi Arabia that they cannot come

here.

1 Thessalonians 5:3 For when they shall say, Peace and safety; then sudden destruction cometh upon them, as travail upon a woman with child; and they shall not escape.

Those who have been led to believe that evolution is a sound idea often see in democracy a progressive step in human evolution. They fail to recognize that only in cultures where Christianity once flourished does democracy even appear to work. As a former Christian country transitions to the religion of secularism, you find that increasingly more stern legislation is passed in an attempt force society to appear the way it did when most people followed Christ. They think that the public order of the past was a result of education and laws. The present lack of order must, in their minds, be the result of a lack of education or the need for even more laws. In this way an apostate society can be willingly brought into the slavery of the fascist collective state. It is ironic that the memory of the freedom people had in Christ is used as a "carrot" to get people who have rejected Christ to put their necks in the noose of slavery.

The Real World

It is not unusual for a father to tell his son, "Just wait until you have to deal with the real world". This is usually intended to mean that when the child moves from his carefree childhood world into the larger social world and has to earn a living he will find that he will be forced to be more responsible.

Consider the following "worlds"

1. Natural world. Here we find tornadoes, weeds, and disease.
2. Childhood world. Here we see play and the unappreciated manifestation of all we need.
3. Social world. Here we find family, classmates, coworkers, bosses, and government.
4. Entertainment world. Here we find a story or movie that takes us away briefly from our world.
5. Ideal world. Here we find an constructed environment in which we would prefer to live or make manifest in the social world.
6. Alternative world. Technology has provided

things like the Sims and Second life so that we have the opportunity to combine 2-5 in such a way that we can be drawn into a world that is imaginary, yet is so attractive that it has a narcotic effect.

7. Spiritual world. Here we can find both fallen and ministering angels.

It is interesting the number of college students who abruptly come to the end of their childhood world when they first experience that the small refrigerator they have in their dorm room becomes empty. This can be a shattering experience and cause many to become communist in response to the flagrant injustice that an empty refrigerator represents.

Since we are all born into families of one sort or another, we all experience the social world. As our world approaches global collectivism, the character of the social world is changing. The significance of family decreases while our position in the collective becomes more significant. Wealth, fame, power, and status are all derived from the ability to influence or exploit others. As everyone pursues the opportunity to exploit others, we are all dragged into increasingly greater collectivism. Like a tightening noose, we are being herded by our own ambitions.

The ideal world is a little like the occultists who attempt to materialize their desires by force of will

through the etheric plane to be manifest in the physical realm. College students who sat on the floor of their dorm rooms in the 60s with their arms linked together singing songs like "Kumbaya", "Puff the magic dragon", and "I'd like to teach the world to sing", created for themselves an idealized reality where social justice, socialism, recycling, and vegetarianism were transcendent. Like Islam, adherents of this religion can be zealous to make the social world conform to their idealized "perfect" world. There are variations in the use of coercive force. Some Christians would scold everyone into complying with their ideals. Most liberals seek to bring their world into reality via the power of legislation. Many Muslims will kill anyone who objects except where they are in the minority and then they declare that Islam is a religion of peace.

The alternative world used to be a more rare phenomena. Many people step into the entertainment world briefly and experience for the length of a book or a movie an alternative existence. Someone might occasionally become convinced that he lived in Middle Earth because he became obsessed with the Lord of the Rings trilogy. However, now, with technology, many more people can shut themselves up in their room and play the Sims or Second Life and be whatever they want to be. Many of these people later emerge from their artificial world to discover that the life they have neglected for so long

has become impoverished both in material and relational terms.

The spiritual world is the least understood. Some people play around with gateway activities such as Ouija boards, tarot cards, automatic writing, even some yoga and meditation opens doors through which people can come in contact with and become subservient to demonic forces. There are also ministering angels that can protect and encourage Christians. Christians also have the indwelling of the Holy Spirit to aid in recognizing truth.

For most of the history of the world we have lived in worlds 1,3, and 7. It has been the intention of Satan to create and advance artificial worlds and perpetuate the childhood world for his purposes. These artificial worlds exist to blind us to truth.

We can see a little of the difference between the real world and the unreal world.

Revelation 3:17 Because thou sayest, I am rich, and increased with goods, and have need of nothing; and knowest not that thou art wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked:

In our blindness, we can be taken and enslaved. We should all hear the words that were spoken to Jonah, "O sleeper, arise, call upon thy God".

Feminism - Self-loathing as a form of political activism

There are two things to understand about women that will help in understanding why Satan sees them as a point to attack.

1 Timothy 2:14 And Adam was not deceived, but the woman being deceived was in the transgression.

Genesis 3:16 Unto the woman he said, I will greatly multiply thy sorrow and thy conception; in sorrow thou shalt bring forth children; and thy desire shall be to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee.

Women are more vulnerable to deception and have a "desire" (stretching out after, used of a beast seeking to devour) for their husband's position. This makes them vulnerable to seeing their position in a family as repulsively subordinate. Satan first tells women they are too stupid to raise the children God has given them so their children must be removed from them and instructed by "professionals". He then tells women that since they now have nothing worthwhile to do, they should get an education so that they can assume a place of prestige in society. While this

can appeal to vanity, it seldom satisfies.

At the core of feminism is an ironic revulsion of everything that is feminine. The natural desire of a woman to be a mother, to nurture, to be protected and be cared for is despised by feminists. They see women as defective if they seek out this natural role. To them the artificial construct of society is the preferable alternative to family because they can soar to whatever "heights" they can imagine. The fact that these "heights" are illusionary and transient are of little matter.

It is sad to see a young woman making \$7.50 an hour as a clerk spend \$500 on a "power suit" because she has become convinced that she is working her way up the corporate ladder and can achieve anything she wants. It is tragic to see young women poison themselves and their babies with chemicals so that they can avoid any pregnancy that might interfere with their ambitions. The thoroughness of this deception is only occasionally glimpsed in old age as a possible life of family, children, and love is seen as having slipped through fingers too busy with self.

The only protection a woman has against the barrage of propaganda spewed out of the mouths of those agents of Satan in schools and in the media is the truth. They often point to the fact that women

business owners make less than male business owners as proof of the hatred of women. They ignore the fact that a woman could make much more money running a plumbing supply business than a flower shop, but that women generally want to run a flower shop more than a plumbing supply store. Since feminism is a Satanic deception, it would follow that truth is not found in their claims and charges.

Feminism would be comical if it were not for the destroyed lives this corrosive deception delivers. Feminism leaves its victims used and discarded. Once their work as a drone for the corporate hive is finished and they can no longer serve the state, they are cast aside and haunted by the voices of children they never had and love they never knew.

Why church is boring

The reason church is boring is the same reason school is boring, you have to sit while someone who is a relative stranger drones on about things that you don't care about. If you add in an uncomfortable seat and critical social pressure, you have a recipe for an all around unpleasant experience. Maybe its just me, but staring at the back of peoples heads for an hour isn't that mesmerizing.

Being lectured to is boring because we are not as interested in what is being said as opposed to wanting to hear an answer to a question such as, "Where is the bathroom", "How can I get my wife to show kindness", and "How can I get my kids to stop being selfish little savages"?

Since most churches are denominational franchises (like 7-11 or Burger King), you can walk into any one and get the guaranteed same experience. Pastors like lectures because after four years of having to listen to them in seminary, it is now their turn to lecture.

To insure that a franchise remains consistent to the brand, churches operate like a mechanical contrivance. Activities and events are scripted

and programmed to prevent any deviation from what would be expected. As a consumer of the service provided by a church you obtain the assurance that you are a good person and/or you are going to heaven. In exchange for this assurance, you pay money and meet the minimum denominational requirements.

Church bores most people. Some because since they have purchased their assurance, they want to get on with activities in which they are interested. Others are bored because they want to actually live a Christian life. Pastors usually prefer those in the first group. The ones in the second group scare them because they seldom know anything about living for Christ other than those scripted activities defined by their denomination.

The lecture format is useful to pastors because it keeps people distant. People are not inclined to "look behind the curtain" if they are kept at a distance. The Bible says that the purpose of church leaders is to help us grow into the full image of Christ. While a pastor may have a seminary education and have been approved of by his denomination, it is difficult to think of a single pastor who has actually helped his flock grow into the full image of Christ. This deficiency becomes more and more apparent as you actually get to know your pastor.

Real Christianity (as opposed to church or mechanical Christianity) needs to be lived out through relationships (us with Christ and each other). Boredom should be an indicator that something is wrong with the way we are being Christian. Either we are so self-consumed that we fail to find things that amuse us in church or we have been directed into life-wasting "Christian" church activities that fail to help us grow into the full image of Christ.

The solution to the problem of churches, is not to abandon them but rather use them to seek out older and wiser Christians who clearly show the light and love of Christ in their lives. These are the people that we can seek out and ask to show us how to know Jesus as well as they do. It is important to escape the church machine and find the real "church" through the relationships we establish with other Christians.

Why Satan hates husbands

Definition of HUSBANDRY

1. archaic : the care of a household
2. the control or judicious use of resources : conservation
3. the cultivation or production of plants or animals : agriculture
4. modern : maintenance of household equipment and pay bills, otherwise drink beer, watch sports, and stay out of everyone's way.

Aliens in space monitoring our TV broadcasts might be justified to conclude that the lowest form of life in a typical household is not the pet dog or cat but the husband or father. The fact that Satan has allocated so many of his media resources into portraying men as obtuse, blundering, and wayward "children" that need to be corrected, instructed, and led by women, indicates that this is a very important strategy for him.

With men marginalized, Satan has full access to women, who are more easily deceived. If men were not so crippled, they might exercise influ-

ence over what remains of their families and resist the direction Satan wants the world to go. Since Satan wants to control the world, he has to lead everyone into global collectivism. Men seeing this, might object so Satan has to pull out all the stops so that men are incapacitated.

The first step was to turn Christianity into church. Christianity is supposed to elevate men to be leaders in their home. Church by-passes men and tells women what rules their family has to follow.

The second step was to advance technology so that men and women were as interchangeable as the machines they operated. The industrial revolution made the product of labor a commodity such that the labor itself became just a component in the process. Cheaper products create a growing emphasis on money.

The third step was mass compulsory education. Once children see society rather than family as the source of instruction, values, and culture, the role of the husband is even further trivialized.

The fourth step was societal mobility that resulted from preceding trends. One needs to go where work or school are and friends and family need to be left behind.

The fifth step was to promote a culture of consumerism. If men can be satiated with sports, beer, pornography, and pizza, then they may be kept inert as well as ignorant and just go along with the societal flow towards complete collectivization.

Men have been cut-off from real Christianity and have little interest in church that seems only to scold and ask for money. Men have little of value to teach their sons because they themselves have received little. Men have little of value to say to each other. Politics and religion have become consumerized such that they mean as little as what flavor of ice cream or what sports team is preferred

Some men are rediscovering the truth of Christianity in spite of church. Some men are taking advantage of home school to teach their children about real life instead of turning them over to be indoctrinated with the world's values. Some men are learning how to lead in their homes, love their wives, and find the life we were called to live.

John 15:19 If ye were of the world, the world would love his own: but because ye are not of the world, but I have chosen you out of the world, therefore the world hateth you.

Satan (who runs the world for now) hates even the word "husband". He is trying to replace it with "significant other" or "partner". The word "husband" appears in no school books. Satan hates men because they represent the only real threat to his plans. While the affairs of the world cannot be influenced, men may still find truth and carve out for their families enclaves of refuge from a world being enslaved.

How to pick the right career

One scholar determined that in ancient Sumeria that 20% of the population were priests and the other 80% were slaves. It seems that early on the advantages of exploiting your neighbor for comfort and profit were clearly understood.

Western Civilization was built on the principal that if you could kill someone and take his land, reduce the neighbors to slaves, and use the profit from the land to keep enough soldiers to kill anyone trying to take the land from you, you were an aristocrat and entitled to rule the land.

With the introduction of the industrial revolution slavery became outmoded. It is sad that the Civil War was fought just a few years before slavery would have ended anyway. The Europeans saw that it was much more cost effective to kick people off the land call them free and let them starve. These urban nomads became wage slaves.

Modern society has achieved social stability (no rioting in the streets) through legislation that has resulted in a population that is at least 50% subsidized by taxes on the other 50%. Even this is only possible by borrowing money. (As a side note it is interesting to see how long people will believe that they can really loan themselves money.

Into this realm of precarious economic equilibrium young people every day decide what they wish to be trained for so that they can have a prosperous life. The possibility of starting a business has been pretty much eliminated by a combination of government regulation and corporate dominance which are often indistinguishable. Like centuries earlier the good land has been seized and is held out of reach. We all now must find employment by the masters of the realm.

At this point one has to choose whether to go to college. The reasons for going to college are a little like the reasons for being a "house slaver" rather than a "field slave" on a plantation, there is more comfort and prestige. However, while one was selected to be a "house slave" in the old system, the new system requires you to go into debt, spend four years training (learning little of any real value), then you have to make supplication with various organizations in an attempt to make a home for yourself. Even then with layoffs, you are never really secure.

With both spouses working and children either denied or in day care, there is a greater similarity to the slave systems of history than many may at first recognize. With children sacrificed for the sake of a good income and the two children you do have going off with their own lives, The career you pick

will leave you with a big house that you may be able to sell and the money sufficient to keep you plugged into cable TV in a nursing home so that you will be distracted from on reflecting on your empty life as you wait to die.

The fact is that what career you pick is less important than how you live your life and the relationships you build and maintain. A career is just a job. Pick one that lets you and your spouse spend as much time with your children as possible. Live poor, but live together. In the end "career" is just a societal label to deceive you into thinking your position in society has value beyond money. Your career is only an indication of what you are worth to others as a slave. As soon as your value drops and you no longer have worth, you will be cast aside.

If you want to invest yourself in a "career" pick father, mother, husband, or wife. It is an investment that pays off in real dividends.

MGTOW and Red Pill

In the early part of the twentieth century in the United States history records that women won the right to vote. It would be more accurate to say that men lost the right to represent their families. The social assault on men has been continuous since then. The idea of the "red pill" derived from the movie *The Matrix*, represents an awakening. It is an awakening from an enforced slumber so it is not surprising that there is some resentment associated with this awakening.

This is summarized on one MGTOW (men going their own way) web site as;

One can argue that:

- Our world is a corporate plantation and men are its primary slaves.
- You have unwittingly been programmed since birth to become a slave.
- A wife, a mortgage and kids almost always guarantees you a life of servitude.
- Men do not innately owe to women or society anything, but they still end up as slaves in sex-

less marriages with moody wives.

- The illusion of marriage from prior generations lures men into bondage.

But do not despair: "waking up" is the key to your freedom.

This is eerily like the financial awakening that happens when people embrace the philosophy of libertarianism. In both awakenings people are presented with an elevated perspective of self as the remedy for having been exploited.

Most people see in the presentation of history an uninterrupted progression of technology, social evolution, and material prosperity. This social inertia tends to validate the world system (matrix). However, there are those who awake and eager for freedom. The problem is that the "freedom" of self-indulgence brings just another form of slavery.

True freedom can only be found in truth. Truth is only found in Jesus. This can be particularly difficult to consider when one looks at the complicity of churches with the assault on men.

Christianity was supposed to be about men leading their families. Instead it became an organizational system where men had only value as sources of

money and as rule enforcers in their homes. The Bible says that women should remain silent in the churches. This is not because the Bible hates women, it is because the role of the man in the home is essential. When women by-pass their husbands to get instructions from their "priest", the home is violated. Instead of building up the home, women are given tools with which they can assault their husbands.

As one takes a closer look at history, one sees not a conspiracy of women, the illuminati, or the Tri-lateral Commission. Rather the guiding hand of Satan can be seen. What is so sad is how often he has used Christians to advance his plans. Satan has been guiding us into inescapable collectivism for centuries. This is to hold us in bondage to serve his purposes.

Men do not need a "movement". Men do not need to "go their own way". Men, like women, need truth.

Both men and women suffer in a relationship when one is only giving and the other only taking. Christianity calls us to selfless love. Relationships based on anything else become at best negotiated partnerships mechanical and devoid of anything fulfilling, rewarding, or satisfying.

Men wounded in encounters with selfish women can resist bitterness by understanding how completely Satan has deceived the world (women are more vulnerable to deception, 1Tim 2:14). Men who have suffered as result of foolish women who have been deceived by Satan might consider how important it is to have discernment, wisdom and understanding provided by God to those who draw nearer to him.

The bible describes love in terms of selflessness;

1Co 13:4 4-8 Love meekly and patiently bears ill treatment from others. Love is kind, gentle, benign, pervading and penetrating the whole nature, mellowing all which would have been harsh and austere; is not envious. Love does not brag, nor does it show itself off, is not ostentatious, does not have an inflated ego, does not act unbecomingly, does not seek after the things which are its own, is not irritated, provoked, exasperated, aroused to anger, does not take into account the evil, does not rejoice at the iniquity but rejoices with the truth, endures all things, believes all things, hopes all things, bears up under all things, not losing heart nor courage. Love never fails.

The man who has been exploited or taken advantage of comes to painfully understand that making oneself vulnerable by showing love is risky. However,

when two people both are vulnerable to each other, there is a possibility for a depth of experience that is the reality to the storybook reputation of love.

Without a heart surrendered to and trusting in Jesus, one does not have the discernment to avoid selfish predatory people. Even becoming one yourself while offering a little protection from some of the more egregious exploiters, does not provide anything really deep or substantive.

A man attacked by a tiger might feel anger towards the tiger, but should also consider how he might avoid such painful encounters in the future. Not all women have been taken in by Satan. However, such a woman who walks in truth and can respond to a man the way God intended, is rare. A man worthy of her is also uncommon.

There are only a few ways to live life with regard to relationships;

1. Trust to luck. This is like buying a lottery ticket with about the same chance for success.
2. Remain alone. While avoiding some of the pain of being exploited, it limits what one can experience in life.
3. Become a predator. This option corrupts the soul

by creating a hunger that is never satisfied while leaving a trail of victims.

4. Become a godly man worthy of a godly woman.

The last option may sound like something unappealing or even unrealistic. However, the first three options each have their own problems. Option four has the advantage of being facilitated by the God who created the universe and has an individual love for you. God created the very idea of marriage and family. One might well anticipate that he would work to make sure it functioned well for those who invited him into their lives to do so.

The steely resolve to not get hurt again can motivate us to be better able to contend against those who would take advantage of our weakness. However, this often commits us in the direction of and to a life of continuing combat. A surrender to God often allows his work in us, protection of, and leading to a life he desires for us. It is understandable that ones wounds might lead to a reluctance to trust. However, one should ask in whom else one could or should trust.

A man that surrenders his life to God and trusts in Jesus can gain the wisdom to be the leader in his home, a man his wife can depend on, his children look up to and build the family he had previously thought would happen automatically. Having a new appreciation for how corrupt the world has become, he is better able to raise his own children to be better prepared and protected.

ADD, ADHD, ASD, PDD, CDD, ODD, CD, OCD, PTSD - The pathology of behavior?

What these acronym have in common is a "D" for disorder. While usual attention is paid to the preceding letters, it can be interesting to stop and ask ourselves about the "disorder".

At the beginning of the Industrial Revolution when families were being de-constructed to obtain components for the factories, children who could not work as factory components were placed in a substitute factory, school. Since some parents were not enthusiastic to have their families destroyed, it was presented to them that this was a good thing since now their children would receive an education (presumably this would mean a future life of wealth and ease). The fiction that ability counts for naught and instruction accomplishes all continues to this day and is more widely held than it was at first.

Oddly enough the music video by Pink Floyd called, "Another brick in the wall" does a fair job capturing the essence of school. However, it has been observed that some children are not so easily processed. Rather than consider the mass processing of children as possibly a mistake, it was necessary to determine what "defect" there

was in these children that made them resistant to processing.

In 1966 a psychologist and associate professor Sam D. Clements from Arkansas was hired by the National Institute of Neurological Diseases and Blindness with funding from the Easter Seal Society to be a consultant and published a report called, "Minimal Brain Dysfunction in Children". This was the point at which behavior started to be called a pathology and in need of medical "correction".

On the Bataan death march those captured soldiers who objected to internment or even were unable to keep up with the pace of the group were executed by the Japanese. Today those children who resist conforming to the school machine (or who have been targeted by teachers as uncooperative) are handled in a less brutal fashion more similar to the Communist political reeducation camps. With the aid of chemical treatment and corrective behavior modification, many more children can be successfully made compliant. The children who have been through such alterations should be thankful that electroshock and lobotomies are so expensive.

The irony may escape those who so proudly declare the value of diversity all the while they condemn anyone who thinks or behaves differently to medical correction and treatment.

God created many different types of people. This does not fit the homogenized global collective Satan is bringing to conclusion. For example, in a large family they may have a Downs Syndrome child. This may not be cruelty on the part of God, but an opportunity to draw the family closer together to care for their disadvantaged sibling. Today the child would most likely be aborted before it was born. However, if the child was allowed to live, it would most likely be dumped on the state to care for with tax money. Few people in our world today want to have to deal with someone who is burdensome or consumes resources (time, money, or otherwise).

In the world God created, we have to draw upon the love he gives us to share with each other. In the artificial society Satan created, we need to conform and be productive, or we need to understand that we will suffer the penalty for being different or burdensome.

Thankfully children today identified as non-conforming provide employment to legions of social workers. Once there is no more money to subsidize this industry, these children may be dealt with in a more pragmatic way such as established by the National Socialists.

Matthew 11:16-17 But whereunto shall I liken this

generation? It is like unto children sitting in the markets, and calling unto their fellows, And saying, We have piped unto you, and ye have not danced; we have mourned unto you, and ye have not lamented.

John 15:19 If ye were of the world, the world would love his own: but because ye are not of the world, but I have chosen you out of the world, therefore the world hateth you.

Let every man be fully persuaded in his own mind.

Romans 14:5 One man esteemeth one day above another: another esteemeth every day alike. Let every man be fully persuaded in his own mind.

This verse is rather interesting. It suggests a couple of principles that are often overlooked in churches today.

1. Allowance for different views and levels of understanding.
2. The average Christian is not to be told what to believe, but to be engaged and convinced.

Modern denominations circle their wagons around doctrines of theology. The word "theology" worries me. The "study" (ology) of the subject of God (theo) seems a little irreverent in that it often implies a subject which can be mastered by study.

Theology is often the package of doctrines of a particular denomination. Often what is learned in seminary is the defense of these doctrines.

I prefer an approach to Bible study that main-

tains reverence, makes room for that which is not known, elevates truth over "being right", encourages inquiry, and maintains humility.

The Catholic church took the Greek form of the academy and gave us modern scholasticism. This elevates man as the judge and gave us such things as the so-called age of enlightenment and German rationalism that desiccated Christianity to such a point that many found it easy to move from Christianity to political progressivism 100-200 years ago.

I think the apprenticeship (Paul and Timothy) method of instruction has more value than the classroom / lecture method. Christianity was always intended to be relational. We have tried many ways to make Christianity into an organizational system, but it is not a good fit.

Christianity is "Christ in you the hope of glory", not the achievement of smart people.

Each Christian is supposed to be engaged in learning and evaluating what is true;

Romans 14:5 One man esteemeth one day above another: another esteemeth every day alike. Let every man be fully persuaded in his own mind.

Hebrews 13:17a Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves: (better translation = Stop resisting and allow yourselves to be persuaded by those you have chosen to follow)

The idea of an insular clergy whose professional function is the administration of Christianity may often be the reality we find today. However, the purpose of church leaders was always supposed to be helping each one of us become like Jesus;

Ephesians 4:11-15 And he gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers; For the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ: Till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ: That we henceforth be no more children, tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the sleight of men, and cunning craftiness, whereby they lie in wait to deceive; But speaking the truth in love, may grow up into him in all things, which is the head, even Christ:

The view of a church leader as a priest or pastor who has achieved a high level of Christianity through study and natural ability seems at odds with what the Bible says.

I think there are many well intentioned people who study theology and becomes pastors and priests. However, I think all too often we are using the

wrong tools and going in the wrong direction. I make this statement by using the Ephesians measurement standard. How many of us are really growing to be like Jesus?

Christian Error

It was understood from the beginning that there would be both intentional error and accidental error introduced in the teaching of Christianity.

The question of how to deal with this was addressed by Paul;

2 Timothy 4:2-3 Preach the word; be instant in season, out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort with all longsuffering and doctrine. For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but after their own lusts shall they heap to themselves teachers, having itching ears;

There are two ways to deal with Christian error. The first is corrective as Paul tells Timothy. The second is to attempt to prevent error. While the attempt to prevent error can be made with good intentions and at first seem an effective tool to identify and eliminate error, prevention requires the use of coercive force and control. The attempt to "prevent" error changes Christianity from an engagement of the individual via persuasion to the subordination of the Christian to a rule based system that functions as a superior entity with the Christian as just a compliant component.

Christianity is about trust. It is not about agreement with or conformity to doctrines, principles, or rules. The Christian who is actively trying to become more like Jesus is one who is open to correction. The prevention approach is dangerous because it often provides assurance that a person will receive the benefits of Christianity because they have followed the rules, met the requirements, and accepted the doctrine rather than trusting in Jesus.

Christianity presented as a correction system relies on persuasion which depends on the active participation of individual. In a correction system an individual has to be actively seeking what is right, asking questions to learn more, and open to correction and instruction.

Christianity presented as an error prevention system can be attractive in that it offers certainty and requires acceptance rather than comprehension which can be less demanding for the participant. Often a person just has to learn the rules and perform the requirements and they can get on with other things in their life. The problem is that they can miss the entire point of Christianity.

Benefits of Christianity are a new and eternal life in Christ, the forgiveness of sins, the filling with the Holy Spirit, growth in wisdom, love, and truth, and

a depth to fellowship that is transcendent.

A Christian needs the freedom to make mistakes and encounter error. The desire to prevent error often quenches the Holy Spirit, stifles Christian growth, and can even deceive someone into thinking he is a Christian when he is not.

2 Corinthians 13:5 Examine yourselves, whether ye be in the faith; prove your own selves. Know ye not your own selves, how that Jesus Christ is in you, except ye be reprobates?

The Philistines are Upon Thee

In a way, the life of Sampson reflects the nation of Israel. Moses had warned Israel that their new found prosperity in the land of Canaan could cause them to forget about God. The book of Judges is an almost litany of a cycle of Israel forgetting God, Israel being invaded (frequently by the Philistines), Israel calling out to God for help, God helping Israel, and then Israel forgetting about God again.

With Sampson we have a cycle of Delilah asking Sampson the secret of his strength, his lying to her, her calling the guards to overpower him, his defeating them, and her asking him again to reveal his secret until he finally does reveal the truth and is taken prisoner.

We might find ourselves thinking how stupid Sampson was or how foolish the Israelites were, however, we might also want to take a closer look at ourselves. Even poor people today live in greater comfort than the kings of history. We have unlimited entertainment, hot and cold running water, year round food, and heating and air conditioning. What the Bible calls “the deceitfulness of riches” ties in with the warning that Moses gave Israel. When we are comfortable,

God seems unnecessary.

There is a Biblical warning regarding Christians “falling asleep at the wheel”;

1 Corinthians 11:31 For if we would judge ourselves, we should not be judged.

It is so easy to fall into a comfortable slumber with the world and the flesh. Sometimes a church can also contribute to our neglecting our Savior by telling us that the Christian life has been completely fulfilled by meeting some sort of “USDA minimum daily requirement”.

We might ask ourselves if we slumber so soundly, is it because we aren’t even Christian.

The last hundred years might be seen as a progressively louder alarm clock for slumbering Christians.

1. Some were alarmed by the invasive ideas of Darwin, Freud, and Marx.

2. Some were alarmed by the use of compulsory public education to convert vulnerable Christian children into followers of the religion of secularism (the worship of man in general and self in particular).

3. Some were alarmed by those who advocated and promoted the killing of children through abortion and even birth control.

4. Some were alarmed by those who have advanced and promoted homosexuality.

Who knows what the future holds or how much worse things will get. We Christians who continue to slumber may finally be roused and “chastened” by roving bands of armed angry blacks, or targeted for extermination by imported Muslims. Europe is now a picture of our near future. It may be that the destruction of our comfortable and prosperous country is allowed by God to awaken those who still slumber. The Philistines are upon us.

Biblical Masculinity

For thousands of years in almost every culture the role of husband and father has been understood. It is only with the advent of modern industrial and post industrial society that these traditional ideas have been challenged. To understand this challenge, we need to first understand that Satan establishes the course of the world (for now and insofar as he is allowed by God) (Eph. 2:2).

The family in general and fathers and husbands in particular are an impediment to the collectivized world Satan is attempting to achieve. Consider the sheer volume of media he has allocated to the portrayal of fathers as jokes, stumbling idiots, and fools unable to function unless a woman directs him (not only before television, but before radio as well).

Men are supposed to be teachers (Deu. 6:7, 1 Cor. 14:35), protectors (1 Tim 2:14, 1 Pe. 3:7), and examples of godly administration (Heb. 12:9, Pro. 3:12). However, after twelve years of collectivized public education the cumulative effect of the words, “Shut up, sit down, and do what you are told” can leave a crippling imprint. Reinforced with media indoctrination and the

club of political correctness wielded in colleges and corporations men in general have been subjected to brutal forces designed to have them accept a world in which they have little to say. Even churches, ignoring the warning of James not to be a friend of the world, can contribute to societal tide pulling men to abandon the role God has called them to.

It is important for Satan to entangle young men in fornication as this sort of de-facto “marriage” diverts attention from what the Lord would have them do to what the world expects of them. If one takes a look at feminist doctrine, one could summarize their discontent with men as basically “men are not women”. As a result, they often seek to impose a social construct that is hostile to masculinity. Men can react to an increasingly hostile world by surrendering their masculinity, withdrawing from a hostile world, plunging into a dissipative life of self indulgence such as with pornography and alcohol, or seeking the truth through the word of God and breaking free from the forces that would cripple him.

Even if a man desires to follow after the Lord, he may find his wife and children resistant or even hostile to his attempt to lead or restore a traditional family. Men who desire to resist the push of Satan to make them impotent drones in his collective hive, but rather to build and protect a traditional family

and go back to what the Lord would have for them may face many difficulties. It can be helpful to remember the verse;

Philippians 4:13 I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me.

It can be helpful to find an older wiser Christian man who can instruct in being free from the contamination of the world and how to deal with the difficulties one may find himself facing. In the past, programs have been started that emphasize strength, courage, accountability, and devotion. While perhaps well-intentioned, these programs usually fail because they rely on the flesh and follow the pattern of the worldly systems that contribute to many of the problems in the first place.

Men generally do not seek help. They can often tolerate a significant amount of pain and discomfort rather than seek a solution. The Christian however should consider that even if he manages to endure the discomfort of a world Satan has designed to be hostile to him, he still has the responsibility to lead, teach, and protect his family. I have counseled thousands of people over the years and am still amazed how much pain people are willing to tolerate in their lives. For the Christian, "This should not be so".

The Shack

Several years ago a short book titled “The Shack” exploded across the Christian community in popularity. Then a movie adaptation was released with a similarly expected popularity. The book is presented as a way to make God more accessible. It has often been critiqued on the basis of flaws in Christian doctrine, such criticism has often missed a critical element.

The book and movie were intended to be an emotional narrative. The author wrote the book to serve as an illustration of the traumatic points in his life and his spiritual journey for the benefit of his family. He made only 15 copies when he first wrote it. The author is particularly gifted in evoking an emotional investment from the reader often approaching a purgative catharsis.

The author has been taken to task for what seems to be an irreverent treatment of the three persons of the trinity which he uses as characters to interact with the protagonist in his story. When one considers the mistreatment he experienced as a child that he associates with his parents (who were missionaries in New Guinea) brand of Christianity, one might be sympathetic with his desire to transform the God of his youth into a

more accommodating construct.

A problem arises from looking at Christianity in a binary way with God either being a “meany” or a “softy”. Neither way does justice to the truth. There is no denying that many crimes have been committed by those who claim Christ. There is no denying that God is merciful and loving. However, one has to be careful, especially when emotional wounds are revisited, opened, and pain is brought to the surface that the intensity of these feelings are not used to validate imagery as doctrine or accept assurances that are not Biblical.

Advertisers, politicians, and even employers often attempt to approach us on an emotional level through which they can gain access to our deeper and inner selves. Because this book and movie are so successful in reaching us through this pathway, we are very vulnerable to taking in and accepting other elements in the story that are not true.

For example, a person may have experienced some emotional trauma in childhood and might have such a powerful reaction to a story of healing and forgiveness that he also takes in an imagery of a total forgiveness that excludes Jesus and his atonement for our sins. This could lead him to take assurance that he is destined to go the heaven and by-pass Jesus and the cross. In a way he could even come to

think that his particular suffering was somehow a payment for sin.

There are many people who look back on the first overwhelming feelings they had of meth, heroin, or oxycodone with bitter regret. Emotions are powerful things. The feelings they produce can have drug like effects and even lead some to seek continual stimulation. The Bible warns us;

The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked: who can know it? Jeremiah 17:9

Emotions serve to let us enjoy life and to warn us when something is wrong or needs to be corrected. We should be careful that we do not confuse the work of the Holy Spirit convicting us of truth with our own feelings and sensations that seem to validate, authenticate, and substantiate imagery that was only used as a fictional background for a story.

Beneficial Adversity

There was an image circulated via email a few days ago with four pictures. The first showed the men on Iwo Jima raising the US flag in WWII. It was titled, “Hard times make strong men”. The next image was of a man working on his car in the 1950s. It was titled, “Strong men make good times”. The third image was of people partying in the 1980s. It was titled, “Good times make weak men”. The last picture was of abandoned houses in Detroit that looked like a demilitarized zone. It was titled, “Weak men make hard times”.

I once worked with a man (a non-custodial parent) who said one of the saddest things I have ever heard, he said, “The laziest person I have ever seen is my son. He never gets up from a video game except to go to the refrigerator.” It is not uncommon for the older generation to comment on the flaws they see in the younger generation. However, this does not automatically mean that these observations are invalid.

By creating a social environment for our children of unending entertainment, subsidized indolence, unrestrained consumerism, offense at every slight (real or imagined), and the cultivation of a

critical spirit to contend with that of a movie, restaurant or theater critic, we may have produced a generation of perpetual adolescents with weak character. This may have been done with good intentions, but the result indicates that it might be legitimately called child abuse.

A generation or two ago a wayward child could have been sent to the military where exposure to an adverse environment might have helped him develop the strength of character he was missing. Unfortunately, the military environment has been modified as to not inflict such character improving difficulty. In addition, the military no longer desires to accept those in need of correction.

There is a saying that the best education in the world comes from the school of hard knocks, the problem is that the tuition is so high. For Christians, we have the option to surrender ourselves to the Lord's leading in humility and sincerity. However, we also have the option to ignore that to which we have access. As a result, we may miss out on prods to a more mature faith.

Satan is almost finished using Christians to advance the plan of global collectivism he has been advancing for centuries. As a result, Christians should expect to face increasing hostility and persecution. In addition to finally getting Christians to curtail their

love affair with the world, we might find that increasing hostility improves our character by seeking after and clinging to Jesus. This might result in a more clear testimony as Peter tells those about to undergo persecution;

But sanctify the Lord God in your hearts: and be ready always to give an answer to every man that asketh you a reason of the hope that is in you with meekness and fear: 1 Peter 3:15

Christians and the Law

Sometimes the laws that were given to the nation of Israel can be confusing for Christians. We think that of one of the ten commandments like not committing murder is a good idea. Since it has been incorporated into the secular laws of most nations, we can then begin to think of the bible as a sort of rule book. However, it becomes a little more difficult when we consider things like not eating pork, working on Saturday, or a requirement to make an offering at the temple.

Christians sometimes attempt to follow the laws in the Old Testament because they feel that this honors God, makes them sort of “extra credit” Christians, or that they are supposed to. Some can even end up with the same self-righteousness created by a feeling of accomplishment demonstrated by the Pharisees, which is one of the reasons Jesus warned his disciples to be cautious about the pervasiveness of this influence (Luke 12:1).

The law presents requirements that we measure ourselves against. Some come to think that they have been successful (Mat 19:20) and even end up having contempt for others (Luke 18:9). Jesus taught in the sermon on the mount that lust was a

violation of adultery and anger a violation of murder to show that the law was not so limited as to be finagled around. Paul shows us an honest struggle with the demands of the law in Romans chapter 7 where he describes his frustrations and failures in attempting to keep the law.

The reason the law is so difficult is not to showcase our mastery but to clearly show our utter inability to keep it. Paul tells us that the law is to act like a school teacher to show us our need for a Savior. (Galatians 3:21-26). We need righteousness to get to heaven and righteousness is unobtainable by the law. The solution is found in Jesus. When we trust (have faith) in Jesus we are born again with his life. This is how we get eternal life and how we get righteousness. Since the law is not necessary for salvation and sometimes even a hindrance to those who think that can achieve righteousness on their own, the Christian needs to consider what his relationship to the law should be.

Much in the law was intended for our benefit. For example the keeping of the Sabbath not only honored God, and was a sign identifying the special relationship God had with the nation of Israel. (Exodus 31:13), in addition, there is a benefit to men in not being worked to death seven days a week. A Christian employer does not have to worry about what rule to follow. Living for Christ and mo-

tivated by love for his Christian brothers and sisters, he extracts from the law the principle of not overworking his employees. (Romans 13:10).

Many of the laws of Moses were designed to establish a social order for the nation of Israel. The Christian who tries to follow all these laws would find them a poor fit. However, we can benefit from the principles we can extract from the laws and apply them with wisdom from God and the leading of the Holy Spirit.

We might not have a temple at which we can offer the first fruits to God, but we can and should sanctify God in our hearts, walk in gratitude and thanksgiving, and give voice to our love for our Savior.

The Christian life is not about getting better and better, but about recognizing how completely we have failed and will fail and how we depend completely on the Lord. It is out of this complete and abject recognition of our failures that a deep faith can arise out of which like Paul, we can “do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me.”

We shouldn't be Christian “Idiots”

1 Corinthians 14:23 If therefore the whole church be come together into one place, and all speak with tongues, and there come in those that are unlearned, or unbelievers, will they not say that ye are mad?

The Christians in Corinth had a number of problems. Paul's letter to them is almost a laundry list of addressing many of them. In chapter 14 he addresses the chaos they were having in their meetings. One thing interesting to note is his use of the word “unlearned” (idiotes). The origin of the word was based on the disdain the early Greeks had for someone who refused to participate in the politics of the city. He was considered selfish. Eventually this came to mean a person unable to participate because of some innate deficiency such as lacking professional skill, relatively unskilled, not clever, or a private soldier as opposed to officer.

Paul cites the terms, “unlearned” and “unbeliever” as two different conditions. Weust translates the word (idiotes / unlearned) as “uninitiated”. This is a kinder approach as it leaves out the reason for being uninitiated (disinclination, inability, poor teaching, or new

to the faith).

In the context of Wuest's definition of the word idiots as "uninitiated", one might come to the conclusion that most Christians are "uninitiated". When asked if they knew for sure that they were going to go to heaven when they died, most would answer, "I hope so". Most would not be able to articulate the reason for such "hope".

Most Christians inherit their Christian practice and tradition from their families and their family association with a particular denomination. They place a lot of trust in what others have told them about Christianity. Considering the eternal consequences, and that Jesus warns that some will be mistaken regarding their assumed eternal destination, it can be a good idea that each Christian search out for himself to verify the basis for his hope that he will end up in heaven.

There are many questions that an uninitiated Christian can have such as, "Was the "great commission" given to Israel or the church?" or "How do Israel and the church differ?". The bible provides many answers and raises many questions. However, it would seem the most important place to start is to determine if your final destination is heaven or not.

The bible paints a picture of Christian growth and

maturity towards Christ-likeness. One might consider this a process of “initiation”. Unfortunately much Christian practice is less dynamic and active. Christians are often assured that they have met the minimum requirements and do not have to concern themselves with the details so they get on with their “real” lives.

Hebrews 5:12-13 For when for the time ye ought to be teachers, ye have need that one teach you again which be the first principles of the oracles of God; and are become such as have need of milk, and not of strong meat. For every one that useth milk is unskilful in the word of righteousness: for he is a babe.

Ephesians 4:14-15 That we henceforth be no more children, tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the sleight of men, and cunning craftiness, whereby they lie in wait to deceive; But speaking the truth in love, may grow up into him in all things, which is the head, even Christ:

Taking Matters Into Our Own Hands

God created us to serve Him to his glory.

Ecclesiastes 12:13 Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God, and keep his commandments: for this is the whole duty of man.

Satan first decided to serve his own interests (Isaiah 14:14) and then got Adam and Eve to follow in the pursuit of their own interests (Genesis 3:5). The rest of human history has been the aggregate result of self-serving actions;

Philippians 2:21 For all seek their own, not the things which are Jesus Christ's.

Satan has directed the course of history in such a way as to seduce Christians into following a path away from God by getting them to consider what they can achieve on their own. For example, the American Revolution (which became a template for world wide revolution) was an opportunity to stir people to rile at the injustice of unfair taxation (20 pence a year on average). Many even came to deceive themselves into thinking it was their Christian duty to “set things right” (similar to the rational of a jihadist).

The Old Testament (particularly the book of Judges) contains a series of cyclical events where people get further away from God, suffer a calamity, cry out to God for help, God rescuing them, then they forget about God and start the cycle all over again. Moses even warned them about this danger (Deuteronomy 6:12). We are told that the record of their failures was kept to instruct us (1 Corinthians 10:11).

The American and French revolutions, the abolitionist movement, the progressivist movement, the socialist movement, the environmentalist movement, the war on poverty, the war on hunger, and the equal rights movement are all examples of how easily we are led to think that we can control things and “fix” all that God has gotten wrong or neglected. God does not seem to have a favorable view of this attitude;

Genesis 11:6 And the LORD said, Behold, the people is one, and they have all one language; and this they begin to do: and now nothing will be restrained from them, which they have imagined to do.

At the core of these various corrective ideas is the belief that man is good and perfectible. Also the appeal to human vanity that one knows how to “fix” others has always had an appeal. Consider Mao,

Lenin, and Hitler. It is ironic that Satan used the result of Western civilization which was achieved mostly by Christians as the basis to support the idea that man is evolving and perfectible and not only does not need God, but is becoming God.

The truth is that man is desperately evil (Romans 3:10) and apart from God has no hope (Ephesians 2:12). Satan wants us to look at the world and see evil and be seduced into thinking we can “fix” it. In reality, what we see is a reflection of our own sinfulness and the patience of God as he tolerates (for now) our evil to each other so that some might be called out of the mess we have made of the world he created. The Christian is well advised to reflect on if he has been seduced into attempting to control that which belongs to the Lord.

Psalm 37:7 Rest in the LORD, and wait patiently for him: fret not thyself because of him who prospereth in his way, because of the man who bringeth wicked devices to pass.

The Dilemma of the Isolated Christian Parent

Most young parents (including Christians) have expectations of childrearing that are often shaped by TV commercials of smiling children carrying a basket of puppies or programs that show grateful loving children hugging their parents. When real life falls short of expectations, it can be difficult for parents. It is at this point that the relational poverty of modern life becomes all too apparent.

Modern family life is devoid of depth (multi-generational components such as parents and grandparents in residence), breadth (siblings and cousins in close proximity), and even in time, as the pace of modern life often precludes the development of any deeper relationship with someone who could be a source of help. Even if a family member or friend can be found who cares about you and your child, they are often just as much at a loss to understand what to do. Sadly for Christians, even churches seem to be run as mechanical systems running parallel to the systems in the world. They can seem mechanical contrivances oriented towards enforcing doctrinal conformity but coming up short in being able to help parents address modern problems.

The industrial revolution took the father out of the home. State mandated education took the children out of the home, and finally economic pressures and possibilities took women out of the home. Now the home is often an empty box to which people periodically return to sleep. As Satan has applied his systems to collectivize the world, some do not fit well into the channels he has established. School is a good example of this. Children are often seen as components on a conveyor belt. Non-conforming components are often medicated, pressured, ridiculed, or otherwise processed to achieve compliance.

God created each person with unique abilities and interests. Some excel at steadfastness and patience, some with flares of brilliance and insight, some with sensitivity and artistry, some with compassion and love (1 Cor. 12). The Christian parent who sees difficulty with school work as the measure of their child may at first be swayed to consider the need to correct a rebellious heart, medicate a defect, or otherwise bring their child into compliance as their responsibility to God and the child. Without access to other information or a broader understanding, the parent can feel lost and frustrated as to what to do.

To understand the limitations of worldly systems, consider that psychology is a collection of theories of human behavior none of which include the con-

cept of sin. Therapeutic remedies drawn from such flawed understanding at best approach randomness in their effectiveness.

Medical practice often prescribes ADHD “medication” at the request of teachers or SSRI medication without first being able to determine if there is any problem with serotonin levels. This practice is supported by the result that few people complain about it, such widespread practice is less likely to incur litigation, and it is fairly easy to move on to the next patient.

Given the limitations of “experts”, one would expect that the Christian parent that relies too heavily on their advice, might find it disappointing. All of this frequently combines to leave the Christian parent at a loss as to how to help their child.

The first thing is to consider that education is a rather fraudulent enterprise. Bright children learn more than dim ones. No amount of teaching, funding for education, or resources can change this fact. In fact an average child who only reads and watched television rather than go to school will be able to pass the minimum test standards by the time they are 18. This is because the standards are incredibly low so as to insure passing by dimmer children. Learning is more important than education which frequently hinders actual learning or replaces

it with social and secular indoctrination.

Most in the educational industrial complex subscribe to the “medical” theories advanced since the 1960s that poor performance in school is a result of brain damage or malformation. Even people that homeschool using various curriculum find themselves first considering poor performance reflective of a defect in their child.

If one considers what is called ADHA, one might rightly ask if there is not some variation in neurology such that those whose sensing and processing neurons operate a little faster might have a little more difficulty responding to a slower presentation of information. The use of drugs like speed that result in a closer match of physiological to neurological speeds through chemical augmentation may be asking the student’s body to pay a price for an educational system that is unable to accommodate actual student diversity. The fact that boys are more often identified as having ADHA might also point to the influence of physiological differences rather than biological pathology.

If one consider Aspergers (which has now been re-branded as a type of autism), the possibility of variation in neurology also should be given some consideration. If whatever causes an above average neurological processing (often manifest as above

average intellect) also extends to sensory processing (such as sensitivity to touch, hearing, lights or smells), the result might be an apparent aloofness in an attempt to manage the anxiety that such intensity of sensation might produce.

The Christian parent might be pressured by the school push their child, by their doctor to drug the child, or by their church to chastise their child into compliance. The parent who resists these directions, may be left feeling like there is no other recourse to “solve the problem”.

It can be heartbreaking to see another Christian suffering and withdrawing into isolated despair. The New Testament describes believers who share one another's burdens (Gal 6:2) and can be a source of wisdom (1 Cor 6:5). Given the impoverished state of personal relations of any kind in modern society and the rather anemic state of many churches compared to what is described in the New Testament, it becomes incumbent on Christians to reach out to each other even at the risk of being considered intrusive.

Dying to self

Luke 9:23 And he said to them all, If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow me.

For many Christians the phrase “picking up a cross daily” is difficult to understand. Some try to dismiss it as an allegory for facing life’s difficulties. The word “cross” conveys not only death, but a voluntary death (John 10:18). The word “daily” conveys a continual willingness to lay down one’s most precious possession, one’s life (Revelation 12:11).

When I was in the Army (50 years ago) there were common conversations about the merits of various ways of dying. Some would suggest the advantages of infantry because a bullet to the head would be a quick death. Others would caution that a gut wound might take days of agony before death. Some would suggest that an APC (armored personnel carrier) would offer protection from small arms fire, but acknowledged that an RPG to the gas tank could roast you alive. This might sound grim to those without this experience but it was reflected in the TV series *Band of Brothers* when one soldier said that he was keeping his silk parachute for material for a

wedding dress for his fiancé. He asked the other soldier if he was shocked that he was so sentimental. The other soldier replied he was shocked to think the first soldier actually thought they going to live to be able to go home.

While some collegiate contemporaries of veterans may turn to nihilism, the prospect of death can be liberating and even peaceful for the vet. The collegiate may develop cynicism and even an anger that fuels a social justice crusade. The vet may find a transcendence that allows him to appreciate even the simple things in life with gratitude. In a way, this is a picture of the transcendence needed to escape the grasp of the world hindering us from freely following Jesus.

The biblical definition of love given in 1 Corinthians 13 is essentially selflessness. This surrender of self is also seen in John 12:25.

In past years I have talked with a number of people who were attempting suicide. Many found the point at which they made a mental break from the life they were living brought a relief from the painful force that was driving them to self-destruction. It is the mental act of disassociation that frees one from a destructive and painful life as well as one so woven into the threads of the world system by ambition, lust, greed, and fear that one can feel there is

no escape.

In suicide, the act of disassociation is usually an act of despair and hopelessness. In the Christian life, dying to self is an act of disassociation that is usually accomplished through love. In a way, the path of love is the sublimation of self. It has been said that the cure for the disease of adolescence is parenthood. When a new mother or father picks up their first child, they begin to see that they will forever be placing the interests of another over their own. This is usually the way many learn of the benefit of surrendering self. Consider the example of Jesus;

Philippians 2:5-8 Have this mind in you, which was also in Christ Jesus: who, existing in the form of God, counted not the being on an equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being made in the likeness of men; and being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, becoming obedient even unto death, yea, the death of the cross.

Assurance of Salvation

While I am not able to tell any specific individual that he has eternal security, I can tell him that it exists. For most people it becomes a question of how they can have assurance that they themselves are saved. I usually try to provide the following as sources of assurance.

1. We can have assurance from God's word.

1 John 5:13 These things have I written unto you that believe on the name of the Son of God; that ye may know that ye have eternal life, and that ye may believe on the name of the Son of God.

Romans 10:13 For whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved.

Romans 8:38-39 For I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, Nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

John 10:28 And I give unto them eternal life; and they shall never perish, neither shall any man pluck them out of my hand.

2. We can have assurance because of the love we have for other Christians.

1 John 3:14 We know that we have passed from death unto life, because we love the brethren. He that loveth not his brother abideth in death.

John 13:35 By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another.

3. We can have assurance because we see truth in the bible.

1 Corinthians 1:18 For the preaching of the cross is to them that perish foolishness; but unto us which are saved it is the power of God.

1 Corinthians 2:14 But the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned.

4. We can have assurance from the indwelling of the Holy Spirit.

Ephesians 1:13 In whom ye also trusted, after that ye heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation: in whom also after that ye believed, ye were sealed with that holy Spirit of promise,

Galatians 4:6 And because ye are sons, God hath sent forth the Spirit of his Son into your hearts, crying, Abba, Father.

2 Corinthians 1:22 Who hath also sealed us, and given the earnest of the Spirit in our hearts.

5. We can have assurance because we are alien to the world.

John 15:19 If ye were of the world, the world would love his own: but because ye are not of the world, but I have chosen you out of the world, therefore the world hateth you.

1 John 4:3-5 And every spirit that confesseth not that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is not of God: and this is that spirit of antichrist, whereof ye have heard that it should come; and even now already is it in the world. Ye are of God, little children, and have overcome them: because greater is he that is in you, than he that is in the world. They are of the world: therefore speak they of the world, and the world heareth them.

6. We can have assurance because we resonate with truth.

1 John 4:6 We are of God: he that knoweth God

heareth us; he that is not of God heareth not us. Hereby know we the spirit of truth, and the spirit of error.

John 18:37 Pilate therefore said unto him, Art thou a king then? Jesus answered, Thou sayest that I am a king. To this end was I born, and for this cause came I into the world, that I should bear witness unto the truth. Every one that is of the truth heareth my voice.

Luke 24:32 And they said one to another, Did not our heart burn within us, while he talked with us by the way, and while he opened to us the scriptures?

John 17:17 Sanctify them through thy truth: thy word is truth.

So many Christians have been spiritually crippled by exposure to their denominational traditions, bad and false teaching, legalistic practices, and by trying to practice Christianity in the flesh. Satan has accomplished much in getting Christians to try to make Christianity like the other religions (you do something to get something). Christianity is supposed to be different. We are supposed to humbly trust in the work Jesus has done and surrender ourselves to the leading of his Spirit.

Too many Christians fret over if they have done enough or are good enough that they seem to have the same anxiety of a jihadist who wonders if he has killed enough. God is not impressed with our accomplishments, he desires our trust (faith). Jesus has already done more than we could ever imagine.

Free Will

One view of Christianity (Calvinism) is that God determines every aspect of life. He chooses who will be saved and who goes to hell in addition to even the smallest aspect of life. At the other end of the spectrum is what is often called Open Theism where God is detached and simply watches the actions of each person. This spectrum is often called determinism versus free will.

That God does not control every action and event can be deduced from the many admonitions and exhortations made of Christians to stir themselves to seek maturity and to avail themselves of the resources they have been provided. This would be unnecessary if everything was decided by God. Conversely the many exhortations to prayer would also seem unnecessary if God remained aloof and uninvolved.

To observe the high percentage of those claiming Christ but are dormant and inert to the point where they are indistinguishable from non-Christians, one might suspect that God is quite distant. However, one might also conclude that God is seemingly distant for those who neglect him and first seek after the world or the flesh. For those who show Christian love (selflessness

rather than emotion) have God more active in their lives (Rom 8:28-29).

Those who are unsaved can find a distant God who allows almost any behavior up to a point. In Romans we learn of a condition (holding the truth in unrighteousness) where God takes an active role with individuals. Two examples are given in chapter one. The first are the unnatural desires as a consequence for worshiping the creature more than the creator. The second example is a reprobate mind as a consequence for rejecting even the knowledge of God. These lives are set on a trajectory of self-destruction by God and perhaps serve as a warning to others against using free will to distort truth (hold it in unrighteousness).

It would seem that all people are allowed to use their free will (up to a point) including harming themselves and others. It would seem that even those who claim Christ are allowed to ignore God and follow selfishness (however, many of these may not actually be Christian). Perhaps the chaos resulting from the selfish use of free will creates such difficulties as to make what God offers more attractive. To surrender selfishness and trust in Christ opens the door to eternal life and provides access to truth and wisdom that allows us to better navigate this present age.

The Christian can have God actively working in him to conform his will to that of God's (Phil 2:3). This may be as the result of the work of the Holy Spirit (Gal 5:22-23). However, the Christian has the freedom to ignore or even halt this work (1 Thess 5:19)

Free will is a gift that most people usually use to create the illusion that we can chart a course away from God, make our own plans, and try to build a world of our own. "Success" is often measured in comfort, pleasures, and material resources. Often these do not satisfy but briefly. Also, they often come at a cost to be paid at a time of judgment (Luke 16:25).

God offers the opportunity to receive enough wisdom and truth so that we can use our free will in accordance with what he would have for us. This is not so much a surrender or abrogation of free will, but rather the intentional alignment of it with the will of God.

Humility - More than extra credit

Many who claim to be Christian live lives indiscernible from those who are not Christian. One reason is that they have by tradition or doctrine come to see the Christian life as one of meeting some criteria for salvation, and once assured that their ultimate destination is heaven, they can relax and get on with their regular lives. Occasionally some will attempt to “do good” or “be nice” as this is considered appropriate for Christians.

The characteristic of humility is more than the optional extra many think. It is a state by which a Christian can receive extra grace (James 4:6), the mind of Christ (Philippians 2:5), and be exalted by God (Matthew 23:12).

To understand humility, it may be helpful to first consider what it is not. Some feel that what is often called “false humility” such as the expression of self-deprecating comments such as “I am no good”, or “Nobody likes me” are an approximation of humility. However, these are often manipulative statements designed to acquire attention or solicit affirming comment.

Real humility is not an achievement. It is not gained or advanced by effort, skill, discipline, or study. It is the result of the understanding gained in the pursuit of truth. As one grows in understanding some of the majesty and greatness of God and at the same time comes to understand some of the depth of our own sinfulness, a growing awareness of this truth produces a humility that is genuine.

The Christian frequently fails to follow a path of humility for two main reasons. First, he may think that if he has avoided pride, he may, by default, be considered humble. He may picture in his mind a character from TV or the movies who represents the qualities of braggart, prideful, and arrogant and he can assure himself that since he is not like that, he is doing OK. However, humility is more than just the absence of excessive pride.

The second problem is our internal measurement system. Ever since grade school we are immersed in a mental construct that defines acceptability as consistency with the group. As long as we are like everyone else, we are OK. The problem is that the Christian is not supposed to be conformed to the world. We are to “measure” ourselves by the standard of Jesus, and to this we all fall short. The path to humility begins with rejecting the idea that as long as we are like everyone else, we have succeeded.

Humility, like love and faith, is hindered by self. The more we are invested in our ambitions, desires, plans, and goals and the more we trust in our skills, resources, accomplishments, and connections, the less able we are to relinquish that which ties us to the world system. The bible tells us that even being a “friend” of the world makes us an enemy of God (James 4:4).

2 Corinthians 5:15 And that he died for all, that they which live should not henceforth live unto themselves, but unto him which died for them, and rose again.

Worldliness - Modern Leaven

In the bible, Jesus warns of three types of leaven, that of the Pharisees, Sadducees, and Herodians. These are influences that can corrupt those who desire to follow Jesus. One can consider a common denominator of smug self-satisfaction that these three types of “leaven” produce. The Pharisees were proud of their religious accomplishments. The Sadducees were proud of their noble position. The Herodians had assurance and drew comfort from their political connections.

Leaven (the yeast that makes bread rise) is pervasive and fills with gas that which it is free to invade. This illustration and understanding was so important that everyone in the nation of Israel was supposed to clean out of their house any trace of yeast every Spring for over a thousand years. What these types of “leaven” illustrate is the danger of allowing a type of thinking where trust in God is replaced by trust in self, position, or influence. This shift in thinking can start slowly but grow to take over just as yeast can make an entire loaf of bread inflated with CO₂ gas.

If we consider what things we might trust in over our faith in Jesus, we have to consider, our job,

social security, Medicare, our education, our accomplishments, our fiends, our 401K account, possessions such as land, business, stocks, bonds, or equipment. We know that Satan sets the course of this world (Ephesians 2:2). He has his own purposes in setting the course of the world towards global collectivism. In doing so he has established a social environment where completely trusting in God seems not possible, not necessary, and even unwise.

We are born into and raised in a world where real abiding, deep, and living faith in God is crippled at every turn. This has even saturated church tradition. The church that elevates political correctness and social justice is just as contaminated with worldly "leaven" as one that elevates rule keeping legalism.

There is a reason the bible tells us that friendship with the world makes us an enemy of God. The Christian seeking to take his ravaged and crippled faith out of the world and build it up in Christ can find healing through the word of God, the bible. The more we grow in the knowledge of God, the more we learn that he is trustworthy and our faith can be stronger.

Disengagement from the world is not hiding in isolation, but it is seeing that the interests of the Christian are different from those in the world. This understanding is facilitated by abiding (living) in the

words of Jesus (the word of God). This immersion in the bible produces “freedom” (John 8:31-32). It is this freedom that allows us to understand how the world actually operates and discern some of the many dynamics that strangle, cripple, and divert faith.

Real bible study is different than one might think from public education where students can be told to “shut up, sit down and do what they are told”. Bible study needs active inquiry. One has to ask questions and wrestle with verses to exercise the mind and open the heart to the work of the Holy Spirit. In a way, there is no more noble endeavor than the quest for truth. It is the hunger for truth that brings us to a greater knowledge of God and a stronger faith. The yeast-like pervasive influence of the world on our lives retreats in the face of truth. We indeed come to know the truth and this results in being set free.

Reflections on Easter

Most of Christian history has observed the anniversary of the resurrection of Jesus with joy and celebration. However, it can be beneficial to consider specific elements associated with this event.

Sin debt. The sins of all people through all time was paid for by Jesus (1 Jn 2:2). Movies like “The Passion of Christ” attempt to show the suffering of Jesus, but ultimately fall short because there is no way to show what having all sin placed on him was like (2 Cor 5:21).

Buying back the earth. One might think of Satan as having obtained some degree of rule over the earth when he got Adam and Eve to sin (Eph 2:2). However, by making payment for the sins of everyone, Jesus was able to “buy” back (or redeem) this authority (Col 2:14-15, Heb 2:14).

Obtaining the right to judge. By making payment for all sin, Jesus obtained the legal right to exact punishment or extend forgiveness (Ro 12:19, Rev 5:9).

Becoming the source of eternal life. By extending the forgiveness of sins to all who trust in

him, Jesus is able to give us new and eternal life (Ro 6:23, Col 3:4)

Illustrating our future state. We can get a glimpse of what our resurrected condition will be like from reading about Jesus after his resurrection (1Jn 3:2, 1Co 15:54).

Providing us with the Holy Spirit. One of the things Jesus did after his resurrection was send his Spirit to those who believe both as proof of our salvation and as the means by which we ourselves can have victory over sin (Jn 16:7, Eph 1:13-14, Gal 5:16).

Offer of the Kingdom. The birth of Jesus brought the promised Messiah to the nation of Israel. At the last supper Jesus used a cup of wine to illustrate that he was fulfilling the promise of Jeremiah (Jer 31:31) for a new covenant with Israel. His disciples saw after the resurrection that this kingdom could come (Acts 1:6). However, the failure of the nation to receive her King meant a postponement of the kingdom until a remnant of Israel is willing (Matt 24:27).

The offer of salvation to gentiles. It had been intended that the nation of Israel would be used by God to bring the knowledge of him to the whole world. This was to be accomplished after the resurrection (Jn 12:23-24). As gentiles began to get

saved, one result that was hoped for was that the nation of Israel would be nudged from complacency (Ro 11:11).

It is natural in affluent and prosperous times that we struggle to give our Lord the worship and attention that he is due. However, we can take advantage of the occasion that we set aside for this remembrance to give thought to some of what he did for us and use that to draw forth gratitude and thanksgiving in our hearts. Like the resolution some make with a new year to lose weight, we might also take advantage of this remembrance to resolve to spend more time in prayer and bible reading so that we can draw closer to him who loves us, died for us, forgave our sins, and keeps us in his care to bring us to eternal life.

Enlightenment - The Smugness of Ignorance

In listening to a recent talk on the historical period called the enlightenment, the speaker presented the common perspective that there was a transition from faith to reason represented by advancements in science. The political progressives and secularists of today are inheritors of this tradition of “reason”. However, when one abandons God (who is truth and is the source of wisdom), one is vulnerable to any idea no matter how ludicrous.

Scientology - Miniature space aliens live in volcanoes and infest people.

Masonic lore - Lucifer had a son (Cain) with Eve and all the cool artists and craftsmen on earth descend from that lineage.

Theosophy - Old dead smart people (ascended masters) want to help you learn secret knowledge.

Equality - This mathematical abstraction is applied to people declaring that everyone has the same ability, talents, and potential.

Evolution - Nothing existed and then it blew up

and became everything and then made itself into people.

Feminism - Rather than being an honored wife and mother, a woman can find more fulfillment being a drone in a corporate hive.

Many mystery religions, cults, and self-professed sages declare like Lucifer or Prometheus that they bring light. When in reality;

John 3:19 And this is the condemnation, that light is come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil.

In rejecting God and elevating his own reason, man essentially blinded himself. He had help in this from Satan who even in the beginning promised secret knowledge to Eve. Satan desires to destroy or cripple our faith. One way he employs is appealing to the vanity of our reason so that we reject what God says when we find it unreasonable. In this way we make ourselves judges of God.

Roman 12:16b Be not wise in your own conceits.

The Christian is called to truth. In truth is humility. It is our surrender to and immersion in Christ and his word that allows us to draw from the well of truth and wisdom. When confronted with things we

do not understand, we may wish to first consider that it is our understanding that is limited rather than God.

Those who reject God with haughty arrogance might be warned that God is not mocked (Gal 6:7). The enlightenment was not the ushering in of the golden age of man's evolution, instead it was the abandonment of faith in God for faith in self.

Romans 1:21-22 Because that, when they knew God, they glorified him not as God, neither were thankful; but became vain in their imaginations, and their foolish heart was darkened. Professing themselves to be wise, they became fools

All In

Poker players can reach a point where they commit all of the cash they have to bet on one hand. They push their chips to the center of the table and declare “all in”. If they loose, they loose all they have. In previous generations phrases like “betting the farm” or “do or die” have also been used to convey a total commitment. This concept would be the opposite of “hedging your bets”.

Marriage used to be seen as something that was undertaken with a view towards permanence. Many people today enter into marriage thinking that if things don’t “work out”, they can pursue other options, not fully understanding the price one pays in going through a divorce.

Many of those today who call themselves Christian also often have only a partial investment in their faith. They may view their church membership as a sort of fire insurance to avoid some vague prospect of afterlife penalty.

Not everyone who declares himself a Christian actually is. Since one becomes a Christian through faith, It can be beneficial to make sure that one’s faith is sufficient.

This can be an alarming revelation for the Christian who was under the impression that an acknowledgment of the historical existence of Jesus constituted salvation. Christians who rest in the assurance that their faith has been confirmed by some act or meeting some criteria may consider the admonition Paul gave the Corinthians to examine themselves to see if they were in the faith.

Many Christians that do not have actual faith go “all in” for church activity and busyness. These are those who will be mystified to stand in front of Christ being judged for their works (1 Cor 3:13). Even some who go “all in” for seminary and become well versed in theology miss the mark. This type of “commitment” (without faith) is works oriented and tends to build up pride often leading to contempt for others (Luke 18:9).

In Hebrews we learn that without faith it is impossible to please God. Therefore establishing this foundation first is critical to living a life “all in” for God. This trust in and reliance upon God is manifest in humility and love. Without this faith, going “all in” often results in an embarrassing level of self-aggrandizement (Matt 6:2).

The Christian walk is supposed to be one of growth and maturation (Eph 4:15 , 2 Pe 1:8). However, Christians can get stuck and fail to grow (1 Cor 3:1

Heb 5:12). There comes a point where a Christian has to decide if he wants to live for Christ. This is sometimes called discipleship. It is described as a singular point of action by the aorist verb tense (Ro 12:1, James 4:7). Those who are Christian but neglect him in this life will be shamed in the next (1 Cor 3:15).

Going “all in” for Christ is a call to discipleship. Not activity, accomplishment, study, or mastery, it is a decision to relinquish control of one’s life and allow the Holy Spirit to lead us towards greater Christ-likeness. Some can be driven to this point by crisis such as in a hospital or jail. However, those who know Christ and thirst for truth, wisdom, love, and righteousness can also be drawn to follow him in discipleship.

Bunker Christianity

There have been historical times of opposition and even persecution where Christians have responded defensively. The term “fundamentalism” comes from a series of booklets called the Fundamentals written 100 years ago in response to the rising tide of secularism seen with Darwin, Freud, and Marx enthusiastically taken up in colleges as an alternative to Christianity.

Hymns like “Onward Christian Soldiers” often resonate with a desire for a militant engagement with the world that can foster either a defensive ossification or alternatively a prideful bellicosity. However, Christians are rather called to be prepared to give a reason for the hope that is within them.

Christians under siege can react to perceived threat with fear and anger which weakens faith in their Savior and a strengthens of faith in themselves (the flesh). This usually happens when walking in truth and humility seems uncertain and being “right” seems a more concrete position. Being “right” usually means adherence to doctrines, rituals, traditions, and practices of men. Walking in truth usually means a humble

surrender to the work of the Holy Spirit and unreserved trust in Jesus.

Being “right” may manifest in creeds, organizational systems, crusades, seminaries, and even inquisitions. Walking in truth often seems to engender a passivity that may lead anywhere from being ignored to being burned alive. Adversity usually exposes the limitations of being “right”. A person may cling to a particular bible translation, an achievement such as having made Jesus Lord of his life or baptism, a tradition such as generations of denominational faithfulness, or faithful adherence to a practice such as Sabbath or dietary observances, however, ultimately being “right” elevates self and walking in truth brings us closer to him who is truth.

Christians who have sought the comfort of security in a defensive position often find themselves contending with other Christians over various elements of doctrine, bible versions, prayer formats, color of choir robes, or any deviation from what has been defined as “right”. Often sermons from this vantage point carry the theme of how bad everyone else is and how good we are.

Christianity was always intended to be transcendent to the world, not promoting it, entangled with it, or in the case of “bunker” Christianity even sniping at

it. There is a book hundreds of years old called, “The Practice of the Presence of God” by a Brother Lawrence. Brother Lawrence could not often be called “right”, but what he shows is a simple and complete faith in God. In a way, his various errors are useful in demonstrating by contrast how little faith depends on intellectual achievement, meticulous practice, or getting things exactly “right”.

Satan has always had success getting humans to try to take control of things. When driven into a defensive posture, we often become vulnerable to this temptation by thinking we are contending for the faith by attacking other Christians or fighting their error. Christians are called to exhort, encourage, even admonish but most of all to love other Christians. When under attack or even put to death, our God is not so weak as to need us to fight the world or each other.

The Supernatural Book

Many people have no trouble accepting the premise in a horror or fantasy film of a book of magic or curses from which all sorts of magical supernatural power and confounding plot points emerge. However when consideration is turned to the bible (the only actually real supernatural book in the history of the world), Most see it as tedious, boring, antiquated, or inaccurate.

The reason it is held in such popular low esteem is that this supernaturally powerful book, has supernaturally evil forces aligned against it. Supposed “smart” people (Ro. 1:22) in universities have railed against it with evolution, higher criticism, and social justice contempt.

We are told in the bible of four things called truth; God the Father, God the Son (Jesus), God the Holy Spirit, and the bible. Truth is a concept that has lost a lot of its popularity in recent years. This is because it is absolute and therefore inconsistent with such recent fashion trends as moral relativism which is used to support the promotion of homosexuality as an acceptable lifestyle (Jn. 3:19).

Jesus is also called the “word of God” (Jn. 1:1).

As the second person of the triune God, Jesus was sent to accomplish the will of God. In a similar way the word of God is sent with a purpose;

Isa 55:10-11 For as the rain cometh down, and the snow from heaven, and returneth not thither, but watereth the earth, and maketh it bring forth and bud, that it may give seed to the sower, and bread to the eater: So shall my word be that goeth forth out of my mouth: it shall not return unto me void, but it shall accomplish that which I please, and it shall prosper in the thing whereto I sent it.

Jesus told Satan that there is spirit sustaining life in the word of God;

Luke 4:4 And Jesus answered him, saying, It is written, That man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word of God.

The bible is powerless in the heart of those who have rejected God (1Co 2:14). However, for those who claim Christ, we should immerse ourselves in this conduit for the power and life of God to us. Jesus tells us that abiding in his word brings a knowledge of truth and associated freedom (Jn 8:31-32).

The bible was inspired (God breathed) for his purposes and our benefit (2Tim 3:16). However, more than a book of instruction, it is the means by which

we can obtain eternal life (Act 13:46, Jn 6:63).

Those who would know Jesus (who is the word of God and truth), should allow his words to live in their heart. Peter did not understand all that Jesus taught, but he did recognize the words of life (Jn 6:68). The Christian is encouraged to dust off his bible and allow the words of God to incrementally and supernaturally work in his heart to make him more like Jesus.

Wisdom

Many people mistake the biblical references to wisdom as references to intelligence or learning. Paul criticizes the Corinthians for going to a secular court with fellow believers and questions them as to if they do not have anyone in their church who has the wisdom to decide a matter. Solomon strongly urged the acquisition of wisdom. The value of wisdom is a consistent biblical theme. Real wisdom is much more than just cleverness or study.

It has been said that the best education in the world comes from the school of hard knocks. The only problem is the tuition is so high. One can learn from his own experiences or the experiences of others. It is all too common that we only are willing to learn from others after we have had many painful experiences ourselves. For example, the lesson that profligate spending is unwise sadly often has to be learned from ones own painful experiences.

One reason that wisdom often seems elusive can be seen from the verse;

Romans 1:22 Professing themselves to be wise, they became fools,

Here we see pride facilitating the substitution of foolishness for wisdom. One might consider humility a requirement for truth which then can receive wisdom. For example, the young person who is humble and follows truth may be more receptive to advice from parents or older and wiser Christians such that they avoid encumbering debt and foolish spending.

Psalm 51:6 Behold, thou desirest truth in the inward parts: and in the hidden part thou shalt make me to know wisdom.

Here we can observe that wisdom is from God. This is true wisdom not to be confused with what the world calls wisdom.

James 3:14-15 But if ye have bitter envying and strife in your hearts, glory not, and lie not against the truth. This wisdom descendeth not from above, but is earthly, sensual, devilish. For where envying and strife is, there is confusion and every evil work. But the wisdom that is from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, and easy to be intreated, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality, and without hypocrisy.

The wisdom of the world is smug, clever, conniving, manipulative, deceptive, and serves selfish ambition. In contrast, Jesus is called the wisdom of God and all real wisdom is to be found in him. This distinction can be more clearly seen in an example contrasting the wisdom of the world represented by the bumper sticker "He who dies with the most toys wins" with the biblical admonition to surrender all for Christ (Luke 9:24).

It is sad that those who claim Christ so often fail to pursue him and grow in him that they might be filled with the wisdom that he has for those who earnestly seek him (James 1:5).

1 Corinthians 1:30 But of him are ye in Christ Jesus, who of God is made unto us wisdom, and righteousness, and sanctification, and redemption:

What's Love Got To Do With It?

This title of a song reflects a dawning awareness of a contrasting difference between attraction and love. Popular culture (driven to a great extent by song lyrics) has come to equate the emotions of attraction, desire, expectation, anticipation and even lust as “love”.

Further complicating matters is the human capacity to mentally associate thoughts with erotic sensations. This sort of self-stimulation can lead people into fetishes, delusions, and even perversions that consume and isolate similar to the effects of drug abuse.

Real love can be seen in the actions of a mother getting up at 3am to feed her baby. The bible defines love in 1 Corinthians 13:4-7;

Love has long patience, is kind; love is not envious of others ; love is not insolent and rash, is not puffed up, does not behave in an unseemly manner, does not seek what is its own, is not quickly provoked, does not impute evil, does not rejoice at iniquity but rejoices with the truth, bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

Understanding love is tricky because all too often those things that comprise a “taking in to self” are driven by consumptive emotional desires are called love. Also so is the “giving out of self” called love. To call one thing love but contain both selfish and selfless components can create confusion.

Those driven by or given over to lust and fornication could not be called “selfless”. The comparison to drug use can illuminate additional characteristics that may warn us of the dangers of such pursuits. For, example in drug use there is a phenomena of habituation. As one gets high from a drug, there are more frequent or intense dosages needed to produce the same effect.

A person given over to pursue his lusts may leave his wife to plunge into a torrid affair which loses its intensity in a short while leaving both parties dissatisfied with each other as they are no longer able to find the intensity of feeling their own minds had fabricated for them. Reality ends up robbing them of their ability to sustain the illusions on which they fed.

Real love is less passionate as it consists of a decision to seek the good of another. It does not plunge into something only to find fading emotional intensity. Rather it slowly builds with affection and kind-

ness a foundation fixed solidly in reality that not only lasts but continues to expand.

Advertising and the media use various images and stories to engage our minds for their purposes. As a result, we are constantly exposed to that which attracts often provoking within us desires or the expectation and seeking of sensation. The Christian is advised to be aware of the manipulations we all encounter and act to curtail their influence.

The Christian is instructed to abandon the works of the flesh and seek to produce the fruits of the Spirit. This is essentially a transition from the consumptive activities of selfishness, to the giving activities of selflessness in love. In this Christ is our example.

But God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. - Romans 5:8

In Search of a Savior

The emergence of the failed Texas senate candidate Beto O'Rourke as a contender for the 2020 Democratic presidential nomination is a testimony to the power of media to anoint almost anyone. The last "savior", Obama, required the support of a blue state, fawning media, and the tired political tactics of last minute sexual allegations of his opponents to step up through the state legislature to the US senate to be positioned for his anointing. It now appears that even this cursory "dues paying" is no longer required.

There has been a long line of liberal "saviors" such as Wilson, FDR, Kennedy, and Obama. The reason for this is that Democrats have traditionally had more of a need for a savior than Republicans.

The need of liberals for a "savior" can be linked to the idea that they see themselves as alone in a hostile universe. To illustrate, a Christian might be seen as a man asleep in the back seat of a speeding car who awakes suddenly to see someone he trusts at the wheel. A person who has no belief in God might be seen as a man asleep in the back seat of a speeding car who awakes suddenly and sees no one at the wheel. He would

desperately clamber over the seat to take the wheel himself. To extend the illustration, a religious liberal might awake to see someone he thinks he knows in the passenger seat telling him to take the wheel.

Many liberals see no one running the universe and often out of fear, greed, or ego find that their anxieties can only be assuaged when they think they are in control. Often the only tool they see to exercise control is government. It is reasonable to expect that someone fearful of a universe filled with potential threat (climate, racism, poverty, injustice, etc.) would find much relief in believing someone could use government to correct the deficiencies they observe in the universe. The irony of elevating a man to effective godhood by those denying the existence of a God seems lost on them. Often the intensity of this relief approaches religious zeal. We have come to the point where universities might be called seminaries or temples to this powerful religious movement.

Sadly, it is the very success of liberals attempting to control the universe that becomes a driving force for conservatives to seek a savior. The very real insanity of the French revolution created a climate where Napoleon could rise to power. The Weimar Republic in Germany, while not as lethal as Paris in the 1790s, was filled with the stench of sexual pervers-

sion, hyper inflation, and the looming threat that the “blessings” of communism observed at the time in the death of millions in Stalinist Russia could be visited upon Germany. This odious climate in Germany created an opportunity for a Hitler to be welcomed.

In our present cultural climate we are taxed to pay for Muslims to be imported, sexual perversion and delusion are not only allowed but extolled, the institution of family has almost been eradicated, and new levels of idiocy are observed every day from universities, government, media, entertainment, and sadly even churches. One might see the potential for a “savior” to be welcomed who would appear to put an end to this lunacy.

Some Christians believe that just such a conservative “savior” is coming seven years before the return of the real one. Consider if someone were to appear on the scene and all the insanity stopped, Muslims became peaceful instead of belligerent, college students studied instead of scolding everyone, prosperity flourished, and divorce and crime rates dropped. This person might well be received as a savior.

In a way, many see Trump as a savior. This is unfair to Trump. We suffer from the work of many guilty hands over two centuries. A cowardly congress that

abdicated their responsibility almost at every turn and an ambitious court that often looks at the constitution as if they were reading tea leaves. To expect Trump to set everything right what thousands made wrong maybe too much..

All the passion put forth to hate Trump may be a bit of a misdirection. It contributes to an assumption that all man's problems are political. We have enough history to prove that our problems are not a result of having the wrong governmental configuration. Government in itself is about the use of force. The Roman army made theft a death penalty offense in Judea, yet at least two people still stole.

The collapse of the Soviet Union was not so much because they failed to correctly implement communism, it was because there is something intrinsically wrong with us that increasing government control only makes worse. The Soviet Union, Zimbabwe, and Venezuela illustrate that increasing control does not make thing better. China gives us an example of Potemkin communism in that it hijacks capitalism and uses it brutally to enslave their own people to be exploited as factory slaves the profits from which are used to achieve their economic, political and military expansionist objectives.

Libertarianism is correct in its identification of political power of any flavor producing disastrous results in proportion to its force. The limitation of Libertarianism is the assumption that the removal of government removes the problem. There is that within the human heart that brings ruin. It is only amplified by collectivization as seen at the Tower of Babel. We may need a savior, but not one that can show us the correct way to collectivize ourselves. Rather one that can remove the evil in our hearts.

“Rage, rage against the dying of the light.”

The Dylan Thomas poem exhorting futile anger against inevitable old age does capture one interesting element, recognition of an approaching end symbolized by “dying light”.

It can be helpful to consider what is “light” and what is “darkness”. There was an historical period called the “enlightenment” where even the pretense of Christianity was begun to be shed. This was contrasted to the “dark ages” in which man allegedly suffered the lack of culture which was supposedly stifled by Christian practice.

The so-called “light” of the enlightenment arose out of a period called the renaissance (from the old French for rebirth). Merchant prosperity coupled with intellectual narcissism set in motion a view of the world seen in the transfer of worship from God to the worship of man in general and self in particular. This accelerated with the industrial revolution providing unprecedented prosperity which seemed to confirm the direction of increasing progress and “light”.

Christians should see this definition of light and dark in just the opposite way. The so-called dark ages may not have had the benefits of modern technology, but they were also lacking the deceitfulness

of riches. Faith in God was essential to daily life whereas today it is often considered more of an optional extra. While secularists see a world increasingly bright with human liberty and freedom, Christians see a world becoming dark with selfishness, self-indulgence, and the foolishness that comes from being disconnected from the source of wisdom, God. Christians look forward to the return of the true light of the world;

I am come a light into the world, that whosoever believeth on me should not abide in darkness. - John 12:46

Secularists do not see Jesus as light.

And this is the condemnation, that light is come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil. For every one that doeth evil hateth the light, neither cometh to the light, lest his deeds should be reproved. - John 3:19-20

As the light of Christianity fades, one can be tempted to rage against the apparent dying of the true light. However, there is a time coming when the light of Jesus will return and every knee will bend and head bow to acknowledge the true light of the world.

For it is written, As I live, saith the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall confess to God. - Romans 14:11

Most people in the world see in Western civilization a beacon of what they think is light, promising free money and every kind of indulgence. This is what draws people to every nation in an effort of enter in to what they see as heaven on earth.

The names for the historical periods (enlightenment, renaissance, etc.) were selected by those who rejoice in man's departure from Christianity. They see it as a liberating period that frees man to do as he wishes. Unfortunately, what man has done is pursue every destructive indulgence he can. There is that in every human heart that is dark and wicked. Only the true light of Jesus and his word can drive out the real darkness.

“Seek and Ye Shall Find”

There is a saying often used when applied to looking for something like a set of keys, “It’s always in the last place you look”. This is because we usually stop looking for something when we find it.

In the Christian life we often stop “looking” because we think we have found “it”. Often we think of “it” as the accomplishment of some criteria such as baptism, church membership, having really repented, or said a specific prayer. These criteria are often associated with requirements to secure a place in heaven.

*Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you: -
Matthew 7:7*

The context of this verse are good things God (our father) in heaven wishes to give to his children who ask. If we think of Christianity as just a way to get to heaven, we miss much of what the Christian life could be. The Christian life is fleshed out and lived with humility, gratitude, wisdom, truth, and love. If we are not seeking these from our heavenly father, then we can only live a shallow imitation of the Christian life.

Many of us feel inadequate to seek out the deeper things of the Lord. We can come to rely on a pastor or denomination to do the Christian “heavy lifting”. As a result we can drift into Christian inertia that sees little “seeking”.

But without faith it is impossible to please him: for he that cometh to God must believe that he is, and that he is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him. - Hebrews 11:6

Here the word “seek” is *ekzeiteo* and means to search out, investigate, crave, demand, enquire, seek after (carefully, diligently). It is in the present tense active which means continuing.

Our “seeking” can often involve us in prayer and bible study. We need to understand that our seeking is for God’s glory not our own. Those who pray that God would let them win the lottery, will probably be disappointed. Seeking may involve discomfort. For example, a prayer for humility might be answered with the loss of a good job so that we would have a heart made more sensitive and capable of a broader ministry to others.

“Seeking” starts when a Christian rises from the pew and begins to move (to use a sports metaphor, gets up from the bench and gets into the game). Of-

ten a person will decide to read a book of the bible. He may run across a verse that is difficult to understand. At this point the actions associated with seeking can be more evident. He can pray for wisdom, ask someone older and wiser, or search for a video, commentary, or web site. Often multiple options are undertaken. As the new seeker encounters opinions, he may also seek and develop discernment as he sifts through what he finds and, like the Bereans, compares it with truth. The whole process of growing in understanding and discernment is aided by the direction of the Holy Spirit.

Even the Spirit of truth; whom the world cannot receive, because it seeth him not, neither knoweth him: but ye know him; for he dwelleth with you, and shall be in you. - John 14:17

“Is This My Father’s World?”

God created the heavens and the earth (Gen 1:1). However Satan sets the course of it (for now and insofar as he is allowed by God, Eph 2:2). Satan has used his influence over centuries to build a global society to serve his ambitions (Is 14:12-14).

When Adam and Eve sinned, God put a curse on creation to make life difficult. This was not so much punishment as a protection. To understand this a little better, we need to consider the contrast between a life lived in dependence upon God versus a life lived in the pursuit of selfish interests.

God warned Adam that the day he disobeyed by eating from the tree, he would die (Gen 2:17). While the physical process of death did begin, what actually and immediately died was Adam’s spiritual connection with God. Adam was left to his own devices which can be observed in his fearful state (Gen 3:8).

God had provided a plan to redeem those lost in sin by faith in Jesus (Adam looking forward and trusting in the promise and us looking rearward trusting in the act). However, we are all born in

this broken condition of a defective spiritual connection with God. The connection is reestablished when we are regenerated by faith (trust) in Jesus. However, we still carry the legacy of a powerful selfish nature with us. Even Christians who have been born again struggle with the this influence.

Without the constraint of difficulty in life, we quickly follow in the footsteps of depravity pioneered by emperors and kings throughout history. Industrialization and prosperity seem to bring widespread blessings of comfort and ease. However, it seems that these “riches” are deceitful because we are drawn to embrace what seems to provide comfort and ease when in reality we find opportunity for the worst aspects of our selfish nature to be expressed and work to corrupt our character. This can be seen in history as civilizations become prosperous then corrupt, and then implode. (Hard times make good men, Good men make good times, Good times make weak men, Weak men make hard times)

It is like there are two worlds. There is the physical or natural world God created and the social or artificial world Satan has constructed. Satan (called the god of this world 2 Cor 4:4) can provide (comforts, pleasures, and prosperity). There are those who seem to flourish in Satan’s world (John 8:44, John 15:19). Those who have God as their father, while tempted by the comforts Satan offers, see consump-

tive dissipation and selfish indulgence as ultimately destructive while those who follow the god of this world see discipline, austerity, and restraint as foolish. We have to make the choice in life as to which direction we follow (Matt. 7:13).

And if it seem evil unto you to serve the LORD, choose you this day whom ye will serve; whether the gods which your fathers served that were on the other side of the flood, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land ye dwell: but as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD. - Joshua 24:15

The Case Against Wearing Makeup

There are some disfiguring circumstances (such as the loss of an eye) that might lead a person to consider making use of appearance altering apparatus to avoid the reactions some may have to the unusual. However, even in these rare circumstances, a person risks coming to think that these devices are necessary for acceptance.

For most people the use of cosmetics begins during adolescence for two overlapping reasons. The first is to experiment with presenting oneself to the opposite sex to solicit arousal of interest. The second motivation is to present oneself to members of the same sex for approval and acceptance.

Personal grooming should have at the core hygiene and neatness. When additional layers are added to achieve social objectives, one begins to transition into an actor whose costume and makeup are selected to present to an 'audience' an image or persona that is inconsistent with reality (one might say deceptive).

Since it is often young people who begin to experiment with manipulating their appearance, they are often unaware of how this can cause

problems. Jesus gave his disciples a theatrical warning by telling them to beware of the 'leaven' of the Pharisees which was hypocrisy. The word hypocrisy in the Greek meant to speak from under a mask as actors would in the Greek theater.

We often consider the admonition to avoid the leaven of the Pharisees as to not engage in intentional deception because today we often think of the word hypocrite as describing a sort of con artist. However, the use of the word 'leaven' (yeast) indicates more of the slow inflation of CO₂ gas to puff up bread. This seems to emphasize more of the gradual process of self-deception we see with the Pharisees.

1. Fraud. The Pharisees presented themselves to the world as righteous because of their strict observance of the law. Jesus often confronted them that this was not true. The use of makeup runs somewhat parallel in that creating and presenting something that is not true risks losing the ability to see what is true.

2. Isolation. Constructing a persona or presenting oneself in a role risks never knowing if those who find the persona attractive would find the real person attractive. As the years pass, a person can grow to be ashamed of how they are without constructing a mask.

3. Uncertainty. If someone attracts romantic interest through the use of an artificial construct, there is always some doubt about how sustainable that interest will be when reality intrudes.

4. Elevating the flesh. In Corinthians love is defined pretty much as selflessness. The more time one spends constructing a persona, the more focused one becomes on self.

5. Superficial. An increasing investment of attention and time to surface appearance and the insubstantial tends to cripple a person from seeing things of deeper and richer value. Many women have said that looking back they had wished they were less impressed with good looks and had placed more value on selecting someone with a good sense of humor.

6. Worldly conformance. Often appearance is manipulated to conform to the expectations of others. This can subtly bring a person into alignment with practices and even values that are worldly. This risks making an enemy of God (James 4:4)

7. Magnetism. Often constructing something attractive that is superficial attracts the superficial. One can find that successful use of superficial attraction draws those who are superficial themselves. In addition to the problem of drawing the wrong kind of

attention, one often finds that there is a failure to draw the right kind of attention.

Many young people find it difficult to wait on the Lord. Abraham also found it difficult to wait and took matters into his own hands. That did not turn out so well. Boys and girls are better off spending their time in surrender to the Lord for his help to develop godly character and make them worthy of godly mates rather than attempting to solicit the attention of whoever happens to be passing by.

This contrast between the superficial and the substantial can be seen in the verse that says unless the Lord build the house, the laborers labor in vain. A focus on the external is usually accompanied by a proportional disinterest in the internal. This contrast can also be seen in the verses that say one cannot serve two masters and the spirit wars against the flesh.

There is a reason the location for the application of makeup is called a 'vanity'. While the word simply means empty or useless, it is a little misleading because great damage can accrue as ones attention is directed towards self and attempting to manipulate others through the presentation of a constructed appearance.

Even if the act was not damaging in itself, the dis-

traction from and neglect of pursuing Christ-likeness is harmful for a Christian. Some might say that the subject of makeup is insignificant and that there are many other things that can focus on self and divert us from our Savior. While there are many potential pitfalls, their sheer number does not make them any less significant.

The wearing of makeup serves as an advertisement to the superficial that one seeks their attention and as a warning to those more mature and perceptive. Wearing makeup does not make one 'bad' just as not wearing makeup does not make one 'good'. What needs to be recognized is that the paths we choose in life shape us in ways that we sometimes do not fully appreciate.

We need to ask ourselves what is most important to us. Do we wish to live for the Lord and follow a path that will lead to Christian maturity. If we find a strong attraction to a path in life that elevates self we may wish to see that as a powerful influence of the flesh and turn to the Lord in prayer that his Spirit might fill us and we would find the strength to not feed our fleshly inclinations so that they would begin to diminish.

Christian Snowflakes

The term 'snowflake' has come into recent usage to describe college students in particular who become offended at the drop of a hat. Like an actual snowflake, they seem unable to withstand even the slightest challenge. They are 'triggered' by any verbal expression or action they do not like. In a way they act as sort of thought police to pitch a fit if they encounter anything they have not been programmed to accept. This could not have happened to them without being severely divorced from reality.

One would have to question to what extent this phenomena could effect Christians. Strolling through the world with haughty disdain was usually only reserved for kings and emperors and a few aristocrats (Matthew 11:8). This was because difficulty and hardship introduce reality into a life that is inescapable. Often it is just these encounters that prove to us our need for God and his provision.

Having been born into an era of prosperity fueled first by the Industrial Revolution and then by a creative web of ever expanding debt, most people have come to be increasingly isolated from reality. Ideas that men and women can change

sex, people can and should save the planet from whatever threat they imagine, cure poverty, evolve to higher consciousness, or import a malignant culture gain traction in the minds of those who have come to believe that the world is theirs to create.

Jesus warned his disciples of the dangers of riches (Luke 18:25). We can see in the bible how Nebuchadnezzar's prosperity diverted him from reality (Daniel 4:30). King David had become so divorced from reality that he had a man killed so he could take his wife.

James writes Christian leaders to warn them to reflect on their actions because they might not have true faith (James 2:14). Satan has put a lot of effort and resources into getting society to accept his ideas. Our prosperity may not be so much 'blessings' from God but the result of Satan's schemes to divert us into the deceptions so easily considered by riches (Mark 4:19).

When a Christian looks at the world and sees something attractive, he risks becoming an enemy of God (James 4:4). When he sees a system that needs fixing, he risks thinking he is God (Genesis 3:5). When he sees opportunities for riches, he risks grief (1 Timothy 6:8-10). When he sees himself superior, he risks having contempt for others (Luke 18:9).

Snowflakes are pitiable creatures who have come so far from reality that they are almost laughable if they were not so dangerous. As Christians we should reflect on how far the deceptions of riches and the world may have also carried us from reality as well. It can happen subtly. A husband and wife can work, commute, and shop outside the home over 100 hours a week. Their children might receive the bulk of their learning from TV and school. In order to provide a 'better' life for their children a couple may actually accomplish the opposite.

Hardship, privation, and even suffering may offer a 'better' life than delusion, self-importance, contempt, and becoming offended at anything one does not like.

Happiness

For several years I worked on a crisis hotline. I talked with about 4000 people of whom about 10% were attempting suicide at the time. I learned much during that time and made an attempt to put some of what I learned into writing that I thought might be of benefit to others.

Since I encountered so many people that were not only not interested in Christianity but openly hostile to it, I thought I would attempt to write from a secular perspective. I found it difficult. One might consider life as a spectrum with problems at one end and happiness on the other. While I could suggest methods and techniques to solve problems, it would only get someone half way to happiness, sort of getting stuck midway in a realm of boredom.

I came to see that living for self almost traps a person circulating between problems and boredom. Buddhism deals with this problem by suggesting the conquest of desire such that selfishness and its tendency to drag us back into the realm of problems is minimized. I found that getting past boredom requires a transition from selfishness to selflessness. A glimpse of this can be seen in a father who sets aside his own interests

to provide for and protect his family or a mother weary from her work tending to her children.

In the Christian realm the distinction between self and selfless is the distinction between the flesh and the Spirit. Christians are called to love and as can be seen involves selflessness;

Love meekly and patiently bears ill treatment from others. Love is kind, gentle, benign, pervading and penetrating the whole nature, mellowing all which would have been harsh and austere; is not envious. Love does not brag, nor does it show itself off, is not ostentatious, does not have an inflated ego, does not act unbecomingly, does not seek after the things which are its own, is not irritated, provoked, exasperated, aroused to anger, does not take into account the evil, does not rejoice at the iniquity but rejoices with the truth, endures all things, believes all things, hopes all things, bears up under all things, not losing heart nor courage. Love never fails. - 1 Corinthians 13:4-7

Most people see no advantage in selflessness. This is why most people have few if any children because nothing demands selflessness more than children. The pouring out of self in love seems foolish to most.

There are consumptive sensations such as fun and

pleasure that are often used as a substitute for happiness. However, (like narcotics) they have diminishing returns and often lead to chasing increasingly greater sensation and plunging one back into the realm of problems.

If one has experienced difficulties and anxieties in life, finally achieving boredom can seem to be an idyllic respite. However as time passes, discontent sets in. As Christians we need to realize that happiness is not to be found in living for self;

And that he died for all, that they which live should not henceforth live unto themselves, but unto him which died for them, and rose again. - 2 Corinthians 5:15

Rethinking Hell

One of the biggest reasons some people find Christianity objectionable is the idea that God would subject those who do not believe to eternal conscious torment. It just doesn't sound just, fair, or right. This idea of eternal torment is so firmly embedded in Christian tradition, that it almost is never examined. This is in part because most English translations of the Bible use the word 'eternal' to translate the Greek word 'aion'.

Another reason for being reluctant to examine this doctrine is that fringe groups such as Jehovah's Witness are identified as holding a view that torment in hell is not infinitely eternal.

The trouble with translating 'aion' is that like the English word 'tall', its specific meaning depends on how it is used. Homer used it to mean the span of a man's life, it is also used to mean an 'age'.

Another consideration is that punishment can be infinitely eternal even if the punishing isn't. For example, Sodom is described in Jude 1:7 as suffering 'eternal' (aion) fire. Sodom was destroyed by fire and even though the city and people are gone, the desolation remains to this day.

One might ask if the gift of God is eternal life (Romans 6:23), why would it be given to those who are not saved? If one considers that there are two births (John 3:3) and two deaths (Rev 20:14), one might see that if one has the second birth, he does not have the second death (Rev 20:6). Also if one does not have the second birth (made alive in Christ), he is subject to the second death (Rev 21:8).

We also need to recognize what we do not know. For example we can ask if eternity is the end of time or time unending. This begins to illustrate our lack of understanding and helps us maintain humility. I cannot tell someone definitively that if they reject Christ they will suffer an infinitely eternal conscious torment. I can tell them that judgment will be according to works (Rev 20:13), that God is just (Ps 89:14), and that God is merciful (Ps 57:10).

We have inherited a traditional view of Hell that may not be entirely accurate. The Bereans were called more 'noble' because they searched the scriptures to see if what they were being told was true. This can serve as an example for us to refrain from being smug, getting on a 'high horse', or bashing others.

I am grateful my sins are covered by the blood of Jesus and that I will not come into judgment for

them. I weep for those who reject Jesus and will suffer judgment for their sins. While punishment and perishing are better than infinite eternal conscious torment, it is still as sad fate.

The Lord is not slack concerning his promise, as some men count slackness; but is longsuffering to us-ward, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance. - 2 Peter 3:9

Being Born Again

There are numerous divisions and denominations in Christianity. One of these divisions regards the understanding of the statement Jesus made to Nicodemus that he must be 'born again'. We can read in John chapter three that this was both perplexing to Nicodemus as well as the statement of Jesus that it was expected that Nicodemus as a teacher of Israel should already understand this concept.

To better understand the second birth we should first consider the warning God gave to Adam and Eve regarding the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it: for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die. - Genesis 2:17

The end of the verse might be better translated, “dying ye shall die”.

When Adam and Eve ate, they did not physically die that day but hundreds of years later. What did happen was that they were cut off from their relationship with God. This indicates that some-

thing within them no longer worked the way that it used to. That was their spiritual component. Mankind has since existed for millenia without the ability to be reconnected to God. This is what 'died' on the day that Adam and Eve sinned.

Nicodemus was supposed to have understood that without a spiritual regeneration (new life or what could be called 'new birth') it would be impossible to obtain a regained relationship with God. This is what Jesus came to offer.

But these are written, that ye might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing ye might have life through his name. - John 20:31

Nicodemus was supposed to have known that being "born again" spoke to the regeneration that would be needed for those of Israel to enter the kingdom (Ezk 36:25-26). However, gentiles would also need to be changed.

Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new. - 2 Corinthians 5:17

For whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved. - Romans 10:13

It is this living vital connection to Christ that is

what happens in regeneration and is frequently also called being 'born again'. Many feel that since they acknowledge that Jesus existed (belief) that this is the same thing. However this sort of belief is not sufficient (James 2:19). It can be a little confusing because the Greek word (pisteo) which often translated 'believe' might be better translated trust. It is important to get this understanding correct because many are going to discover that they were mistaken about their faith.

Many will say to me in that day, Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in thy name? and in thy name have cast out devils? and in thy name done many wonderful works? And then will I profess unto them, I never knew you: depart from me, ye that work iniquity. - Matthew 7:22-23

For this reason we should urgently seek to verify if we have accepted a false or substitute second birth or if we actually have new and eternal life in Christ.

Short Timer

Over 50 years ago I was in the Army. A common expression at the time was being a 'short timer'. This referred to someone who had just a month or so before they got out of the Army. When a person got down to around three months left to go, he was called a 'two digit midget'.

Now, getting closer to the end of life, I see a parallel in that an end is approaching and becoming increasingly tangible. While I was eager to get out of the Army, I am not so eager to leave this life. For the Christian there is both an attraction for the world to come and a desire to be useful here. Paul gives us a picture of his thoughts on this;

For me to live is Christ [His life in me], and to die is gain [the gain of the glory of eternity]. If, however, it is to be life in the flesh and I am to live on here, that means fruitful service for me; so I can say nothing as to my personal preference [I cannot choose], But I am hard pressed between the two. My yearning desire is to depart (to be free of this world, to set forth) and be with Christ, for that is far, far better; But to remain in my body is more needful and essential for your sake. - Philippians 1:21-24 (Amplified Version)

People who do not have faith in Jesus (without hope in the world Eph. 2:12) would be expected to fear the end of life or even to deny its approach. However, the Christian has assurance and comfort that, having been joined to the body of Christ, he will rejoice in seeing his Savior at the resurrection.

Beloved, now are we the sons of God, and it doth not yet appear what we shall be: but we know that, when he shall appear, we shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is. - 1 John 3:2

The bible says that the glory of young men is their strength (Prov. 20:29). Those of us in our sunset years know that strength fades and sometimes painfully. Our increasing physical maladies also serve to help us look forward to letting go of this world for the joy of eternal life.

Looking back over a long life carries with it many regrets. We can wish we had done better raising our children, loving our spouse, been more kind to our friends, and taken advantage of opportunities to serve our Lord. When we meet our brothers and sisters in heaven, we might expect to be overcome with sorrow for not only the wrongs we have done, but the rights we failed to do. However, greater than all our present and future regrets is the love of Christ that washes away all of our sins. It is because

of this that we can look at those we have wronged and those who have wronged us with his love which is greater than all our sin.

We can get a little of this transcendent perspective by looking at our own life and seeing things like foolish ambitions and that for which we strived only to reach old age and understand things of real value. How much more precious as the years pass by is hearing something like 'I love you' from your child than social position, wealth, or achievement. Those who can see this ultimate reality often busy themselves in 'storing up treasures'.

Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth and rust doth corrupt, and where thieves break through and steal: But lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust doth corrupt, and where thieves do not break through nor steal: For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also. - Matthew 6:19-21

Healing for Sex Abuse

Many years ago I worked on a crisis hotline and talked with many women who had this experience. I will relate some thoughts hopefully it will be helpful or encouraging for others.

One call I had started as a routine description of difficulty in a relationship. After about five minutes I asked if the caller had been sexually abused as a child. There was a long silence and then a tentative question, 'How could you tell'. I can understand how the caller would be shocked to think that what she considered her shameful past was so easily discovered.

It was my suggestion that she consider that the experiences she had as a child hurt her in two ways. First she had the negative experience of the abuse. Secondly, she was lacking in the positive developmental steps that would have helped her to have a foundation from which to build healthy relationships.

There are chiefly two bad ways to deal with such an experience. The first is to pretend it never happened. The second is to constantly revisit it. It can be helpful to consider the damage caused to a person similar to the physical damage that

can occur in a car accident. Injuries may heal more or less completely. The negligence or malice of the perpetrator can lead to bitter recriminations. If the person who took the car out was a teen that was not supposed to, they may also feel shame or responsibility.

With any trauma, it is important to work at as much recovery as possible. However, there may be a limit as to how much function can be re-acquired. A car accident victim may face permanent limits of mobility. An abuse victim may face similar limits of trust. The advantage for the abuse victim is that, with the help of God, significant healing can be achieved.

One aspect of healing is forgiveness. This is often misunderstood and attempted unilaterally. Forgiveness is about relationship and is not possible without the responsible person being repentant and asking forgiveness. We can see this with our relationship with God.

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

Here the word 'confess' is homologos (to say the same words). The idea is that if those of Israel could say the same words about their sins that God would,

they bring themselves into alignment with truth and can receive God's forgiveness. (Christians today already have forgiveness.)

In the mind of a child, a perpetrator can loom large indeed. As the years pass and understanding grows, the perpetrator begins to take on more accurate proportions. Those who exploit the weak and vulnerable are usually cowardly, sad, debased creatures seeking out a victim they can use to support a fantasy of affection they are not able to obtain otherwise. Some healing can be obtained as a victim comes to see less of the 'power' of the perpetrator and more of the true sad nature.

One hindrance to healing is the limitation to being able to share the event with others. People who have had traumatic experiences often find others are upset and avoid mentioning it. Combat veterans, ex-cons, even cops can find that their experiences can be unsettling to those who have not had similar experiences. Working on a crisis hotline gave me an appreciation for the perspective held by cops and emergency room nurses resulting from their unhindered view of humanity. Most of us live lives distant from the ravages of much of the more brutal sin in the world. If we live in an artificial bubble, life can be more comfortable, but more distant from truth.

For the Christian, surviving trauma can make us useful in ministering to others.

Who comforteth us in all our tribulation, that we may be able to comfort them which are in any trouble, by the comfort wherewith we ourselves are comforted of God. For as the sufferings of Christ abound in us, so our consolation also aboundeth by Christ. - 2 Corinthians 1:4-5

If we consider examples of gross injustice such as Saul seeking to kill David or Joseph sold by his brothers into slavery (talk about family rejection) then sent to prison, we can see that throughout all manner of human sin, God still works out his will.

But as for you, ye thought evil against me; but God meant it unto good, to bring to pass, as it is this day, to save much people alive. - Genesis 50:20

While use can be made of scars obtained from the evil of others, it can still seem as if we have been abandoned. However, we need not only to recognize that God has not abandoned us, but that we need to be seeking him so that his work in us can continue.

When my father and my mother forsake me, then the LORD will take me up. - Psalm 27:10

He restoreth my soul:. - Psalm 23:3a

For every one that asketh receiveth; and he that seeketh findeth; and to him that knocketh it shall be opened. - Luke 11:10

There are a few concerns that make sexual abuse of girls more difficult to recover from than physical trauma.

1. The sexual component. When herpes was first becoming observed in the general population, a gal asked me if she should ask her boyfriend if he had it. She said she felt uncomfortable bringing the subject up. I asked her why she was contemplating the greatest act of intimacy with someone she felt so uncomfortable with as to be inhibited from asking a question.

Today most people engage in casual fornication with almost recreational ease and subsequent loss of intimacy. Seldom considered is that when two people marry who are inexperienced, they spend much of their first year in mutual discovery and with humor and sensitivity build a special intimacy that makes a strong marriage that can last a lifetime. This opportunity to build something special through mutual discovery can be damages. A child cannot understand that they are just being used to facilitate the fantasy of someone else. They can come to think

that their actions reflect something defective about them.

An adult rape victim may be able to see their experience as more a violent assault feeding the need for the perpetrator to feel power with sex only being the means to accomplish the fantasy. A child seduced or manipulated will have greater difficulty making a distinction.

2. Female vulnerability. In an age of ascendant feminism, it can seem heretical to suggest that men and women are different. However, if woman was created to be a helper for man it would seem that she would have an extra ability to trust, depend on, and focus on the immediate. This constitution would create a vulnerability to exploitation that was intended to be protected.

3. The trust of children. People have been exploiting the vulnerable since the early days of Genesis. The problem with exploiting children is that the damage it causes can run so deep as to cripple someone the rest of their life. A person swindled out of his life savings might recover sufficiently to work and earn the money to rebuild his savings. A child swindled out of normal development may be crippled in such a way that it is difficult to recover.

4. The guilt of enjoyment. Sometimes an exploited

child derives pleasure from the exploitation. Either in terms of sensation or from the influence such as position can provide. As an adult, a person can come to feel shame for their participation. They may even come to feel responsible, particularly if they were told that they caused the encounters.

There are particular challenges in recovery from sexual abuse. These can be more readily overcome for the Christian .

1. Truth, the ultimate remedy. One of the advantages of the past is that it is not now. Being able to break from the past allows a person to be able to see the past with the clarity of truth. Perpetrators and crimes take a more accurate shape and become more sad and less menacing with the distant perspective of time. An adult survivor of childhood sexual abuse can gain a more healthy perspective if they can use truth to disconnect themselves from the oppressive burden of past people and events.

Then said Jesus to those Jews which believed on him, If ye continue in my word, then are ye my disciples indeed; And ye . - John 8:31-32

2. Love. Today the idea of love has become just the opposite of how the bible uses the word. Today the self-stimulating sensatiionshall know the truth, and the truth shall make you freens of lust, desire, pleas-

ure, and expectation have come to replace the biblical idea of self-denial and seeking the good of others.

Love is long-suffering, it is kind, love doth not envy, love doth not vaunt itself, is not puffed up, doth not act unseemly, doth not seek its own things, is not provoked, doth not impute evil, rejoiceth not over the unrighteousness, and rejoiceth with the truth; all things it beareth, all it believeth, all it hopeth, all it endureth. - 1 Corinthians 13:4-7

If one considers almost every popular song from the 1950s through the 1960s was about teen 'love', one might see the hand of Satan (who sets the course of this world (Eph 2:2)) attempting to divert an entire generation to substitute selfish indulgence for actual love. The Christian who comes to understand real self-sacrificial love through the example of Jesus has an advantage to see that what they were subjected to had little to do with 'love'.

3. Wisdom. Wisdom comes from God and is available to all who would ask. Wisdom works in conjunction with truth. For example, truth tells us that the abuse of a child is not the fault of the child. Wisdom tells us that it is foolish and ultimately harmful to ignore truth and cling to a sensation of blame, fault, and shame.

If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not; and it shall be given him. But let him ask in faith, nothing wavering. For he that wavereth is like a wave of the sea driven with the wind and tossed. - James 1:5-6

4. Faith. The English word 'believe' is often used as a substitute for faith. However, this can be confusing.

Thou believest that there is one God; thou doest well: the devils also believe, and tremble. - James 2:19

It can be more helpful to consider the word 'trust' as a substitute. The example is often given of a man setting up to cross Niagara Falls with a wheelbarrow on a tightrope (a frequent stunt in the early part of the twentieth century). The man asked a bystander if he thought he could accomplish the feat, the bystander said that he believed he could. The bystander was then asked if he wanted to ride in the wheelbarrow. This sort of expands the differentiation between belief and trust.

For the which cause I also suffer these things: nevertheless I am not ashamed: for I know whom I have believed, and am persuaded that he is able to keep that which I have committed unto him against that day. - 2 Timothy 1:12

Experiencing childhood abuse can cripple ones ability to trust. However, as one's faith (trust) in God grows, one is better able to risk opening the heart to others.

An additional problem is for people who are already in a relationship revealing they had an abuse in the past. Frequently men react with anger and seek to punish or bring to justice those responsible. This causes problems because the woman generally wants affection, affirmation, and to know that she is accepted regardless of the circumstances of the past. In this situation a Christian man can benefit from someone helping him to understand what his wife needs from him and that his first priority should be to comfort, assure, and create a zone of acceptance for his wife.

The Christian wife who has a Christian husband who can help her get past the damage done years ago has a gift from God. The Christian woman

who remains single or does not have someone who can shield her can take solace that God is her shield and that a healing heart can be used to bring a depth of sensitivity in ministry to others.

Brethren, I count not myself to have apprehended: but this one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before, I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus. - Philippians 3:13-14

True recovery lies in being able to disconnect from the past like losing an old scab. It is possible to avoid the root of bitterness that can poison a life (Heb 12:15). We come to be grateful for the love of Christ without which we would be alone and without hope in the world (Eph 2:12). Past pain can give us greater sensitivity, humility, and gratitude for the love of God that rescues us.

Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new. - 2 Corinthians 5:17

Illness and Health

Regarding matters of health, most non-Christians and perhaps most Christians give it little attention until there are problems. Even then, most consider good health the normal state and may think that any failures of health are simply reflective of the current state of evolution.

It can be helpful to first start with a consideration of some of the reasons for ill health.

1. The Curse. In Genesis we read of a judicial pronouncement of God that the natural world will become hostile to us. It would not be unreasonable to consider that in addition to difficulty in agriculture that pathogens and internal frailty of our DNA might also be included.

Some consider the curse to be a just punishment for sin. However, it may also be that such a 'curse' was for our benefit to limit our delusion of self-sufficiency.

Consider two wealthy fathers of young men who both rebel against their fathers. One father chooses to cut off all funds from his rebellious son. The other father allows his son to continue access to his funds. The first son has to find a job to earn the money he needs to eat. The second son continues to

finance whatever indulgences and whims he fancies. The difficulties the first son encounters help him come to understand reality and truth. The delusions and dissipations of the second son carry him increasingly further from truth.

2. Purposeful. We have examples in the bible of people who become ill or, like the man born blind, are positioned for God's purposes. These purposes can be varied such as for our benefit, God's glory, or the benefit of others. Hezekiah gives us an example that longer life is not necessarily a blessing. Paul came to understand that God's strength is made complete in weakness.

3. Accidental. There are activities and situations that accrue damage to health without forewarning. Over a hundred years ago women who were employed to paint luminous Radium on the hands of clocks discovered tumors on their lips and tongues as a result of whetting the paint brush. These women would have had no way of knowing the damage that would result of their actions.

4. Consequential. The alcoholic, drug user, and fornicator all face health problems directly attributable to their choices. Even people who chose activities like boxing or football face health consequences.

5. Congenital. Some people are born with condi-

tions that define how they will have to live life. This can vary from a life long nuisance to a condition that gives only a few hours of life after birth.

6. Corrective. We may come to a condition of poor health as a result of having ignored God's instruction and are being encouraged to seek his leading as to what needs to be corrected. (1 Cor 11:30)

7. Demonic. There is a category of illnesses that stem from the exploration of occult solutions to health problems. Often the attempt to solve one problem results in being beset by other physical and particularly psychological problems. Much of this was documented by Kurt Koch who passed away in 1987.

Some health conditions result from a combination of factors. For example it might be considered both accidental and consequential when people who lived far from a coastline developed thyroid problems because of a lack of iodine in their diet.

It is difficult to imagine that he whose 'eye is on the sparrow' would be disinterested in our difficulties. We know that all things work together for good for those who love God (Rom 8:28). However, this does not mean that all things happen for comfort, pleasure, or ease.

There are maladies that accumulate with age. This may have contributed to Paul's wistfulness as he considered his approaching death and going to be with Jesus. However, his remembrance of his ministry to the Philippians roused him from his contemplation of setting aside this 'mortal coil' (Phil 1:23)

If we consider what options we have for healing today we might see some of the following;

1. Medical care. If we consider that Luke was a physician, we might conclude that seeking routine medical care is not showing a lack of faith (Jer 8:22, Mk 2:17).
2. Prayer. Even if a particular malady is from the Lord, there is still precedence for praying that it be taken away (Php 4:6, 2 Cor 12:7-8).
3. Self-healing. If we get a cut, burn, or strain a muscle to the point of inflammation, we can find that in a few days the repair mechanisms of the body tend to restore function.
4. Nutrition and Diet. Sometimes experimentation with foods, vitamins, or supplements can shed light on physical complaints. For example, when industrial agriculture selected wheat varieties for better yields, many people developed gluten intolerance. The selection of gluten alternatives or products

made from older wheat varieties may offer a management strategy.

Caution needs to be taken when exploring the realm of what is called alternative medicine. There can be benefit such as when people took willow bark to alleviate pain before the Bayer Chemical company extracted salicin, called it aspirin, and patented it. However, it was also common for people to take Laudanum in the 1800s for pain initially unaware of the addictive nature of opium derivatives.

It can be tempting to look into health options that are particularly dangerous. In addition to quackery that can pose the risk of increasing ones health problems, there are those who offer 'spiritual' help that can open the door to spiritual harm. A man from Nigeria was once asked about the practice of witch doctors. He said that they preferred to call it 'country medicine'.

The realm of claimed self-healing can include such practices as 'Word of Faith' and 'Christian Science'. Both of these can trace their origins to Phineas Quimby a mesmerist (hypnotist) and healer who came to view health as something one could achieve through ones own thinking.

There are those who offer to perform healing which can include those who make use of demonic re-

sources. This field is complicated by what is called the 'placebo effect' where some people can show remarkable health improvement when nothing has actually been done. This opens the door for all sorts of claims that can be fraudulent, diabolical, self-deception, actual, or partial.

If we consider what the bible says about healing, we do know that God can answer prayer. However, we also read concerning a time when healing will be routine (Is 35:1-6).

With the arrival of Jesus and the offer of the kingdom to the nation of Israel, healing was given a proof of the immanent kingdom (Mat 11:2-5).

Jesus instructed his disciples what they could expect with the restoration of the kingdom and the role the nation of Israel would play in God's intended purpose for the nation (Mk 16:14-18)

We also read about healing demonstrated by the Apostles as they attempted to demonstrate to the nation of Israel that Jesus was the Messiah and that the offer of the kingdom for the nation was still open (Act 3:11, Act 5:16, Act 8:7, Act 14:9-10, Act 26:8-9).

The invitation to the nation of Israel to receive the kingdom was authenticated by miraculous signs

(Act 14:3). However, this invitation was not to be extended continuously (Act 28:28).

Jesus had warned the nation of Israel what would happen if they did not repent (Lk 13:1-9). The death of the Galilaeans (presumably on the way to Jerusalem with their sacrifices) by Pilate and the death of those who were crushed under stones were fulfilled (the use of the word 'likewise' was a forewarning) with the destruction of the temple.

Some consider the book of Hebrews as a last ditch effort to appeal to the nation of Israel to receive the kingdom. The reference to 'healing' in Hebrews 12:12-13 may be more metaphorical than a description of physical healing as it follows on the reference to 'chastening' in verse 11.

In the description of the kingdom a reference is made to longer life (Is 65:20). This would be consistent with the description of every believer having the power to heal (Mk 16:17-18).

The description of healing given in James is within the context of an immanent kingdom. We see a description of an approach to healing that falls short of what would be expected when the kingdom was realized, but advanced of what we can expect today. It can be confusing because of the use of the word 'church' (ekklesia) in verse 14. There are certain

words that evoke a particular image in our minds that we tend to bring into the word that distort our understanding. If we were to substitute the word 'assembly', we might get a better picture of the gathering of Jews (Ja 1:1) to whom this is addressed.

We might surmise that some of the Jews in this group were faithful Jews, however, since the gospel of the kingdom was for Israel and not yet fulfilled, an emphasis on works and perseverance might be expected.

An additional point of confusion in James is reference to 'anointing' (aleipho).

Two words in the New Testament, aleiphō and chriō, refer to the act of applying something to something else for a certain purpose. Aleiphō was used, for instance, in the papyri of the act of greasing the yoke-band of an ox, namely, the act of applying grease to the yoke-band so that it would not irritate the sleek hide of the ox. - Wuest

The verb chrio is the root of not only chrisma, but also the noun christos, which strictly speaking applies to one who has been anointed, the anointing serving to symbolize appointment for some task. Thus christos is used in the Septuagint to describe "the anointed (Heb = mashiach from mashach = to smear or anoint; Lxx = christos) priest" (Lev 4:5,

4:16, 6:22). In First Samuel *christos* is used in the Septuagint to describe the king of Israel as God's "anointed." (*mashiach*; Lxx - *christos*) (1Sa 2:10)

The word used in James, however, is the Greek word *aleiphō*. This word is primarily a medical term meaning 'to rub or massage with oil.' The rubbing of a person with oil (*aleiphō*) was a common medical practice for the sick or injured to promote and encourage the healing of wounds and diseases.

We can see a further distinction as the word 'anoint' (*aleipho*) is also used in Luke 7:46.

Much confusion can arise if we fail to see a distinction between three groups of believers. The first are those in the nation of Israel to whom the offer of the kingdom was made. These are those who are saved and receive eternal life at the first resurrection (Dan 12:2, Rev 20:6). These are those for whom the practice of James 5 would not be foreign (Mk 6:13).

A third group might be thought of as mostly gentile believers who receive the grace of God by believing in Jesus. These are those who even today are translated into the kingdom of God and become joint heirs with those of Israel (Co 1:13, Eph 2:16-19). However, these have not power from the Holy Spirit to demonstrate the immanent kingdom (Heb 6:5).

The second group consists of various assemblies (some Jewish, some mostly gentile, and some a mix of both Jew and gentile). What was distinctive of this group was the demonstration of supernatural powers that was to authenticate the offer of the kingdom and was observed between 33AD and 70AD. This was such a powerful demonstration that the Corinthian church had to be admonished for the exuberance with which they used these gifts (1Cor 14:12).

One of the unique characteristics of the second group was the demonstration of the power of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 12&14, Rom 12, Heb 6:4-5). Today many in the third group have convinced themselves that they are still able to call upon and use these 'powers of the world to come'. While they can cause some positive result through the occasional 'placebo effect', they do not seem able to duplicate the significant healings described in the bible, which include raising the dead.

While some in the Charismatic circle are greedy idolaters (Col 3:5) thinking that this is the path to wealth, many more can be drawn in by a sincere desire to be healed. The example we have of dealing with difficulty in general can be seen with Jesus when he was facing the cross (O my Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me: nevertheless not as I will, but as thou wilt).

Healing can be sought within the context of what is 'possible'. Medical treatment, nutrition, and prayer can be thought of as exploring the possible. A danger arises when a person seeks to employ his own control such as 'casting out the demon of illness'. The reason rebellion is equated with witchcraft (1Sm 15:23) (two seemingly unrelated activities), is that both have in common the attempt to control that which should be left to God.

If we consider the affliction of Job, we can see that his situation can be instructive for all who suffer. However, in addition to providing a lesson in long-suffering, we see that there was an element of correction for Job as well (Job 29). The purging of self-sufficiency and pride were of great benefit to Job as it can be for all of us.

While pain and illness can be an isolating and

individual experience, it occurs within a social context such that our example to others of patient endurance and confidence in the Lord under trial can benefit them. It can also humble us to receive care from others and as we give thanks to God for their assistance and ministry, we bless them (2Cor 9:11).

It can be tricky to consider that what we experience of Christianity today may be different than during the time of Acts. One indicator is when Simon the magician (who is called a believer) desires to obtain the power to give the Holy Spirit through the laying on of hands (Acts 8:13-18). The healings performed during the Acts period may have been the result of the power of the Holy Spirit distinct from the immersion by the Holy Spirit into the body of Christ.

We can observe that the healing done by Jesus was immediate, complete, and lasting. We may surmise that the healings done by the Apostles were equally effective. Healing done today seems distant from God (as with medical care). Healing in answer to prayer might demonstrate some of the qualities as the healings done by Jesus and the apostles, however, they are not consistently demonstrated as they are not used to authenticate a kingdom offer or as representative of an established kingdom as will be observed when Israel finally receives the kingdom.

Healing today should probably be considered indi-

vidual and at the will of God. As a result, seeking routine medical treatment and continuing to ask God for relief in prayer would not be unreasonable. If immediate relief is not observed, care should be taken to avoid anger, fear, frustration, and despair. Just as the hunger from fasting can be a reminder towards prayer, delayed or denied healing can also spur us to deeper dependence on the Lord.

Get Rich Quick

In the movie 'The Flim Flam Man' George C. Scott delivers the line 'You can't cheat and honest man'. He was explaining that his technique of deception required the victim to have a component of greediness that was necessary to bring him in to be robbed. In a way, if his greed could be invoked, he would blind himself to the protection skepticism would provide. Sadly some branches of Christianity seek to profit from a similar form of exploitation. They sometimes brandish 'words' as if they were a magical incantation. This is similar to the practice of 'precipitation through the etheric plane'. This was a practice brought from the Hinduism of colonial India into England 150 years ago and still resonates today in various occult circles.

The appeal of using one's thoughts to get rich, healthy, or manifest one's desires can be attractive to those who are far from God. In a way, it is an echo of the seductive deception of Satan, 'Ye shall be as gods' (Gen 3:5). This sort of appeal is also found in all sorts of variations on 'mind power' like the so-called law of attraction that assures people they can get what they want by just thinking about it hard enough. Satan has

made effective use of such things as gambling and the lottery to bring many to ruin through stirring up the lust of greed (1 Tim 6:10). However, for those few who are actually successful in obtaining worldly riches, it is often not as desirable as they thought. Frequently wealth requires maintenance and protection such that its needs require you become its servant.

The bible speaks of 'true riches' (Luke 16:11). This is contrasted with worldly wealth (Mat 6:19-20). At the core of 'treasures in heaven' is eternal life. This is something that can be obtained immediately (1 Cor 15:1-4, Rom 10:9, Act 16:30-31, John 5:24).

There are short term riches which are mostly illusory and tie one to the world and its systems. Even if one gains the world, it is only temporary and ties to that which ends (1 Cor 7:31, Mat 16:26, 1 Jn 2:17). In contrast, that which God offers everyone in Christ is sure, immediate, and eternal. To transcend from the world with its contention, smugness, and pride to the eternal life and riches in Christ that God offers requires letting go of that with which one may be familiar or comfortable. Many are unable to let go (Mat 19:22).

It can seem foolish to those immersed in the world to turn from that which seems certain to that which seems distant. There are not many powerful, fa-

mous, influential, or wealthy people who are Christian (1Cor 1:26-27). One cannot be convinced by physical evidence that trusting in Christ is the path to 'riches'. In fact, the Christian life often seems to border on disadvantage.

It is truth that convinces Christians to place their trust in Jesus. Jesus said that those who were of the truth would hear his words (Jn 18:37). By truth one sees the limitations of the world, the lust, greed, ambition, and acquisition. By truth one sees the giving, love, wisdom, joy, and peace that are riches available to those who trust in Christ.

Those of the world who would trick you by offering you a get rich quick scheme are usually unaware of the true riches that can be had quickly simply by trusting in Jesus.

Fake News

Recently the term 'fake news' has been applied to those in the media who present information as true when it is selected, distorted, or even fabricated to push a particular political agenda. While the phrase is relatively new, the process has been long established. One reporter commenting on his coverage of the presidential election of 1960 mentioned that he was talking with his friend (a fellow journalist) who was assigned to travel with Nixon. He asked his friend if he was disappointed to be stuck with Nixon. His friend said that he thought he would be in a better position to help 'Jack' this way.

Even many reporters in the 1930s considered themselves 'fellow travelers' (closet communists). However, the insurgency of social manipulation was not limited to those presenting themselves as heralds of truth, the entertainment industry also was busy advancing distorted images of life such as presenting men as stupid dolts worthy of ridicule. Radio and movies had advanced this long before television.

Even before the 20th century, Marx, Freud, and Darwin were heralded as prophets of truth, understanding, and progress that would sweep

away simple-minded and outdated thinking represented by religious faith. Perhaps the earliest example we have of fake news was when Satan told Eve 'Thou shalt not surely die' (Gen 3:4).

If we consider that Satan is the 'father' of lies (John 8:44), and we can see his hand throughout history, we should ask ourselves to what purpose. As Christians we should be able to recognize the schemes of Satan (2 Cor 2:11). However, our ability to discern is coupled with spiritual maturity (Heb 5:14) and that is often lacking in the modern Christian life.

The use of lies and deception is usually for the purpose of manipulating us to work to accomplish the objectives of Satan. As 'fake news' becomes increasingly obvious, it may indicate that our deception is no longer needed as much. In a way, the world is divided into two groups, those who value truth and those who find comfort in deception. The reason so many are deceived, is because they failed to receive a love of the truth. (2 Thess 2:10).

Truth does set one free (John 8:32). However, most people prefer to feel good rather than have freedom. In fact, many find truth so uncomfortable that they become hostile to it. Jesus prayed that his disciples would be 'sanctified' by the truth (John 17:17). Sanctify means to set apart. This division can be seen when Jesus told his disciples that the world

would hate them (John 15:19). James writes that friendship with the world was to be an enemy of God. (James 4:4)

Christians who have seen themselves as more integrated into the world, may be beginning to see that they will have to choose on which side they will stand. John described the hatred people had for Jesus by saying that light had come into the world, but people hated the light because their deeds were evil. (John 3:19). The use of the word 'hate' indicates a depth of passion that may not yet be fully appreciated. Those who stand for truth can expect to be reviled. It may be that martyrdom will soon be as common in the West as it is Muslim countries.

Yea, and all that will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution. - 2 Timothy 3:12

Digital Christianity

We can use music as a method to illustrate the difference between analog and digital. Old phonograph records had small variations in the groove that represented sound waves. Today CDs have a multitude of 'bits' (ones and zeroes) that can be quickly assembled so that an approximation of the original sound wave can be produced.

A parallel can be drawn to the Christian life. If we seek out the truth from God's word and grow in understanding, we might be called analog Christians. If we pick a denominational flavor and park there, we might be called a digital Christian. If we allow ourselves to think of Christian doctrine as either 'right' or 'wrong', we can come to see Christianity as either a 'one' or a 'zero'

The digital approach to Christianity (one is either right or wrong) offers an assurance that one has achieved completion and even lead one to a smugness (Luke 18:9) that has contributed to denominational antagonism that has divided Christianity for centuries and has even led to the deaths of millions (for example, the Thirty Years War).

An analog perspective on the Christian life can contribute to humility in that we are all learning. A tolerance and compassion for those who have not learned as much as we have can replace a contempt for those who have 'got it wrong'.

One aspect of digital Christianity that is crippling is that it stifles the desire to learn and mature. There is no need to learn if one thinks he has achieved completion. We might consider the angels, because even they have a desire to learn as well. (1 Peter 1:12)

Paul admonishes the Corinthians for suing each other and then doing it in a secular court. (1 Cor 6:1). He asks them if there is not anyone wise among them that could settle the dispute. (1 Cor 6:5) It seems that the litigants were more interested in advantage than wisdom or truth. This represents another problem with digital Christianity. We can detach our faith from our daily life because we have come to see it as settled.

Faith becomes an integral part of daily life for those who recognize that they have much yet to learn. They seek out those who have wisdom and desire to grow in understanding and mature in faith. Immaturity is rebuked in the bible (1 Cor 3:1, Heb 5:12). Digital Christianity tends to divert people from individual growth into a measurement of activity or ac-

knowledgment of doctrinal dictums.

Christian maturity might be better measured in terms of humility, kindness, and love. In this Christ is our example, being of 'full stature' (Eph 4:13).

With our eyes on Jesus, we all can see how far short we fall. However, we should not see ourselves digitally as either like Jesus or not like Jesus. Rather we should see ourselves in a process of growth becoming increasingly more like Jesus.

Being a Berean

The term 'Berean' might be familiar to some. Luke describes (Acts 17:10-11) Paul arriving at the city of Berea and announcing the gospel of Jesus in the Synagogue. The response of the believers in Berea was called 'more noble' than that of the those in Thessalonica because the gospel was received with 'readiness of mind'. Also the Bereans would search the scriptures to see if what they were being told was true.

There is a degree of restlessness in the heart of a believer that is only satisfied with truth. The Christian 'marketplace' is awash with various doctrines and claims. However, the Christian who is thirsty for truth is never completely satisfied with anything short of Christ who is truth.

We are told that the bible is truth (John 17:17). This provides us something against which all else can be measured. The bible also serves to provide us with a means to sharpen our discernment so that we are better able to recognize truth. The more we allow ourselves to be washed (Eph 5:26) with God's word, the greater its effect on us will be.

There is a degree of enthusiasm we should have

for the things of God (Mat 5:6). The grind of daily life can produce a dullness and complacency such that we are lulled into a sort of dormant Christian life. We should recognize if we have slipped into a sort of sleep-walking Christian life (1Cor 15:34).

Perhaps the first step of revitalizing ones Christian life is to ask if one has assumed that he has accomplished all that is required. This may include various tasks such as baptism, church attendance, making a profession, saying a particular prayer, or giving an amount of money. If one looks at his faith in terms of accomplishment, he may feel that there is nothing left to do and allow himself to rest from 'religious' activities.

A task perspective can be crippling for a Christian because following rules, avoiding big sins, or saying the right prayers can lead a person to see himself as having a successful Christian life. This is the trap that the Pharisees fell into. Rather than a checklist of accomplishments, we should measure ourselves against Jesus (Eph 4:13).

Seeing how far short we all fall from the stature of Christ, we should consider availing ourselves of all that God offers us to follow the path of Christ-likeness. He provides us with his Spirit (John 16:13), He provides us with his word (Luke 24:32), He provides us with fellow believers (Col 3:16).

If the world wears us down, we should consider seeking out that which can build us up. A vital bible study where questions are welcomed, seeking is not quenched to achieve compliance, and curiosity can be satisfied may be a step towards a more active faith that produces a more noble character and results in growing more like Jesus.

Most of the “activity” of a Christian life should be, like the Bereans, asking if what you are presented is true. This requires biblical familiarity as this is the standard against what is heard should be compared.

Obedience

Many people have a negative view of Christianity because they see it as a system of oppressive rules. Much of this view comes from some Christians themselves who (like the Pharisees) frequently attempt to show off their Christian 'achievements' in rule keeping. Some of it comes from English words like 'obey' and 'commandment' which have come to convey the idea of robot-like compliance.

Exasperated parents can sometimes wish their children would demonstrate robot-like compliance, however, they usually come to understand that their children have to learn for themselves the value of parental decrees. This parent/child relationship can illustrate God's desire for us. Just as a parent wishes his child to come to understand the wisdom and advantage of that to which the parent exhorts, God wishes us to come to understand the value of that which he has told us.

As we grow in understanding, we begin to see in a word like 'commandment' less of a rule we are obligated to observe and more of a precept (closer to the meaning of the Greek and Hebrew words) that is intended to protect us. Consider

something like the biblical prohibition of murder. It does not take much understanding to see how committing murder would ruin your own life not to mention that of others.

Just as a parent who tells his child not to play in the street has reasons that the child may not yet understand, biblical prohibitions also have reasons. Stealing, coveting, fornication, drunkenness, and similar prohibitions have reasons that may not at first be apparent. However, as one grows in understanding, the wisdom of such injunctions becomes increasingly obvious.

Just as a child that suddenly runs out into the street in front of a speeding car will pay a price for disobedience, those of us who fail to see the wisdom in the precepts (commandments) of God, may also encounter painful consequences. There is a richness in the Christian life that comes from growing in wisdom and understanding. However, when the Christian focus is on a set of rules without understanding the wisdom behind them, the Christian life can be impoverished.

There is a bible verse that says, 'wisdom is justified by her children'. This means that the works one does demonstrate that their source is from wisdom. Obedience is not a Herculean demonstration of the effort one can muster to restrain evil, but rather the

result of the understanding and wisdom one has to see the truth of a precept. Just as it does not take much effort to resist plunging a table fork into one's eye, those things that are harmful, when fully understood, also represent less temptation.

Obedience is not so much an achievement, but the result of coming to a full and mature understanding of truth such that disobedience is seen as hazardous. The Christian life should be marked with the blessings of constantly increasing wisdom, understanding, and discernment. If one finds oneself in a joyless drudgery of rule keeping, one might ask himself if he is really a Christian or if he has received inadequate Christian instruction.

Real Bible Study

For many Christians reading the bible is boring, difficult to understand, and can appear irrelevant to actual daily life. Some see in it rules that can seem obvious like don't kill or steal. Others see sort of cartoon images of bible stories like the animals going in a parade into Noah's ark. It can help to start with a better understanding of what the bible actually is.

It is the word of God (Prov 30:5). It is sent with a purpose (Is 55:10-11). It washes and purifies (Eph 5:26). It is used to separate his people from the world (John 17:17). It trains and equips (2 Tim 3:16). It is life itself (Luke 4:4).

Some read the bible as a chapter a day or set out to read the bible in a year. Some even attempt memorization in an attempt to demonstrate devotion to God and his word. However, these methods can be static and stifle the dynamic influence the bible can have in our lives. We can read the gospels and learn what Jesus said and where he went and what he did. However, we begin to infuse the word into our lives and understanding when we draw from it more than narrative or description, but truth that transforms.

One might read that Jesus was asked by the temple officials to explain by what authority he did his works. Jesus asked them to first answer if the baptism of John was of heaven or men. Their reluctance to answer was the basis for Jesus to refuse to answer them. The truth that can be drawn from the story is that those who have no interest in truth have no claim on those who are of the truth.

Jesus said to those who believed in him that if they continued in his word, they were his disciples and they would know the truth and the truth would set them free (John 8: 31-32). Conversely, those who do not believe find the bible foolishness (1 Cor 2:14).

If we approach the bible as a gold mine looking for nuggets we can take for ourselves, we often find more value in our study. If we look for answers to questions like, "How can I know I am going to go to heaven" (Rom 10:9), "How can I live a less sinful life" (Gal 5:16), or "How can I have a better marriage" (Eph 5:33) we can begin to see value for our daily life.

As we begin to see that the bible is more than just a collection of things that are true, but the source of truth itself, we are increasingly more able to direct this flow of truth into our own lives. With a growth of truth comes the freedom to be found in discern-

ing that which entangles and harms. For example, an offer of casual fornication can be tempting to someone whose vision is limited to immediate sensation. To someone who has grown in truth the consequences are more discernable and therefore temptation is more easily avoided.

Bible study can start with a children's bible that describes the various bible stories that are so often highlighted in Sunday School. However, even children are benefited from moving as quickly as possible into a study that establishes the bible as not only useful, but essential to daily life.

Thy word is a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path. - Psalm 119:105

Why Many Christians Don't Know The Bible

1. Their denomination may have told them that smart people have already studied it and they just need to acknowledge the bullet points those people extracted.
2. The bible seems difficult to understand (Act 8:30-31).
3. The bible seems alien to the modern life with which we are more familiar.
4. People have become convinced that “science” has disproven the bible.
5. Many think that the biblical description of supernatural events is just superstition.
6. Some see contradictions in the bible and feel that it is invalidated.
7. Some see bible familiarity as an optional extra and not worth investing effort in learning.

What most Christians fail to understand is that the bible is a powerful way God works in one's life (Is 55:10-11). It sustains life (Lk 4:4). It is the means to know truth and achieve freedom (Jn

8:32). The bible has transformative power (Jn 17:17). The bible is a source of illumination (Ps 119:105). Walking according to the bible can prevent being overcome by sin (Ps 119:133). It contains valuable instruction (2 Tim 3:16, 1 Cor 10:11).

When life is prosperous and comfortable, people often see little value in the bible. However, now that our society appears to be melting down, some may wish to rekindle their faith. This emerging interest is often hindered by not knowing where to start. Some start at the beginning (as one might with any book) and find the stories about Adam and Eve, the flood, Abraham, and even into the first part of Exodus interesting. However, things soon bog down and often interest is lost.

If one starts with the New Testament one can read in the gospels about who Jesus was and what he did and said. One problem that can be encountered is what Francis Chan told about his youth. The bible tells us that Jesus told his disciples they could move a mountain with enough faith. Francis tried moving a pencil and could not. He considered that what Jesus said was either wrong or that he did not have enough faith. This dilemma is more correctly resolved with a better understanding of context. For example, If one considers that Jesus was telling his disciples what they could expect to experience when the kingdom was established for Israel, we

might not read ourselves into every situation.

There are Old Testament prophecies that supernatural phenomena would be operative in the kingdom. The bible tells those in New Testament times that the supernatural works they did were just a taste of the age to come (Heb 6:5). The fact that no other book in the world has accurately described future events like the bible alone testifies that it is from God.

Many have undertaken to attack the bible under the guise of the truth of “science” like evolution (nothing existed and then it blew up and became everything) even though no one has ever observed any life “evolving”. When one takes a closer look at how the bible is attacked, it becomes obvious that the bible is what is true. We might think of the bible as a pipeline from God to us. We should not be surprised that the enemies of God would try to cripple us by turning us from our connection with our creator.

There are many reasons we have become disconnected from the bible. One problem is accepting what so-called experts say. We need to be searching the scriptures ourselves to see what is true.

Facing Death

I once led a bible study with teen boys in a juvenile detention center. I was giving an illustration of what a living faith was by saying that if someone held a gun on me and told me that I had to do what he said, my response would be that if he pulled the trigger, I would instantly be with Jesus and he would be the one left trying to explain to the police where the body came from. One boy asked, “Do you really believe that?” My answer was a solemn “Yes”.

When I was in high school I delivered pizzas. I had a series of cars purchased around \$25 each. At that time I was always waiting for the license plates to arrive and was used to getting stopped by the police to show that I had applied for the plates. One evening I was pulled over and got out of the car and was reaching for my wallet when I looked up and saw the cop pointing his gun at me with the hammer cocked. He was very nervous as he had thought I might be going for a gun.

Things like being in the Army during a war or facing a terminal illness also bring one to consider what happens after we die. The recent exposure of the nation to the Wuhan virus has

brought many to reflect on their own mortality that they might not have considered it previously. There can be anxiety associated with having no certainty or hope (Eph 2:12)

Jesus told his followers that there was a way to have eternal life;

Verily, verily, I say unto you, He that heareth my word, and believeth on him that sent me, hath everlasting life, and shall not come into condemnation; but is passed from death unto life. - John 5:24

The Christian can have assurance from the love he has for other Christians (John 13:35), that we do not see the bible as foolish (1 Cor 1:18), the presence of the Holy Spirit (2 Cor 1:22), and the assurance we can have from the bible (1 John 5:13).

This particular virus may prove not to be as deadly as first thought. However, regardless of whether we become ill or not, it can be helpful to give some attention to our eternal fate and consider that in which we really trust.

Those who have died and are in Hades seem to finally recognize the truth that they were resistant to during their lives (Luke 16:28). Most people prefer a comfortable life and turn away from considering things that make them feel uncomfortable. This par-

ticular virus can be helpful if it leads some to seek after the one that can provide eternal life.

Jesus said unto her, I am the resurrection, and the life: he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live: - John 11:25

As long as we have breath there is always hope that we can come to trust in Jesus, that he died for our sins, and rose again so that we might live with him.

Courtship

The contemporary process of marriage involves selecting a candidate (usually through a visual appraisal), dating, fornication, cohabitation, and marriage. This process produces results that are at least tolerable half of the time (given a 50% divorce rate).

Previous to the dating method was a courtship method that involved families consisting of several generations, and over a protracted period of time. While constructed with obstacles at first, it would produce a higher chance of marital longevity and success when completed.

One might picture courtship as an antiquated practice associated with a rural past and unsuited to the pace of modern urban life. Courtship would definitely have been easier when most people lived their lives in the villages in which they were born and grew up. People would begin the process with a lifetime of knowledge of the other people and make a selection with a high degree of success based on knowledge already acquired.

Attempting a courtship practice in today's society places a greater burden on all the parties in-

volved. The most significant obstacle is the lack of information . Historically people beginning a courtship already have tons of information and were mostly attempting to gauge temperament and compatibility.

Today an attempt at courtship has to have front loaded a process of gaining information. This would be done through family activities whereby slowly over time one would be assessing character qualities that have greater significance than visually obtained physical attributes. In this, the involvement of relatives is useful to direct the passions of youth aside so that a more deliberative and evaluative process can be conducted.

The young girl who succeeded in marrying the High School football star may, ten years later, wish she had instead married someone with a better sense of humor. These are the sort of regrets that might be avoided when an extended family is involved in the courtship process.

The advice of older and wiser relatives can be invaluable to those whose youth tends to fail recognizing some of the deeper and more substantive issues of life. For example, if two people feel attracted to each other and both are of a personality that is quiet and withdrawn, even if both desire affection, if neither is inclined to initiate it, a resulting

marriage might starve both parties of what they desire.

Religion is another important factor the importance of which young people dating often fail to consider. It used to be that Catholics and Protestants would not marry. This is not as much of a problem today because usually Protestants and Catholics place less value on their beliefs. If one person has a growing faith that questions and explores spiritual issues and the other person has a static faith that does not tolerate deviation from a denominational stricture, there will be tension in a marriage.

Issues of character and belief are usually demonstrated over time. The courtship process is intended to allow both parties gain the information they need to make informed decisions. It is better to make the beginning of a relationship difficult to insure its success rather than make it easy and pay the price in a lifetime of regret, bitterness, or sorrow.

How to Survive the Zombie Apocalypse

The title was selected to capture the attention of a wider audience. It is hoped that a sprinkling of humor may be sufficient to keep the reader's attention while he is subtly given information that could be useful to him in the future.

It may surprise the contemporary reader to learn that the word "Apocalypse" had a usage before the X-men and even before Robert Duval loved the smell of napalm in the morning. From the Greek *apokalyptein*, the word meant to uncover, disclose, reveal. The word was applied to the last book of the bible to describe what the apostle John wrote about the future.

What John describes is destruction and carnage over the whole earth that has yet to be rendered fully into a Hollywood blockbuster. However the word "apocalyptic" has found a home in our language to describe everything from a broken fingernail to the trash left after a music festival.

The phrase "zombie apocalypse" has come to convey a thematic idea, frequently posed in movies, of a future where some calamity has rendered much of the population walking corpses (living dead). These stories have come to present

the dead as much more active (and thus threatening) than one usually finds the dead.

One might think of the last book of the bible, called Revelation (apokalupsis) from the first verse, as the grandfather of all zombie stories. However, what makes the calamities described more alarming is that they are not stories but predictions.

Since the people who would find themselves in the middle of such strange circumstances would most likely be those with the least idea of what was happening or why, this article could be useful to call to memory an understanding of such cataclysmic events.

A zombie movie is designed to show the viewer what is happening in sequence so that he can understand the story and identify with the protagonists. In the Apocalypse most will not even understand what they are being told, much less what is really happening or that they are the protagonists. Since most media people have come to see their job as similar to how the news is presented in North Korea, one may have to rely more on rumor and previously obtained information.

There are two events that could occur before the start of the tribulation (apocalypse) that could be noticeable even if covered by TV news. The first

might be the disappearance of Christians called the rapture. This is not specifically called out in the bible but it can be inferred from several verses. What may make this less discernable is that only real Christians would be taken. Remaining behind would be many who consider themselves Christian, but aren't. This could include almost entire church congregations.

The second event may be a war of an Arab and Persian alliance against Israel. This also may be difficult to discern as wars are almost always happening in the Mid East. It may be that the supernatural protection of Israel by God will be attributed to a charismatic leader who would then be seen by Israel as their Messiah. This would be a clever deception for the antichrist (anti being a Greek prefix meaning in place of). While not the same as claiming credit for making the sun come up or causing it to rain, Israel would not be the first people to be taken in by boasting.

What might be considered as the actual start of the tribulation is usually seen with the four horsemen. This is not a reference to the Notre Dame football squad under Knute Rockne. Rather it is a reference to different color horses used in the book of Revelation to illustrate the arrival of war, death, famine, and pestilence that start the tribulation. These combine to kill 25% of the people on earth. This should

be noticeable enough that even the TV news wouldn't be able to suppress it.

Even a nuclear exchange between the US and Russia would likely kill only 600 million. However, with the interruption of food production and distribution as well as the disease associated with the dead from war, one can see where the number of dead could rise to the 25% level.

For those who survive, a period will be coming that makes the zombie movies look like child's play. A choice will have to be made by the survivors. The antichrist will establish an economic system for the world that requires all people to have a mark on their hand or their head in order to be allowed to buy or sell anything. Those who accept the mark will be like zombies (the living dead) because they are destined to be thrown in the lake of fire (the second death).

If someone wants to avoid this zombie fate, he will have to not take the mark and try to survive outside of the world wide economic system. It might be a good idea to find an abandoned Christian home in a rural area where food and water could be obtained away from population centers. It would be helpful to find a bible and start reading it as if your life depended upon it.

Is "Gay" Really Happy?

Many years ago I worked on a Crisis Hotline. We had a speaker at a training session who was a spokesman for the gay community. In a Q&A session, I asked him from his perspective, how many gay people were alcoholic. His response was 50%. When you consider the health risks (not even counting AIDS), the turnover rate, the superficial emphasis on appearance, and the ultimate loneliness, it does not seem to be a path which one might choose to find happiness.

Many gay people feel that they were “born that way” because of the intensity of the drive they feel. Christianity offers an alternative explanation;

Rom 1:21 Because that, when they knew God, they glorified him not as God, neither were thankful; but became vain in their imaginations, and their foolish heart was darkened.

Rom 1:22 Professing themselves to be wise, they became fools,

Rom 1:23 And changed the glory of the uncorruptible God into an image made like to corruptible man, and to birds, and fourfooted beasts, and creeping things.

Rom 1:24 Wherefore God also gave them up to uncleanness through the lusts of their own hearts, to dishonour their own bodies between themselves:

Rom 1:25 Who changed the truth of God into a lie, and worshipped and served the creature more than the Creator, who is blessed for ever. Amen.

Rom 1:26 For this cause God gave them up unto vile affections: for even their women did change the natural use into that which is against nature:

Rom 1:27 And likewise also the men, leaving the natural use of the woman, burned in their lust one toward another; men with men working that which is unseemly, and receiving in themselves that recompence of their error which was meet.

In summary, the Christian explanation for the intensity of the drive towards homosexuality would be a consequence for rejecting the creator and giving the honor, respect, and gratitude due the creator to that which was created (frequently, self).

Many would argue against the Christian position and declare that the difficulties of the gay life are solely attributable to the discrimination or hostility of others. I suspect than many (perhaps even most) gay people would acknowledge that the problems they encounter are intrinsic to the life more than a

result of what others think.

The bible gives no step by step method to turn from homosexuality. However, if one considers that God is forgiving and that the condition is a result of failing to glorify God, it might be that turning back to God in repentance and asking for forgiveness could start a process of a new path.

Jesus came to bring light to darkness. It is often only when we are broken or at the end of our rope that we are willing to even consider the life Jesus and God would have for us. A much more receptive audience is found in prisons or hospitals for hearing about Jesus than in comfortable country clubs.

This whole section of Romans starts with the explanation that the wrath of God comes upon those who hold the truth in unrighteousness. For those who would chose to abandon homosexuality, it might be a good idea to reverence truth and seek it out most earnestly. Since Jesus is truth this would be a good starting point.

Whether from holding the truth in unrighteousness or being abused when young, there is hope for those to escape the gay life to find new life in Christ. Happiness lies in selflessness.

Christianity - Liberal or Conservative

Christianity was always intended to help people become like Jesus (Eph 4). However, even before the persecution ended (or perhaps aided by it) Christian groups organized themselves into small collectives. Elements of the Greek academy were brought in to catechetical schools. Individual Christian maturity and growing in faith (surrendering self to the leading of the Holy Spirit) was gradually replaced with classroom type instruction where increasingly arcane and abstract elements of theology fostered the advancement of the intellectually gifted into a clergy class disconnected from the laity.

Over the centuries even though Christianity became increasingly hamstrung with obtuse doctrines, ritual instead practical Christian living, and a growing bureaucracy instead of person to person connections, many people still could obtain the benefits of limited selfishness and deeper love that come from growing in faith.

The period of the enlightenment accelerated the divorce of the intellectual class from Christianity. In all fairness, what they observed that was called Christianity was pretty distant from where it started. They were also not aware that there were consequences for rejecting even the knowledge of God that are detailed at the end of Romans chapter one.

To illustrate this phenomena one can consider a man asleep in the back seat of a speeding car. The man who has faith in God is like a man who suddenly awakes and sees someone he trusts driving the car and goes back to sleep. The man who does not believe in God is like a man who suddenly awakes and sees no one driving the car so he clambers over the seat and grabs the wheel himself.

Contemporary liberalism is a direct descendant (through progressivism) of the enlightenment view that man is the master of his own destiny. One might see the liberalism of today as the natural movement of change towards the goal of a utopia of man's design.

Conservatism might be better seen not as a religious desire, but a reaction against change and a desire to keep or return to a previous condition. This might be seen from the early 20th century. The impact of Marx, Darwin, and Freud were representative of much of the liberal change taking place at the time represented by progressivism. The fundamentalist Christian reaction was an attempt to resist this change more than a return to authentic Christianity. In this way, conservatism can be more accurately seen as resistance to change which can arise in a religious movement as well as political or other environments.

Today what is called Christianity might be seen in several categories.

1. Social gospel. This represent the contemporary liberal / progressive tradition.
2. Fundamental. This often represents an attempt to resist change often employing legalism.
3. Contemporary. This often presents a consumer approach with an emphasis on experience.
4. Traditional. These are usually legacy denominations with a dwindling membership.

While number 1 and 3 might be called liberal and 2 and 4 might be called conservative, sadly few are very much interested in Jesus except as a market brand.

It is sad that Christians seem to only have the option of a conservative or liberal church. This might be because the denominational approach to Christianity usually offers a static “package” of doctrines and as such is not well suited to a process of growth and maturity. If the package is old fashioned it is considered conservative. If the package is hip, it is considered liberal.

It Don't Come Easy

The philosopher Ringo Starr once said, “If you want to sing the blues, you’ve got to pay your dues, because you know it don’t come easy”. This insightful observation has been expanded upon by numerous others. Many who are hostile to Christianity often declare that there is no God based on their observation of bad things, like sickness, injustice, and difficulty of life.

However, if we examine the many examples throughout history of how humans behave when things are easy like the Roman emperors, the French aristocracy, tribal chieftains, and even warlords, it seems to show the debilitating effects of prosperity, comfort, and ease. It would seem that we are all inclined to become debased, selfish, lazy, and arrogant if given half a chance.

If we consider the curse upon the earth that resulted from Adam’s sin, we can see that a difficult life is more an act of kindness rather than a punishment. When humans chose to turn their back on God and sought what they wanted instead, they set a path towards individual selfishness that would place each person in conflict with others.

Our limited lifespan, susceptibility to illness and aging, and our need for food, clothing, and shelter cre-

ate an environment where we have to depend on each other and God. The difficulties built into our fallen world were dramatically reduced with the baby boom generation which was raised with a view towards consumerism resulting in the pursuit of sex, drugs, and rock and roll, which became a dominant philosophy right through to today. Like the Roman emperors of old, many today have found no reason to move beyond the selfishness of childhood regardless of their physical age.

Consider raising children. This is a hard job. It is even more difficult when it is done right. The desire to avoid this difficulty has contributed to millions of surgical abortions and perhaps billions of chemical abortions with oral contraceptives. Those children that do survive are often abandoned by their parents to be raised by TV and pattern themselves to adopt the prevailing culture of the world, that of the pursuit of comfort, ease, and prosperity.

The bible tells of a future world ruler called the antichrist who will enslave the world to the point where no one will be allowed to buy or sell anything without his mark. This will seem a small price to pay for those who are slaves to their comforts and could not even imagine a life of hardship or difficulty.

Prosperity is a false light. It becomes a substitute for God. The rich young ruler could not follow Jesus because he only saw his riches as that which would provide for him. People around the world are flocking to the US and Europe mostly because of the intensity of desire to have things easier. They, like previous generations, see this prosperity as a blessing for their children. They fail to recognize that prosperity is often a curse because it fuels the selfishness of our hearts and blinds us to our need for a Savior.

For what shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul? - Matthew 8:36

Finding Jesus

A man recently asked me if he was an atheist how he could become a Christian. I thought it might be useful for others to consider this process as well. If your starting point is atheist, you may consider moving to the category of agnostic. The difference is that an atheist is certain that there is no God, the agnostic is not certain.

Once you can see yourself as open to inquiry, you can begin to investigate. Some follow a path of science seeing in creation the hand of a creator. Some follow a path of reason like Einstein who came to believe in the God of Spinoza who made himself manifest in the harmony of nature. Whatever path one takes it is generally a search for truth.

If you come to believe that there is a God, you move from the agnostic category to that of theist. Some, like Einstein, Thomas Jefferson, and many others remain at this point. If one continues in the quest for truth, one begins to examine various religions. This can be difficult because there are so many often conflicting claims. At this point it is probably best to pray to God for wisdom. The bible says that God gives wisdom to all who ask.

Jesus told Pilate that all who were of the truth would hear his voice. For this reason, it can be help-

ful to become someone "of the truth". By elevating truth, one establishes a configuration within themselves that becomes sensitive to truth and resonates or responds the closer one gets to truth.

Some come to see in Islam a closeness to truth greater than Hinduism. However, as one continues to search, one will find in Jesus greater truth still. The bible declares that Jesus is truth and as such a search for truth will lead to Jesus. The end of this search is having come to the conviction that enough truth has been found to place one's trust in it. This is the point where if one places his trust in Jesus, he becomes a Christian.

The path can be difficult for some and take one over fifty years to come to the point where he can trust in Jesus. The path can be as short as five minutes for others. The journey begins with seeking after truth and ends with having found it in Jesus. Sadly, many churches and Christian traditions have accumulated things that fall short of truth and can make the path more difficult and confusing.

One can start with TV preachers and come to find their limitations. One can visit different churches and denominations and also find their limitations. One can seek Christians who clearly show the light and love of Jesus and learn from them to know Jesus like they do, but even this can be limited. The path to find Jesus, trust in him, and grow to be like him is laid out in the bible. This connection with God through his word is supposed to be at the core of any Christian life.

And ye shall seek me, and find me, when ye shall search for me with all your heart. - Jeremiah 29:13

How to be “Of The Truth”

Every one that is of the truth heareth my voice. -
John 18:37b

There is a distinctive condition that a person can have that makes him able to “hear” the words of Jesus. Like a radio tuned to the right frequency can pick up a station, those who are “of the truth” can receive what Jesus says. Those who are unable to “tune in” to the right frequency are deaf to the words of Jesus. We are told that the gospel is foolishness to those that are perishing (1Cor 1:18).

There is a principle of physics called resonance that describes the transfer of energy from a source to a target that has been configured to just the right condition. For example, a note played on a piano can cause the string of a guitar to vibrate if it has been tuned to the same note. Since Jesus is truth (John 14:6), those who are “of the truth” are able to tune in.

Most people today value feeling good over truth. The reason is that truth often exposes what we are ashamed of, our comfortable delusions, and our inadequacies (John 3:19). To be “of the truth” requires us to elevate truth in our lives even over our own comfort. When we allow the cold light of truth to wash over us, we are all brought to a place of hu-

mility. This alignment with truth is critical for our relationship with God.

Jesus told those who had believed in him that if they continued in his word, they would know the truth and the truth would set them free (John 8:31-32). This points to a progressive process of growing in truth. Truth not only brings us to Jesus, but also continues to work and grow in us so that we can be truly free (John 8:36).

We are told in Romans chapter one that the wrath of God is revealed against those who hold the truth in unrighteousness. Since we would like not to find God's wrath, but rather his mercy, it behooves us to consider how we might hold the truth in righteousness. An example of unrighteousness might be the scribes in attempting to answer a question from Jesus that they never even asked themselves what was true (Mark 11:29-33). By using this as a negative example, we can consider that always asking what is true might be a way to hold the truth in righteousness.

The Bereans (Acts 17:11) demonstrate being "of the truth" in that they used the source of truth (the bible) to measure what they were being told. Asking and seeking truth combined with comparing what we hear to what the bible says begins to build a condition of "being of the truth".

There can be a sadness to “being of the truth”. Like for a combat veteran or a cop who have seen what humans are capable of, the comfort of delusion is not available. However, transcending the gloom that arises from seeing the human condition in truth is the radiance of the mercy and love of God that is greater than all of our evil. Truth reveals man for what he really is, however, it also reveals God for what he is and that is our basis for rejoicing.

Why There is Suffering

God is often seen by people as a meany because people can suffer in life. This assumes that the perfect life would be one of comfort and ease. That this is a false assumption can be seen in the story of the Prodigal Son. He had every advantage and comfort of a prosperous life. As a result, he rebelled against his father and sought to strike out on his own. He came to an understanding of the truth because of his suffering. It was suffering that helped rescue him.

We can suffer because of consequence such as hitting our thumb with a hammer. However, not all suffering is self-inflicted. People can look at the world and see injustice, hunger, homelessness, illness, and even old age and see suffering that they attribute to God's failure to make life comfortable. The hardships of this fallen natural world are not God being unfair, but having love so great as to even see people suffer in the hope that they will learn to see truth. We have turned the world God gave us into a sinking ship. It is God's love that allows this painful world to continue that some might come to see truth and turn to him.

It has been said that the place least likely for

people to have an interest in God is a country club. The places more likely for people to have an interest in God are hospitals and prisons. God gave us free will. We also have suffering almost as a gift to rescue us from the soul destroying effects of using our free will to pursue selfishness. Some see prosperity and comfort as blessings from God, when they might more accurately be seen as deceptions from Satan.

Moses warned Israel that when they entered into the promised land they would transition from the hardships of wandering in the wilderness for 40 years to inheriting a land with wells already dug and orchards already planted. It was this prosperity that would tempt them to forget God (which is what happened).

Seeking truth, speaking truth, and following truth are not always activities that produce pleasure and comfort. Often we only undertake them in response to suffering. Old age is an example of a process of discomfort to disconnect us from this world and induce us to consider the next.

God could have chosen to wipe us all out for using our free will to inflict suffering on ourselves and others. Instead God chose to send Jesus to pay for all sin. If we trust in what Jesus did, we

are placed into what is called “the body of Christ” by the Holy Spirit. This placement becomes the means we have to enter into the world to come. Jesus is our “lifeboat”.

As long as we are in this present world and live in the flesh, we will encounter suffering caused by ourselves, others, and the natural world. Even after we become Christian, we can experience difficulty and suffering. However, we have a more sure hope.

For which cause we faint not; but though our outward man perish, yet the inward man is renewed day by day. For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, worketh for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory; - 2 Corinthians 4:16-17

Climate Change

In the 1960s and 70s self-proclaimed “experts” shouted alarm over global cooling. In the 1980s and 90s these experts shouted alarm over global warming. Since then we have been bombarded with claims of “climate change”. as if the alarmists do not wish to be pinned down to anything specific anymore. There are those who respond to these proclamations like Chicken Little thinking the sky is falling. Fearful people can be led to make poor choices.

In 2009 former presidential candidate Al Gore announced that in five years the polar ice cap would have melted. This was a little unusual because most prophetic announcements are usually made in a longer time frame and with greater ambiguity because in the past those who proved false for reasons of lying or incompetence would have had no celebrated future. However, this did not happen to Mr. Gore. Indeed a climate had changed, the social climate. There now seemed no longer to be a consequence for declaring that which was false.

In ancient times a priestly class obtained a comfortable and leisurely life from making declarations about future weather that made an agrarian populace feel good. If the weather should actually turn out unfavorable, they would blame the people for having offended the gods and thus be able to have

an even greater income. The priests controlled the social climate through their declarations.

Western Civilization was largely influenced by Christianity. One result was an intolerance for that which was false. This climate started to change with Italian humanism and accelerated during the so-called enlightenment. In the 1800s newspapers started to take responsibility for declaring what was true and then colleges were established to provide a new priestly class.

We have had a change in social climate so dramatic that proposals that the police should be abolished or that people entering the country illegally should be rewarded with half a million dollars each are put forth with little objection. One might well ask how we came to such a state of foolishness. The simple answer is that as a people we have rejected truth and embraced that which makes us feel good.

Our social climate has changed and for the worse. Truth is assaulted and lies and foolishness are elevated. The bible tells us that woe is upon those who call good evil and evil good. Civilizations that go down this road weaken themselves for invasion or simply economic and social collapse. As Christians, we may not be able to encourage our fellow citizens to embrace truth. The public forum seems to be fully in the hands of the liars, thieves, perverts, and

others of low character.

Peter wrote his first letter to believing Jews in what is now western Turkey. They were most likely refugees from Israel where believers in Jesus as Messiah were not welcome. They were probably discouraged as their expectations of the return of Jesus and the establishment of the earthly kingdom seemed year by year to become less real. Paul also wrote to those who were discouraged in Ephesus (Ephesians 3:13-21).

As our own society so rapidly turns its back on truth and Christ, we might also borrow from the exhortations to those almost 2,000 years ago to remain steadfast and faithful. While the world melts down, we can draw strength from Him who has saved us.

Enemies of God

In James chapter four we read that one is an enemy of God even if they are just friends with the world. This can seem strange to us as we might not see the world as hostile enough to God to be considered an “enemy”. We live in a unique time in human history. Satan (who sets the course of the world, Eph 2:2) needed a period of stability in which the technological tools he needed to try to enslave the world could be developed. To accomplish this, he allowed a partial Christian culture to emerge.

Those of us old enough can remember a time when people in general were more honest, diligent, and good. Because this period of time covered several generations, many came to think this was the natural state of man. Europe is already ahead of us in descending back to the barbarism that is the natural state of man. Europe still has a way to go in that the rape, murder, and theft culture of Islam that they have been importing is still a shock to them. What they are experiencing is not something necessarily defective with Islam, but the natural state to which they themselves are all headed now that they have abandoned Christ.

One historian described political liberalism as secularized Christianity. There is an idea that one should be good without the means or reason to do so. This

was useful to establish a sort of “Potemkin” Christian culture that gave the illusion that our Christian culture was continuing when it was actually rotting from the inside.

Dog eat dog, the survival of the fittest, and every one for themselves pretty much defines the world. With the ascendancy of corporations and governments one should expect collective tyranny as it is the way to marshal the most strength to use against the powerless and weak. This is the natural state of man.

As things continue to unravel, Christians need to consider the degree to which they have been entangled in the world. Seeking employment can increasingly demand that Christians advocate social and political views that are hostile to the God of truth. Christian parents can begin to see homeschool as an alternative to prevent worldly values and philosophies from being injected into their children. The bible tells us that we cannot separate ourselves from dealing with the evil people in the world (1 Cor 5:9-10). However, it is suggested that we keep ourselves “unspotted” (James 1:27).

We might learn from the example of Israel. Jesus offered the kingdom to the nation. The reason they failed to receive it was two fold. The first was the influence of religious leaders who saw in Jesus not

the promised king and kingdom, but a threat to their position and traditions. Secondly, the majority of people had little interest.

Christians today can be as mistaken about their individual salvation just as most Israelites were about the kingdom offer. Religious leaders can be mistaken and religious apathy and indifference can disconnect one from saving faith. One measure of this condition is to what degree one is "friendly" with the world. Christians who wish to not be found as enemies of God should consider examining and questioning their faith to make sure that they have not been mistaken or misled.

Being able to escape entanglement with the world is getting easier every day as the world so rapidly returns to its natural state of foolishness, immorality, and selfishness.

If ye were of the world, the world would love his own: but because ye are not of the world, but I have chosen you out of the world, therefore the world hateth you. - John 15:19

Underground Christianity

In our social world today there is a certain homogenizing effect from TV, public education, and even many work place environments such that there is an expectation of conduct, behavior, and even beliefs that conform to a social standard. There was a time when this social expectation included attendance at some sort of Christian church.

Today church attendance is still tolerated, but voicing Christian beliefs is not. In the early church people who failed to offer a pinch of incense to Caesar might be put to death. In that environment Christians sometimes would recognize each other through something like drawing a picture of a fish, the Greek spelling of which was used to symbolize the phrase “Jesus Christ son of God and Savior”

There have always been those who are out of the mainstream, cops, abuse victims, emergency room nurses, accident and crime victims, combat veterans, those with severe health problems. ex-cons, and clergy are some whose experiences do not often allow an easy integration into the larger social world. Christians who are even a little active in their faith have access to wisdom, discernment, and truth. Increasingly, this makes Christians as disconnected from the world of foolishness, gullibility, and lies perhaps even more than those whose encounters

with the harshness of reality have disconnected them.

It used to be that one could turn to a neighbor and find a fellow Christian believer. However, after the push for evolution (the universe created itself), relativism (there is no truth), abortion (the lives of others don't matter), and homosexuality (there is no limit to perversion), society itself is being disassembled with debt, calls to get rid of the police, the refusal to incarcerate criminals, and even the delusions of transsexualism (which lead half to attempt suicide).

As a result, many have been swept up to see Christianity as not only wrong, but dangerous. At the present rate of social change, it will not be long before Christians will once again face death at the hands of those that hate them. Many Christians were willing to accept a religion increasingly devoid of Christ. However, appeasement is the road to capitulation. A choice will have to be made, does one seek acceptance by the world or faithfulness to Christ.

As our world more rapidly sinks into darkness, the role for faithful Christians will be to exhort and encourage one another as well as receive those who still seek truth and desire to pursue light rather than darkness.

But ye, brethren, are not in darkness, that that day should overtake you as a thief. Ye are all the children of light, and the children of the day: we are not of the night, nor of darkness. - 1 Thessalonians 5:4-5

Robots in Revolt

A favorite science fiction theme is robots. This imagery can be useful for a mental simulation exercise that can illustrate man's relation to God. If we think of God as an inventor and humans as robots, the first choice God would face was whether or not his robots would be programmed to follow his instructions or have the option to make their own choices.

A human inventor would be unlikely to allow his robots to act on their own as he would recognize the possibility and even likelihood that his invention could kill him. While humans cannot kill God, our running amok would serve no divine purpose. A key element in the design choice to give free will to the robots would be to devise a way for what is created to use their free will to recognize that it is in their best interest to align their choices with that of their creator.

Since the robots could not be programmed to know what is best, they would have to discover it for themselves. Since living for self is both destructive to others as well as oneself, and living for others is the discovery of love, one would think that an observant robot would quickly align himself with the desires of his creator and be able to escape the misery of making bad choices.

Many of the robots experiencing the pain of suffering would question if there was an inventor, why he would allow them to suffer. They fail to recognize that they were not created to experience comfort and ease, but to choose between selfishness and selflessness. The heart of the inventor would be grieved by the pain his robots experienced from the suffering they inflicted on themselves and others.

The inventor could choose some robots to communicate with so that they could tell others what was expected of them. He might pick one robot from whom generations of robots would accumulate his words. He might give them a list of rules and ask them to follow them. He might even communicate with some over time telling them what would happen in the future. He might even send his son to live among them to show them the way out of the suffering they persist in inflicting on themselves.

Those robots that managed to hear about the inventor and learn from his words what was expected would be able to see the world in truth. Truth can shatter the delusions of pride. Truth can bring shame for the harm caused to others. Truth can open eyes to reality. Truth can grow and become the way a robot can be connected to his inventor.

At a future point when all the robots have been deactivated, the inventor can identify those who trusted in the truth and reactivate them because they have learned to use their free will to choose the will of the inventor. There would be no need to reactivate those robots who could not give up seeking after self.

While stories about robots can be entertaining, they can also be used as an illustration to help us understand the purpose and goal of our existence. They can also help us understand why we have to endure for now the consequence of those “robots” who rebel against their creator.

For this is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Saviour; Who will have all men to be saved, and to come unto the knowledge of the truth. - 1 Timothy 2:3-4

What's Wong with Church?

One Lutheran pastor once observed that his church lost 80% of their youth. There are many reasons for declining church attendance (particularly among youth) like the decimation of families, the attraction of the world, secular education, and the influence of media. However, there are two internal problems every church should consider, denominationalism and running Christianity like a machine.

Paul spoke to the divisions (denominations) within Christianity by calling them a sign of immaturity (1 Cor 3:1-3). It might be expected that if Christians reject some error, that they might assume that they now have it “right” and form a separate group. Someone once asked if the reformers got it wrong. The answer to that was to question how likely would it be to fix all of the errors in one step.

One problem with denominations is that they usually provide a finished package of doctrine. This does two things. It can make the church member feel that there is nothing left for him to learn (and grow) as it has already been done by someone else. This can stunt Christian maturity keeping one from progressing to the stature of Christ (Eph 4:13). One quote regarding growth is: “I am embarrassed by what I thought five years ago. I hope to be embarrassed five years from now by what I know today.”

In addition to de-emphasizing Christian growth, a second problem with denominations is that it is not uncommon for criteria (baptism, communion, church membership, saying a prayer, really repenting, making Jesus Lord, etc.) to be established, the achievement of which will assure a place in heaven. While being saved and going to heaven are important, so are growing in faith and becoming more like Jesus.

The second problem area of churches is their mechanical nature. Scripted events and programs tend to kill the relationships that should be the core of Christianity. The hallmark of Christianity today is the Sunday sermon. The lecture / audience model is a recreation of the classroom / lecture model that most seminary students were exposed to. While many pastors struggle to make their sermons interesting, useful, and even entertaining, one might better ask if too much is being expected out of a lecture. A question and answer session might be more useful in engaging with what the congregation would like to learn.

Most pastors are in the unenviable position of having been hired to keep the “machine” running as it always has even when seeing some of what may be causing many (particularly the youth) to drop away. Some may attempt to experiment peripheral to the

machine but often find that there is not the response for which they had hoped.

Ever since the industrial Revolution people have been chasing a life defined by “fast, cheap, and easy”. This is ultimately a life lived for self. Some churches try to compete in this arena by offering a sort of Christianized entertainment. The world may be able to offer entertainment, diversions, and indulgences, but it falls short in offering deep relationships. This is perhaps where churches might be able to compete.

Facebook and Twitter followers do not offer real relationships. Real relationships require the self-sacrifice of love. If churches can find a way to teach their youth to see the value of self-sacrifice, they may be able to equip their youth to resist the allure of the world which ultimately leads to selfishness and loneliness.

What Happened to the Family?

God instituted the family when he brought Adam and Eve together and told them to be fruitful and multiply. While people still get married and have children what passes for family today is very different than what was common even up to 100 years ago. People lived, worked, and died mostly in the town in which they had been raised. People had a depth of relational connections that is difficult to even imagine today.

One might see historically where the Industrial Revolution took men out of the home, public education took children out of the home, and feminism took women out of the home until today where a family might more closely resemble a boarding house where four people pursue their own work, friends, activities, and interests independently. In 1800 that average woman had seven children, today this is less than two. If children are from the Lord (Ps 127:3), then as a nation we have been telling him “no thanks” for over 200 years.

The technological changes over the last 200 years seem to confirm the parallel social changes. As life became easier and more comfortable, many came to see the social changes as indicating we were moving into a utopian future. The increase in suicide, drug overdose, divorce, and single parent homes

represent a growing level of pain and suffering that no amount of cable TV, video games, and social media can completely mask.

In contrast to the older model of the family in a fixed location with many siblings cousins, aunts and uncles, today's common model of children leaving home at 18 and infrequent contact thereafter leaves many with relationship needs that often are only superficially met. Checking a Facebook page is often like sneaking a peak through a window of your child's home. Since we came to this point over several generations, many do not even realize the way it used to be.

Many think that the anemic state of the family today is the natural way it is supposed to be which often contributes to a sense of despair and hopelessness. If one looks at human history not as an evolutionary path to a utopian paradise, but as a Satanic attack of humans in an effort to take control of the world, one can begin to understand why the institution of the family has fallen to such a sad state, it has been under attack for centuries.

Satan has been largely successful in getting people to think that he doesn't even exist. However, the bible tells us he does and is active. Since Satan cannot be everywhere at once, he needs to collectivize the world in an attempt to exercise control through surrogates. He needed to break up families (husbands from wives and parents from children) so that people could be directed by his influence more than that of their families.

Today the worldly superficial social connections that pass for "friendships" are usually a poor substitute for real relationships. Sadly, even in Christian circles having someone show their concern for you by asking how you are doing financially, what you have been learning from the scriptures recently, or what prayer needs you have is the exception rather than the rule. Even within Christian families these sort of questions are seldom asked.

To resist these worldly destructive forces, one needs wisdom, (James 1:5), a close relationship with Jesus (Philippians 4:13), and an immersion in God's word (Ephesians 5:26).

Transgender Tragedy

There have been periods of history where people have had the opportunity to indulge various delusions. These were mostly limited to kings, emperors, and aristocracy. The present age is perhaps the first time that there has been such a widespread opportunity for many to so indulge themselves.

There was a newspaper photograph of a man who had his head completely tattooed with red and green patches and had his ears and nose surgically removed so he could support his delusion that he was a dragon. Today many children (for whom such fantasy and delusional thinking is more common) are being encouraged to damage themselves physically and irrevocably so that they can obtain a little more pleasure from artificially supporting their delusions.

One might think that the fact that half of the people encouraged down this road will attempt suicide would cause alarm. One might think it would be considered at least as dangerous as smoking. Sadly, most so-called social influencers seem to urge others down this road as if they would also cry out to a distressed soul standing at the edge of a roof to jump.

What usually brings an end to fantasy and delusions is reality. For the transgender, the intrusion of real-

ity can be abrupt and filled with monumental regret. Parents who encourage children down this road may face the same lifelong haunting that parents who incited their sons to go off in a pointless war feel when their son comes back home crippled.

There are people like Mark Zuckerberg who are working to create technology like a virtual reality where one can indulge whatever one can imagine. Good parenting includes teaching children how to deal with reality, not how to flee from it. Some parents cloaked in self-righteousness declare that they are defending their children from those who would cause harm, blind to the fact that they are the ones who are causing harm.

Consider what the bible says;

It were better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and he cast into the sea, than that he should offend one of these little ones. - Luke 17:2

Our society took two hammer blows in the 20th century. The first was the theory of evolution cloaked as “science” which undercut the faith of many. The second was moral relativism which declared that there was no right or wrong. As a result, generations were born with no foundation in the knowledge of their creator and no idea that some of their ideas might be wrong and even harmful.

Forty years ago abortion was celebrated. Twenty years ago homosexuality was celebrated. Now transgenderism is being celebrated. The future does not look bright. The fifty year old woman with secret tears and sorrow for the child she lost, the aging homosexual suffering from disease and the ravages of drug and alcohol use, and now the aging youth beginning to recognize the effect of self-mutilation and considering suicide may all find redemption in the blood of Christ.

There is one who is the father of lies that sets the course of this world. Those vulnerable to his deceptions can pay a very high price. While not often can someone vulnerable be dissuaded from following the lies, those who can have gone down these roads and discovered the consequences of fleeing reality who may be more open to words of truth and love.

For their own good, children need to be skilled at dealing with reality. Hiding in an imaginary playland will only bring tears and sorrow for a neglected and misused life.

Church - Traditional or Contemporary

Many churches today offer both a contemporary service as well as a traditional one. This may be an attempt to satisfy the older parishioners who find the contemporary service to be too wild and the younger parishioners who find the traditional service too stodgy.

Trying to find a marketing solution to an apparent problem in Christianity may not be a complete answer. If young people find little of value in a traditional service, recasting Christianity in an entertainment mold may not be the best answer.

Both groups may be holding on to an environment that makes them feel good. One might ask, "What is wrong with feeling good?". However, one should ask what Christianity was supposed to be about. The Christian is supposed to have his character improved by walking by the Spirit (Gal 5:22-23), reject worldly conformance (Rom 12:2), give up selfishness (2 Cor 5:15), and show love to other Christians (Eph 4:2).

The purpose of Christianity is to become more like Christ. Pastors are supposed to help (Eph 4:11-13). Facing how far short we all fall from the measurement standard of Jesus is not pleasurable. However, if we are to walk in truth, we should consider that

“feeling good” may not be a first priority for us.

If we have come to select a church environment that makes us feel comfortable, we should ask ourselves if it is at the expense of growing in Christ-likeness. If we are not being challenged to grow in Christ, we can ask ourselves if we have been seduced to accept a consumer appeal to a comfortable Christian inertness.

I taught a bible study for juvenile delinquents for several years. I was often asked what church they should go to. I wanted to weep because I said that almost any church you go to will warehouse you in a youth group where you will go bowling and have pizza. You might ask what that has to do with Jesus or the bible and that would be a good question. I told them that they would need someone who could take a long term personal interest in them and help them inventory themselves to see what they were lacking and be able to help them learn how to grow in Christ. Originally Christianity was about Christians providing this sort of encouragement and exhortation to each other.

My advice to Christians today who seek to live a Christian life growing in the Lord is the same that I gave those kids years ago, you have to take the initiative yourself. We know in the future that Jews will be sought after because it will be known that

Jesus (then reigning on earth in his kingdom) will be known of through the Jews (Zec 8:23). Today a similar opportunity exists if a person can observe someone who clearly shows the light and love of Jesus in his life, to be asked if they can help one to learn and grow.

In our consumer society few (even Christians) seek that which might be uncomfortable. To question a tradition one has relied on for years can be unsettling. To forgo the excitement of a stimulating church service can be difficult. One can have been assured that what they are doing is “right”, complete, or sufficient. However, if one asks oneself if they have obtained Christ-likeness, how many of us could answer, Yes.

The Christian should know that he will one day stand before Jesus (Rom 14:12). At that time we may come to wish that we undertook some degree of discomfort so that we would have grown more in Christ.

Useful Christianity

Christianity is often introduced to others as a way to get forgiveness for sins so that one can escape the eternal conscious torment of hell and get into heaven. This approach may find traction with those who see themselves as sinful and accept the ideas of hell and heaven. However, for many this presentation falls short of convincing. An alternative presentation of light versus darkness (selflessness versus selfishness) can be more relatable for many than “sin” (which many assume to be equivalent to felony crimes and often feel that it doesn’t apply to them).

Christianity spread for the first three centuries even under persecution because many could see in the changed lives of those they grew up with what was useful and desirable. For many people what happens after death can seem too distant or abstract to have much meaning. However, being able to see in the testimony of a changed life some of the following can be persuasive;

1. **Wisdom.** Wisdom might be viewed as consequences clearly seen. Avoiding the diseases associated with fornication, the ruination to be found in alcohol and drugs, and the crippling effects of debt. However, going beyond avoiding the pain poor choices can bring, one can also find the joys that

good choices can bring. For example, selecting a marriage partner that is kind, compassionate and has a good sense of humor can build a family in which one finds a refuge from the world rather than a family one wishes to flee.

2. Truth. In a world of advertising, politics, and bombast at every turn, being able to see truth is distinctly advantageous. There was a movie where a character wore glasses that turned black whenever there was danger. The supposed advantage was that one could continue feeling good regardless of reality. While many seek to avoid truth and continue in a comfortable cocoon of delusion, deception, and fantasy, there are still many who would find truth to be useful.

3. Selflessness. God designed the world so that the natural selfishness of childhood was to be replaced with the selflessness required by parenthood. A child thinks in terms of what can be consumed and what sensations can be had. These sensations are temporary and ultimately unsatisfying. Selflessness opens the door to true happiness and becomes the foundation for lasting relationships, peace, and love.

4. Character. Being a Christian opens the door to the opportunity to be a better person. If we allow the Holy Spirit to work in us, the result is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith,

meekness, and temperance. While there are many who see no advantage in having these qualities, there are still many others who would give anything for them.

5. Certainty. Fears evaporate when faith comes. Poverty, illness, imprisonment, or even death are not seen as calamitous fates. With a view of the eternal, one can transcend what Paul calls momentary afflictions.

6. Family. While often Christians only extend a sense of “brotherhood” to others of their own denomination or church, there are many that can recognize in each other the light of Christ and give each other such a warm, deep, and loving connection that all else pales in comparison.

There are three reasons why this may not be as powerful a testimony today as it was in ancient times. People do not know each other as well as they used to. Many claim to be Christian but have only inherited a Christian tradition. And lastly, many who are Christian have never matured in their faith to show the advantages of Christianity. Perhaps it would be a good idea for those of us who claim Christ to examine ourselves and seek after the maturity that was also lacking among the Corinthians (1 Cor 3:1-3). If we were to show more clearly the immediate advantages of Christianity, it

Sobriety is not Enough

At a recent Al-anon meeting the subject of sobriety was raised and discussion ensued regarding the fact the even when someone stopped drinking, it did not necessarily make things better. In fact, sometimes the clarity of sobriety exposes or amplifies other difficulties.

It reminded me of a talk I once had with a gal that was having relationship problems. I asked her if she had been sexually abused as a child. She became suddenly very quiet and then asked how I could tell, as if she was afraid that others might be able to tell as well.

I said that abuse was tricky because not only do negative things happen but the development of positive ones may also be neglected. Many people do not appreciate the double sided harm this can cause. I could see an application to sobriety in that stopping a downward spiral, while good, is not a complete answer as it can leave people stranded somewhere on that spiral.

It can be necessary to work at repair and development of a life that has been neglected. Just as a vacant house will deteriorate, a life spent in pursuit of indulgences also falls into disrepair. For many people healthy life skills were never fully developed

and something like sobriety is not so much a recovery of what has been lost, but the discovery of what was never built.

This is where the twelve step programs have an advantage. They provide a context for rebuilding or even for the first time to develop those missing life skills. We all start life as selfish children. Some make little progress in growing out of this state. Those who see little reason not to pursue whatever selfish desires they have can make the lives of those around them very unhappy. They may even come to see the negative effects in themselves of immoderate indulgence.

Twelve step programs do a lot to introduce people to skills like seeing oneself honestly, considering how others feel, using the motivational power of shame to try to face difficulties like mending relationships, and use the acknowledgment of God to help accept the humility that is necessary for a healthy life.

One does not need alcoholism or child abuse to leave one with a sort of arrested development. Christian parents themselves may have been raised with an incomplete understanding of how to live the Christian life (other than “try to be good”). As a result, they may be ignorant of how to teach their children to follow Christ. They may rely on Sunday

School classes and sermon lectures to accomplish this instruction. Paul admonishes the Galatians calling them “foolish” for abandoning his teaching and trying to follow the law. He tells them that they are incomplete by saying that he hopes Christ will be “formed” in them at a future time (Gal 4:19).

Christianity was never intended to be a partial or incomplete life. There is an expectation that in each of us Christ will be formed and be observable (Eph 4:13). A life calamity like alcoholism can propel one to seek solutions and personal growth. It might seem a shame that Christians who have access to all that God would desire for them, seldom take advantage of what is available.

Often it takes some calamity or crisis to force a Christian out of his comfort zone to seek out what God offers freely. Just as sobriety by itself is incomplete, The Christian convinced that there is nothing further required of him may also still have skills to develop, lessons to learn, and progress to make.

What in the World is Wrong? - Intellectualism

The Feudal period of history was ruled by an aristocracy defined by inherited wealth and position. People born into this sort of environment would find it almost impossible not to think of themselves smugly as superior to others. Today people who have inherited a high IQ also often find themselves contemptuous of others. The educated elite that rule the world today differ little from their historical aristocratic fellows except that rather than marginal Christians, these are often devout secularists.

Secularism is often presented as the absence of religion but perhaps more accurately could be called a religion of the worship of man in general and self in particular. While often advocated in educational institutions, colleges seem particularly aggressive in promoting the doctrines of this religion. such as evolution (there is no God), psychology (do what feels good), relativism, (there is no right or wrong), and collectivism (people need to be controlled).

Many might not see a problem in being ruled by the “best and the brightest”. However, intellect is not the same thing as wisdom. We know that knowledge puffs up (1 Cor 8:1) and that those who think highly of themselves despise others (Luke 18:9). However, there can be additional elements at work such as not only being cut off from wisdom, but ac-

tually becoming fools (Rom 1:22).

That humans are irredeemable outside of the blood of Christ has been a long established Christian tradition. However, breaking from this perspective have been periodic attempts to see humans as evolving towards nobility. This can be seen with the Italian humanism (Renaissance humanism) of the 14th-16th centuries, the so-called enlightenment of the 17th and 18th centuries, the progressive era for the 19th and 20th centuries, and what might now be called the “woke” culture. Often central to these movements is the idea of humans evolving in general and seeing oneself at the forefront.

This blindness to truth is a sad effect of self-adulation. William Buckley is famous for the quote that he would rather be governed by the first 400 names in the Boston telephone book than by the faculty of Harvard. This assertion might be understood better when considering that IQ is a genetic quality, but wisdom is from God and available to any who would ask on the condition of faith. If someone with a lower IQ had wisdom they might be described as having “common sense”. Sadly, it is not as “common” as it used to be.

There is nothing wrong with having a high IQ. However, if used in the pursuit and advocacy of foolishness, it becomes dangerous because it often seeks to impose foolishness on others. The bible tells us that the fear (reverence) of God is the beginning of wisdom. This path is the only one to cure those who have been drawn to foolishness by conformance to the world and by thinking too highly of themselves (Rom 12:2-3).

Things are Different

It is almost impossible today for those in Western society to even imagine how people lived up until 100 years ago. In 1800 the average woman had given birth to seven or eight children. By 1900 this had dropped to four or five. Even then, most people lived and died in the town in which they were born. As a result, one's friends were one's siblings and cousins and almost everyone in town was a relative of some sort. People were intimately known.

Today most "families" often consist of only two adults on their first or second marriage and one or two children all of whom have their own work or school, friends, interests, and activities such that the home is more like a boarding house where each can sleep, shower, and change clothes. Relatives are often distant and only visited infrequently. The historical model of the large and geographically fixed family began to transition with the mobility afforded by the automobile in the 1920s.

It can be difficult to grasp the parallel impact of media as first radio and then television became the primary sources of information and even values which had previously been provided by fathers and grandfathers. Public education also provided a channel for information. Spending 12 formative years being told to shut up, sit down, and do what you are told

can contribute much to a mostly compliant populace.

A child born today will be processed to develop much more differently than most humans throughout history. He will assume that his experiences are normative as they will be similar to the others of his age with whom he is most familiar. He will not be aware of the depth and breadth of family connections that had been the norm in the past. He will, however, still have the need for social connections that will only superficially be met with the current family structure.

Like a Harlow monkey clinging to a wire mother, various problems can begin to manifest. The thousands of screaming teen girls at the Beatles concerts in the 1960s might be seen as an indicator of the degree to which emotional deficiencies were accumulating. Another indicator of problems associated with this new direction of life might be seen in increasing rates of divorce, drug and alcohol abuse, anxiety, suicide, and depression..

The decrease of relational connections has had an additional effect in amplifying the attention given to oneself. This has contributed to what Christopher Lasch called "The Culture of Narcissism". Aided by advertising, a "consumer society" emerged to profit from growing anxieties seeking to be soothed

briefly through purchasing. The explosive growth of entertainment such as movies, TV, and music was reflective of the emphasis people were increasingly giving to give themselves pleasurable sensations. It was as if a nation of Stoics increasingly abandoned their philosophy in favor of Hedonism.

It was not uncommon for those of the WWII generation to get into fist-fights over politics or religion. This was not so admirable in itself, but is reflective of a time when what people thought was right, true, and good meant enough to them to stand up to opposition. This seems so archaic today as most feel the greatest crime that can be committed is to make someone feel bad. Thus “feelings” have replaced values as the highest good today.

One can observe a change in the prevailing religion of Christianity as well. It has either been mostly abandoned or transformed into various self-stimulating experiences. Perhaps this disconnection from the source of wisdom (God) may be related to the larger societal pursuit of foolishness.

For those cognizant of the divergent path of our culture and desiring to minimize its impact on their own families consideration is often given to different options. The easiest is to have hope that the political climate of the country will reverse its trend because some political icon like Trump or DeSantis will make things better.

Some work feverishly to convince their neighbors and family members that a conservative approach will change things for the better. Still others withdraw somewhat seeing in contemporary times a climate a little similar to what Jews saw in Germany in the 1930s. Homeschooling can limit the total indoctrination of one's children. Moving to a red state or a rural area might buy time or even provide survivalist options.

Depending on how one projects the current trend, more drastic steps can be taken. Aside from the Amish, one will be unlikely to find a community similar to what existed prior to the 1920s. However, it might be wise to relocate to a statistically safer area. Scott Adams (of Dilbert fame) was crucified for saying that if 50% of a group felt you had no right to exist, that it might be wise to avoid that group. It is difficult to fault the logic.

If those on the left kill their own children simply for their own convenience, it is not a big stretch of the imagination to consider that they might apply the same solution to those who disagree with their policies. Hopefully they will not see it as a final solution.

God's "Red Pill"

In the movie "The Matrix" the protagonist is offered a choice. He could remain in a comfortable simulated existence or he could choose to live an uncomfortable life in the real world. This choice was to be made by taking a red pill (for reality) or a blue pill (for continued comfort). In a way, God offers everyone the same choice. However, instead of pills, each person makes his choice everyday in how he lives his life.

Whether by blaming others, thinking too much of ourselves, or simply avoiding critical thinking, we, each day, make choices that accumulates to bring us closer to truth (reality) or further from it. Often the basis for these choices are whether they will make us feel good or not. In the book, "1984", the protagonist is offered the opportunity to avoid punishment if he betrays his lover. Forever afterwards he carries the burden of his betrayal. Similarly, each time we choose to distort reality to make ourselves feel good, we have betrayed truth. While probably not particularly bothered by this betrayal, we become ever increasingly distant from, unable to discern, and even hostile to truth.

When Jesus announced the potential of the kingdom to the people of Israel, he could have told them that the baptisms and healings were necessary to prepare

them to be the nation of priests that was originally intended. He could have spelled things out and have persuaded most to accept his offer. He did not explain or persuade. He intentionally spoke in parables so that those who were not inclined towards truth, would not understand. (Matt 13:13-15).

It is as if God created humans to produce a crop. The harvest is of those who seek truth. Since God is truth, he seeks those who seek him. This can be further seen using the illustration of light and darkness. God is light and in him is no darkness at all. Light is radiated outward and is symbolic of giving and selflessness. Darkness can be thought of as taking, selfishness, and consumption. We choose to either seek the light and abandon selfishness or turn from the light and pursue that which makes us feel good.

Instead of being offered a red or blue pill, we are given life and how we live it reflects our choice. Built in to the design of life is the transition from the selfishness of childhood to the selfless love of parenthood. The natural world is hostile to us and requires us to help each other. History shows us many examples of collective killing and stealing which perhaps best illustrates darkness. God, at the tower of Babel, created differing languages to limit the damage we could do through collectives.

Satan has set the course of the world using collectives to leverage his influence. “Society” seems to have replaced the family and technology seems to have removed many of the discomforts of the natural world. Even parenthood has become optional. There seems to be little incentive to abandon the selfishness of childhood. All in all, the comfortable delusions, indulgences, and self-deceptions now available seem quite “Matrix”-like.

The bible tells us that the Gospel is foolishness to those that are perishing (1 Cor 1:18). As the number of people who choose the “blue pill” increases, we might expect that God, seeing little hope of a bountiful “harvest”, will bring an end to this present age.

Patriotism

It is not uncommon at the anniversary of our country to consider how we feel about our country.

There can be an element of nostalgia especially for older people who have memories of a country that was less distant from God. However, my memories also include being spit on simply for being in my Army uniform 55 years ago.

Often mixed in with memories are emotions associated with family, an appreciation for the advantages available over other countries, and the sense of loss for those who served and paid with their lives.

While patriotism can be a deep-felt emotional experience, Christians should be careful not to give honor due to God to a political entity instead.

In 1994 (the 50th anniversary of D Day) my wife and I were outside a Christian bookstore in northern France. An older woman who had been told we were American expressed a deep-felt gratitude, even 50 years later. It is these sort of experiences that can make one proud to be an American. However, if one looks deeper, the love that leads one to surrender his life for others or even to take on the debt of reconstruction flows from a Christian selflessness found in those who walk by the power of the Holy Spirit.

What made America great was not our culture, industry, or even democracy. What made America great was the hand of God working in and through the lives of so many Christians. It can be emotionally stirring to see the flag pass by in a parade. However, rather than pride, we might better turn our hearts in gratitude for the millions of Christians whose collective self-sacrificing made this a country better than most and for the love of God that sent Jesus to die for the sins of the whole world so that we could be blessed by the lives of those who serve him.

A down side of patriotism is the anger one feels towards those who work to destroy the country either intentionally or through ignorance. This anger is similar to what one feels if one's family is insulted or threatened. Those who seek to destroy can only accomplish their objectives because, as a country, we have turned away from God who is the source of wisdom and often do not have the discernment to know what is happening.

America is losing its greatness because so many are either abandoning Christianity, transforming it into something experiential, or changing it into a program of social and political activism. It may be too late to stop the slide of America into the same pattern as countries that do not know God. Often it is through hard times and difficult experiences that one learns the value of self-denial, self-sacrifice, and self-discipline. A prosperous, materialistic, and consumer society often sees little incentive to deny itself every indulgence and pleasure it can get.

Many urban areas are already lost causes as gangs duplicate tribal savagery and crime is actually encouraged. What hope there may be for America may lie in rural regions where a love of Christ, truth, and the willingness to deny selfishness may provide sanctuaries of reason and hope.

Good Works

I was raised in a home that had a strong Lutheran influence. As a child I frequently heard derisive comments about Catholics who believed in “good works”. I remember asking myself, “Why would “good works” be a bad thing.” I later came to understand that they were saying that Catholics thought they earned their way into heaven by doing good works. I still thought my parents and grandparents were being inaccurate, unfair, and that mocking others was a poor example of Christianity.

In looking at the subject of good works outside of denominational distinctives we have a wealth of information about Israel and what God required of them in the bible. The law for Israel consisted of the ten commandments and the 613 Mosaic laws. To flesh this out thousands of additional requirements were written in the Talmud and the Mishnah.

A lot of the law concerned what not to do and how to do ceremonial acts. However, there were also requirements for “good works” such as providing care for widows and orphans, the poor, sojourners, and to not charge usury on loans. However, as it is with any, people can find ways around them and convince themselves that they haven’t done anything wrong like the Pharisees who would steal houses from widows (Mat 23:14).

For Israel keeping the law (including good works) was the way to obtain righteousness and the hope of the resurrection of the just. However, many in Israel (including the Sadducees) did not even believe in a resurrection. Some Christians today try to apply the requirements for Israel to themselves including keeping the law, tithing, and good works. It can be a poor fit because Christians are not supposed to obtain righteousness, we already have the righteousness of Christ (Phil 3:9).

The question for Christians is that why would one do good works if they do not have to in order to get to heaven. The answer is that for Israel death represented the transition to eternal life for the righteous. For Christians there has been an equivalent “death” when we trusted in Christ. It is in this newness of life (Rom 7:6) that we are expected to show the love of Christ in service to others (2 Cor 5:15).

In this new and eternal life we have in Christ we are to do good works (Gal 6:10) to our fellow Christians in particular. There is an expectation that as Christians we would grow and mature in our knowledge of the bible and as a result we would be complete and equipped for good works (2 Tim 3:17). Part of our contribution to good works is our choice to not walk after the flesh, but after the Spirit so his “fruit” could be produced in us (Gal 5:22-25).

Having Christ in us gives us an advantage over those of Israel. We do not need a list of rules as we grow in love (1 Cor 13:4-7) we become less selfish and self-focused. We become more aware of those around us and their needs. If we have material assets, we may have an opportunity to share what we have (Eph 4:28). If we have time, we might be able to share that. If we have knowledge, that also could be shared.

For the Christian, good works are less a transaction to earn reward, than simply the way God would have us live.

Christian Emotionalism

There is a whole spectrum of emotions that humans are capable of. And many are very pleasant and may be thought of as those that might be stimulated by a visit to an amusement park. Interestingly the word amusement is from the Greek and means “without thinking”. The physical sensation of the rides and the possibility of winning a prize at an arcade can all evoke pleasant emotions that can be savored and consumed leaving pleasant memories and a future desire to repeat the experience. The pleasure one has with a good book or movie is also similar.

Christians can also experience similar sensations in their churches. A particularly gifted speaker can touch emotions as well as activities that, even if not frenzied, are engaging enough to draw out emotional responses. Even the solemnity of a Cathedral can be imposing enough to evoke an emotional response. However, these might all be seen as consumptive in that the experience and associated emotions are repeatedly sought after. This can be similar to those who seek after other sensations (Jam 4:3).

There are other emotions that result from ambitions and desires. These are less for consumption but rather the result of intent. In the movie *An Officer and a Gentleman* there is a scene where a drill instructor is try to get an officer candidate to drop out

of the program. His exhortation to drop out is intensely rejected with the cry that it is the only thing he can have hope in. The emotional intensity is compelling. However it was mitigated for me that as a former enlisted man seeing someone so horrified by the prospect of remaining an enlisted man was a little insulting. However, it did demonstrate that which fills the heart is that which is spoken (Mat 12:34).

For Christians, an inventory of what words were spoken on a particular day can reveal what is foremost in our hearts. Daniel set himself on a particular course by “purposing in his heart” (Dan 1:8). This gives a little insight as to how Christians can make use of their emotions to help them avoid the seductions of the world. Emotions left undirected tend to cause us problems (Jer 17:9). If one considers the verbs of entreaty in Proverbs 2:1-11 (receive, hide, incline, apply, criest, seekest, and searchest) one can feel the passion to strive. Some today with great sincerity strive to follow such exhortations, but often flag over time as it is difficult to find the strength to consistently support such noble intentions.

The Christian today has more resources upon which to draw than did those of the Old Testament. We have the indwelling Holy Spirit (Gal 4:6) and the opportunity to have the mind of Christ (Phil 2:5), to

put on the “new man” (Eph 4:24), to have a renewed mind free from worldliness (Rom 12:2-3), and to be free from the compulsions of the flesh (Rom 13:14).

One can perhaps best see the difference between emotions run amok and emotions that result from a purposeful life by considering the word “love”. For many this is something that is fallen into and out of. This reflects emotions that are free ranging. The bible defines love (1 Cor 13:4-7) as essentially a result of conscious decisions to forgo selfish interests. The bible tells husbands to love their wives (Eph 5:25). While romantic and emotional sensations abound and can ebb and flow, the decision to give selfless love is a result of what one “purposes in their heart”.

There is a risk of pursuing emotional sensations, misjudging truth because of feelings, and a failure to develop critical thinking. However, when emotions are kept as a “cart after a horse”, they can be a blessing and can contribute to the richness of life.

Blinded

Sight is an amazing facility. With it we are able to navigate through the world by perceiving what is illuminated by light. The bible uses the illustration of light and sight frequently to convey an understanding of spiritual truth. Most are familiar to some degree of the difficulty experienced by the blind. Even the use of secondary perceptions such as touch, sound, and even smell can only provide a poor approximation of what can be seen.

Spiritual blindness is often experienced with little or no understanding of the condition (Rev 3:17). It might not be surprising that those who have never had spiritual “sight” would not be aware of its absence. The Laodiceans were rebuked because they allowed their prosperity to lull them into a sort of walking slumber in which they did not notice or feel the need for the “sight” they were lacking.

One would expect that those who reject or are uninterested in God would have no particular desire to obtain spiritual “sight”. However, they perhaps are unaware that there is an extra difficulty in obtaining such “sight” (2 Cor 4:4). Satan does not want any of those he controls to be aware of their captive state. He blinds their minds and thus they are unable to see reality with the true light that comes from God. They are open to accept most anything as true. Ly-

ing to the blind would be a cruel trick. However, one would not expect better from the “father of lies” (Jn 8:44).

There is a type of self-blindness that comes from seeing one’s own expectations as truth. The question by the disciples at the time of Jesus’ ascension is reflective of an assumption that the promised kingdom would be a gift and be the restoration of the historical prominence of the time of king David and Solomon. They could not “see” that only a faithful remnant would receive the new covenant and enter the kingdom.

Christians also are subject to blindness. Perhaps the most common for us is what might be called “arrested development”. Paul writes the Corinthians that he is unable to explain more things to them because of their immaturity (1 Cor 3:1-3). We live at a time without Apostles, prophets, or others receiving direct revelations from God. We do have the bible, but we have to deal with the thousand and one various interpretations people make regarding it. It can seem daunting to find a nugget or two of truth in an avalanche of opinion and conflicting declarations.

Christians today have two big advantages. The first is the word of God (2 Tim 3:16) and the second is the indwelling Spirit of truth. If we immerse ourselves in God's word, we can slowly grow in truth and find that the Spirit can help us draw closer to what is true and move away from what is false or of the flesh (1 Cor 2:14).

How to Help Those in the Tribulation

The book of Revelation describes a future time when first one fourth of the worlds population will be killed. Subsequently another third of the remaining will be killed. These events are part of what is called the tribulation or the Day of Jacob's trouble. Those surviving in those times may find homes of former Christians abandoned in their search for resources to survive. It might be helpful for them to find on the wall something that could help them understand why things are happening. To aid in this I wrote a two page description that might be useful to them. If left on a wall, it might be found by someone it could help. Feel free to copy, change, distribute or translate.

Why This Has Happened

This was written in early 2023. The “this” of the title has not happened yet. This is intended to explain to the survivors what it is they are facing and why it is happening. There has only been one book in all of human history that accurately foretold the future, the bible. The information contained herein is drawn from the bible. Before the circumstances you now face was a time of prosperity and ease. Most in that time (perhaps including yourselves) had little interest in the bible.

The bible described a future time when one out of every four people on earth will have died as a result of war, famine, and disease. It is this event through which you have come. One can assume that to reach the numbers of dead this prophecy implies, that there has to be a nuclear exchange between Russian and the US. As this would not even reach 1 billion people, China may have some involvement or disease and famine would also make a contribution. The reader of this notice might face survival in the face of any or all of the effects of a multi-element disaster.

Those who survive face a greater danger than simple survival. There will be a world government (probably in the mid-east or what remains of Europe). This will be ruthlessly run by a man the bible calls the man of sin. He will be aided by what the bible calls the false prophet. In addition to military power, he will also employ religion that will seem convincing in addition to what appears to be miracles. The bible says that people will be taken in because they received not a love of the truth. For this reason, seeking after truth will be essential for survival. If you can find a copy of the bible, you may want to hold on to it as the bible is truth.

It may be that those in the Americas or Africa will be out of the reach of the world leader and have to

only contend with basic survival (food, clothing, shelter, etc). For those closer to his rule, there will be the temptation to participate in his economy (buying and selling). This might seem a survival strategy, except to participate one has to have a “mark” on the hand or head and having this mark will guarantee a tormented future. It is recommended to escape the regions of his control so that one might truly survive.

The survivors who are reading this will most likely be the ones who have the least inclination to understand, much less agree with the reasons for why this is happening. In the last half of the 20th century and the first half of the 21st the idea of God, Jesus, and the bible have almost been laughed out of any consideration. However, the magnitude of the loss of one fourth of the world’s population may give support to the reality of these subjects. Considering that the media has become a willing partner of the present insanity, it may be that the people who do survive may not know of the scope of destruction. However, things are going to get even worse as a further loss of one third of the remaining population lies yet in the future.

To understand why this is happening one has to consider that God created everything perfect including the angels and us. However, we were given “free will”. About a third of the angels rebelled

against God and their leader, Satan, got the first humans (Adam and Eve) to rebel as well. As a result Satan got dominion over the earth.

People became so evil that God destroyed the world with a flood saving only eight people. In a few hundred years God then picked the nation of Israel and made an agreement with them so that he could use them as a nation of priests to bring the knowledge of God to the whole world. However, the people of Israel abandoned God and sought idolatry. After having the remaining Jews taken in captivity for 70 years, he finally got them to stop idolatry. However, when he sent his son Jesus to offer his kingdom to Israel, most were not interested. Plan B was to allow non-Jews to hear about God and Jesus and have a chance to be saved from the destruction called the second death in Revelation. Sadly, Christians turned the opportunity for an individual relationship with God into a mechanized system of churches and denominations frequently at war with each other.

When Jesus offered himself up to be killed on the cross, God the Father placed on him all the sins of the whole world. With this payment, Jesus gained the right to execute or forgo judgment as well as regained dominion over the world. In the book of Revelation in chapters four and five a description is given of the time when Jesus receives what might be called the title deed to earth. As he opens this

scroll seven seals with be sequentially be broken. Each seal represents some judgment of wrath to be poured out on the world. It is this sequence of events that is happening to you now.

At a local level, it may be difficult to discern or even understand what is happening at a global level. However, it is important to not get the mark. It may be possible to encounter one of the 144,000 young Jewish men who will be sent into the world to tell people what is happening and encourage people to persevere. Perseverance may be the most difficult part. It will be so tempting to take the mark. People raised in relative comfort and ease may find primitive survival living especially difficult.

The bible describes a seven year period the last three and a half of which will be especially difficult. Once this time is past those who have persevered without the mark will enter a time when things on earth will be magnificently changed. People will live much longer, There will be less hostility from nature, and there will be no more war for a thousand years. This will be because Jesus will return and establish his Kingdom in Israel.

Things like God, Jesus, and the bible might seem like they have nothing to do with the difficulties you now face. However, it will be important to have the facts before making your choice. If you can find a bible, the last book will be Revelation. It was written to seven churches in what is now southwestern Turkey. This was to tell Jewish believers what they could expect. Chapters four and five describe a time when Jesus (symbolically referred to as the “lamb”) is presented with a scroll that is sealed with seven seals. As this document is opened and these seals are broken, the wrath of God is poured out on the earth. All this could have happened two thousand years ago. However, an interruption was allowed so that non-Jews could hear about God even though Israel (who was supposed to be used to accomplish this) was negligent. The time when God would subject Israel to great hardship to recover them for this purpose might be seen as the end of what could be called the “church age”. This would be what you are experiencing now.

During the church age anyone could be saved by placing their trust in Jesus and being placed in what Paul calls “the body of Christ”. Now that the church age is over, one can still draw comfort from the words of Matthew - *And ye shall be hated of all men for my name's sake: but he that endureth to the end shall be saved.* - Matthew 10:22

Science

What is called “science” today started as the collection of observations by men who saw in the nature God created patterns of cause and effect that were called laws. Since God is truth and that is reflected in what he created, the word “science” gained a lot of credibility in the mind of the public. When technology started to produce useful items for everyday life, the public further attributed to “science” a sort of gratitude for making life easier.

However science and technology are not as closely related as many think. Most technological advances were made by tinkerers who experimented with ways to improve things. In a way, science can follow after technology in that when someone discovers something, scientists then come along afterwards and try to measure and describe it using math. Almost like librarians, scientists maintain a catalog of mathematical descriptions of how things work.

Science developed in an almost cloistered realm in the newly emerging colleges of the late 1800s as a sort of union closed shop or a medieval guild. One might think of it as a monastery or castle surrounded by a moat of mathematics allowing few to enter. They came to think of themselves as the repository of all human knowledge. Hubris is a quite

human failing and science was not immune. Rather than recognizing the creator whose hand in nature was observed, God was at first ignored and then adamantly rejected based on the new “science” of evolution.

Evolution is a good way to illustrate how science transformed from truth to propaganda. Conjecture of how life began was accepted as true solely because those making “scientific” declarations wanted it to be. Slowly things like psychology, sociology, and anthropology were added under the “science” umbrella. The shameful Kinsey Report published under the guise of academic professionalism was widely accepted as true simply because it was in the format of academia which had by the 1950s already come to be seen as truth.

Trained over generations of classroom instruction a population, never before in history molded to be so compliant, mostly accepts what they are told by those in authority, especially professionals and scientists, as truth. Just as ancient populations were made to offer the fruit of their labor to their priestly class to assure a good harvest, people today can be made to fund environmental and other scams to appease the new gods at the behest of the new priestly class.

Science has descended into a relativistic soup of

conjecture, supposition, and even fraud. Driven by politics, the pursuit of grant money, the security of tenure, and the arrogance of pride, It has become a new religion. The pronouncements from its new priests are to be taken as the new truth. Sadly, this is worse than a few egomaniacs trying to tell everyone else what to do. These are those who serve Satan (either willingly or unknowingly). They are used to direct an increasingly collectivized populace in the direction that will accomplish Satanic objectives.

This is nothing we can change or stop. However a few Christians might be helped to understand what is happening and why so that they can escape the worst of what is coming and help their children to see through the distortions of those who exchange the truth of God for lies.

Who changed the truth of God into a lie, and worshipped and served the creature more than the Creator, who is blessed for ever. Amen. - Romans 1:25

Abortion

It is difficult to think of a subject more contentious than abortion. The passion for access to abortion has grown past the desire to be free from the consequence of fornication to become emblematic of a social and political movement. Today zeal for abortion has begun to take on religious characteristics such that some see it almost as sacramental. It is difficult to have a conversation with abortion proponents because every tactic is used to obtain their objectives and logic and truth are seldom used as other approaches are more useful. The policy as well as the act seems oriented solely towards getting what one wants.

Perhaps the most frequently used tactic is to declare that an embryo is not human. This declaration is not used to advance truth, but as a tactic to reduce objections. That this assertion is not true can be seen in the bible. In Luke chapter one we read that Elizabeth (the mother of John the Baptist) was six months pregnant with John when she felt the baby leap within her at the presence of Mary signifying that the unborn John responded to the presence of the unborn Jesus. However, as Mary had only recently conceived, the case that life begins at conception seems to receive biblical support.

The second most common objective of the abortion-

ists is to allow restrictions on abortion except for rape, incest, or the health of the mother. If the born children of sexual predators are not killed, why should the unborn ones be killed? By using imagery associated with rape and incest the proponents of abortion seek to create a willingness to allow the inclusion of the phrase “health of the mother” which one might normally think of as a life threatening condition but actually allows for any condition such as feeling bad.

The freshman college student whose parents sent her to college with high hopes for her future would have been shocked at how quickly she was swept off her feet romantically by an upperclassman and become pregnant. Having been abandoned by him, she seeks an abortion and keeps secret her hidden shame. She may become a staunch advocate for abortion having come to see it as the “remedy” that saved her from having her secret exposed. This is not an uncommon scenario, however, the shame might be better placed on the parents whose ignorance sent their daughter into a den of iniquity.

Those who speak in favor of abortion often cite it as a private decision. However, as a society we have decided that allowing one citizen to kill another should not be allowed. Sadly, some people can conclude that their personal problems could best be solved by killing another, however, this does not make for a stable society. One might say that the right to privacy ended when a girl allowed someone to plant a seed within her. If a landlord is not allowed to kill an inconvenient renter, a woman should not be allowed to kill someone staying within her for nine months.

For the person that has an abortion there seems to be one of two directions one goes over the passing years. One either seems to be filled with growing regret and remorse or one seems to become more insensitive and cold similar to the seared conscience referred to in Paul's letter to Timothy (1 Tim 4:1-2). For those who follow the path of regret, there is forgiveness in Christ for all sins.

How to Approach God

Many people have demanded God answer why he allows suffering. Some have even been so bold as to declare that after they die, they are going to demand some answers from God. Such foolishness reflects both ignorance and pride (a frequent combination). One might even ask if blindness to truth is a result of pride or its cause. We know that self-righteousness causes contempt for others (Luke 18:9), perhaps even for God. Those who speak so boldly and even mockingly of God now, may come to a different approach after death.

The bible gives a description in the story of the rich man and Lazarus of the rich man (who had no interest in God during his life) suffering after death. The description of his fate in Hades (the Sheol of the Old Testament) is described as torments (Luke 16:23).

The Greek word translated as torments is *basanos* and was used for a touchstone which was used to test the purity of gold and silver coins as there was much adulteration in coinage. The word was also used to describe the torture applied to slaves in judicial proceedings to insure their testimony was truthful. Both of these word uses are seen in bringing out truth. From this one might conclude that after death those who resisted truth find it forced upon them.

This fate may also await those who resist truth (2 Tim 3:8) as Paul writes to Timothy regarding those in the “last days”.

It may be that this process of “torment” is applied to those who were not interested in God or were even contemptuous of him for the purpose of creating a situation where ultimately every knee will bend and every tongue confess that Jesus is Lord (Is 42:23). Thus every mocker and those contemptuous of God as well as those who were not interested in God will be brought to acknowledge truth as they stand in judgment of their works. (Rev 20:12) This process of correction after death may produce in those previously hostile to or disinterested in God a new appreciation of truth

For those who see in the gospel of Christ the truth that Jesus paid for our sins on the cross and trust in him for salvation, we are placed into what is called the “body of Christ” and are sealed with the Holy Spirit. As a result, we can come before God with confidence (Eph 3:11-12) even to the point of similarity to a small child coming to his father (Rom 8:15).

Many belong to a denomination that makes use of the supposed intercession of deceased Christians, scripted prayers, sacraments, and rituals as the way to approach God. While approximating a relationship, these often are limiting and can still leave one feeling distant or disconnected. The Christian of immature faith can also experience similar distance in their approach to God. Worldly influence such as the idea of self-creation (evolution) can also hinder even the Christian's approach to God (Heb 11:6).

Perhaps the most earnest and honest approach is that of one who is seeking. The person who is trying to understand and find truth represents the same thing that was expected of the nation of Israel (Jer 29:13).

Birth Control

The bible tells us that children are from the Lord (Ps 127:3). Using birth control is telling God, “No thanks”. The advantages to using birth control, especially in today’s society, are fairly obvious. Not having children at inconvenient times or freeing parents so that two incomes can be enjoyed can be attractive. Additionally, being a parent can be more difficult than just inconvenience. Children can also bring a depth of heartache seldom experienced by others. In addition, there are social advantages in doing whatever everyone else is doing.

For Christians the factors that weigh on their decision can seem to heavily lean in favor of using birth control. It can be tempting to rationalize the decision as being responsible. However, it can be useful to consider biblical references. The survivors of the flood were told to be fruitful and multiply (Gen 8:7). Onan’s attempt at birth control was not well received (Gen 38:9-10). God may have a hand in forming people right from the beginning (Is 44:24).

Of all the various types of birth control (barrier, surgery, IUD, Spermicide, oral contraception, and abortion), the use of oral contraceptives (which frequently produce abortions) and chemical or surgical abortion are the two which accrue greater sin for the user. The other methods are frustrating God’s at-

tempt to provide children. Abortion is taking the life of someone else for one's own benefit, like a murder robbery.

We will consider here only that birth control that does not take the life of another. God gave mankind the perfect birth control, abstinence. This is useful in particular for adolescence so that their energies might be directed towards finding the best possible marriage partner with whom to build a life and a strong family of their own. Life can be difficult. If two young people have self-discipline, they are more likely to give each other self-sacrificial love and build a strong family. If they are seeking transient pleasures, they may consume themselves and each other with their own selfishness.

There are two main reasons for using birth control. The first is a management tool to accommodate the demands of the world (two incomes, delay for advanced education, or social acceptance). The second is to accommodate personal convenience (more personal freedom, more financial resources, or easier home life). Neither of these two categories of reasons should attract the Christian. The Christian is to shun worldly integration (Rom 12:2) as well as to live a selfless life (2 Cor 5:15). Parenthood often forces upon people a requirement for selflessness that exposes them to what becomes the basis for real love (self-sacrificial as opposed to selfish consumption).

In a way the decision to use birth control or not represents to the Christian a choice between to what degree to choose to live for God and to what degree to live for self and the world. Even though the Christian will not be judged for condemnation, we will give an account to God (Rom 14:12). It will be shameful for Christians to have to admit that they were not interested in suffering inconvenience for the sake of him who died for all their sins. Additionally, their choice is a testimony to others such that the minimal Christian life seems to be endorsed.

Thy Kingdom Come

When a disciple asked Jesus to teach them to pray, Jesus included a request be made for the kingdom promised by the prophets (Jer 23:5, Dan 2:44, Is 9:7) to be established. That this was imperfectly understood can be seen in the expectations that many had (Mat 18:1, Act 1:6, Lu 14:15).

The common idea of the kingdom that was held seemed not to include the promises of a new covenant (Jer 31:31). There were to be supernatural changes in the people of Israel (Jer 31:33-34). This change requirement seemed to have not been understood by Nicodemus (Jn 3:3-10), but was expected to be known (Eze 36:25-27).

There was an idea of a Messiah that was to come (Is 59:20-21). However, there did not seem to be an integrated view of the kingdom, Messiah, new covenant, and the changes that would be required. It was also poorly understood that the Messiah would be put to death and be resurrected in spite of prophecies (Is 53, Dan 9:26, Ps 16:10, Ps 118:22).

After Jesus ascended into heaven there was still an opportunity for Israel to accept the new covenant and kingdom until the destruction of the Temple in 70AD. During this time there were two gospels (Gal 2:7). The first gospel was the kingdom offer to the

nation of Israel. The offer of the kingdom to the nation of Israel was legitimate, the potential was there. As time passed and Israel seemed disinterested, a second gospel was introduced by Paul, that of individual salvation offered to both gentiles (Rom 11:11) and those of Israel. Even though Jesus foretold in a parable that the end would come with three years and then a year off and then the end (Luk 13:7-9), when the Romans came in 66AD and took off a year in 69AD, few saw the connection.

Jesus told the Pharisees that the kingdom would not come as they expected (usually kingdoms were established by conquest). Jesus said that the kingdom was in their midst (Luk 17:20-21). Both John the Baptist and Jesus proclaimed that the kingdom was “at hand”. What was needed was similar to how the first covenant was established (Ex 19:8). God made an offer and it was accepted by the nation. The difference here was that at the time of the first covenant the people had just finished observing the plagues on Egypt and the destruction of the Egyptian army. Their descendants were not interested because most were concerned with their daily activities and their leaders were openly hostile to Jesus.

Jesus told Pilate that his kingdom was not of this world. Many people have taken this to mean that his kingdom was un-worldly or simply spiritual. However, a better understanding might come from con-

sideration of the Greek word Kosmos (world) which has a main component that of order or structure. If we consider that Satan sets the course of this world for now (Eph 2:2), we might see that the structure set by Satan needs to be changed before the kingdom of God can be established.

That it is the structure of this world that needs to change can be born out when Jesus further tells Pilate that if his kingdom was of this world, he would have an army to fight for him (Jn 18:36). We get a deeper insight into this combative character of the world from Daniel. Daniel describes history from his time to ours using the illustration of a statue (Dan 2:32). The various kingdoms and empires he describes have conquest as their common theme. It is the destruction of this statue (Dan 2:44) by the Messiah that represents the change needed for the establishment of the kingdom.

The Greek word "basileia" is translated kingdom, but in Greek had more of the reign of a king in mind than a political or geographical entity. This is why Christians today can be said to have been placed in the kingdom (Col 1:13). However, the physical kingdom will wait until Christ returns and establishes it.

The “stone” that will destroy the statue is the same stone that the builders rejected (Ps 118:22, Luke 22:2). The supernatural gifts that were experienced by the early church were just a sample of what the new world would be like (Heb 6:5). The writers of the New Testament all expected that this transition to the “new” world would happen in their life time. However, they did not appreciate that it was predicated on the nation of Israel accepting the new covenant. As a result, desperate circumstances will arise in the future, even more severe than those surrounding the flight from Egypt, whereby those of Israel that survive will gladly receive her king (Is 66:8).

Therefore let us join with Israel in earnest prayer, “Thy Kingdom come”.

What is the Christian Advantage?

Most people who are religious inherit the tradition from their parents and it is often seen as an integral part of their culture. Few sit down and make an intentional selection of a religion. Some may move from one flavor to another, but seldom is consideration given to selecting a religion on the basis of what it offers.

Most religions are presented as transactional where something is done in order to get something in return (usually something beneficial in the next or after life). Philosophies are often more centered around this life. The Greeks had Hedonism (the unabashed pursuit of pleasure), Epicureanism (the moderated pursuit of pleasure), and Stoicism (the pursuit of virtue). Today the western influence of secularism is transitioning many from the world of religion to the world of philosophy.

In the Roman empire there were to be found numerous religions and philosophies. Yet even in spite of periods of intense persecution, Christianity flourished and grew. One might consider that there was more to Christianity than just the transactional promise of avoiding hell and going to heaven.

People of the time usually lived out their lives where they were born. They were intimately known

by everyone they knew so that one who lived a life in the pursuit of gluttony, drink, or lust were known as such. When such a person became a Christian their life was freed from the compelling power of sin. If they also took advantage of walking by the spirit, they could be observed to demonstrate a change of character consistent with godliness.

It was the undeniable demonstration of a changed life that persuaded many to become Christian even at the risk of the loss of property or even one's life. One did not have to summon the iron will of the Stoic, virtue could be obtained by a new life in Christ. Satan, who sets the course of the world (Eph 2:2), has made sure that people do not know each other as intimately as they did during Roman times. Mobility, hectic schedules, consumptive selfishness, and impoverished families work together to mask the character changes to be found in those that become Christian.

Christianity still offers these advantages and perhaps while less noticeable in a world of endless diversions and unrestrained selfishness, they are perhaps even more needed. Loneliness would be expected following the decimation of the family, yet he who walks with Jesus is never truly alone. Access to the wisdom of God, freedom from consumptive selfishness, discernment regarding worldly seductions, and true fellowship with other Christians can offer soul-satisfying fulfillment especially to those most harmed by this brave new world.

In addition to all of the present advantages, being excused from judgment by having all of one's sins forgiven and the prospect of eternal life makes a compelling case for the advantages of Christianity.

How to Become a True Christian

The title alone should stir controversy. This is not the intent, but reflects the confusion regarding what it means to be “saved”. Almost anyone can join a Christian church and after following their requirements be declared a Christian. This is usually taken to mean that one is destined for eternal life in heaven and escaping being tormented in hell forever. Considering that some may be mistaken about their eternal destination (Mat 7:22-23), it can be useful to see what the bible says.

First we should consider that entering the kingdom was different for those of Israel than salvation is for us today. Israel could obtain a degree of righteousness by following the law that was given to their nation by God (Eze 18:21). There was a degree of faith buried in the keeping of the law. This can be seen as some who kept the law were not acceptable to God and others who were not as observant were justified by repentance .(Luke 18:10-14). By the time of Jesus, faith was more specifically shown to be a requirement for Israel (John 8:24, James 2:18). Works and law keeping were part of what was required of Israel in addition to faith. For the faithful remnant of Israel there will be a transformation to enter the kingdom that Jesus told Nicodemus that he should have known about (John 3:10, Eze 26:24-28)

Because Israel was still failing to respond to the kingdom offer just after the time of Jesus, Paul was called to bring the gospel of salvation by faith to gentiles (Acts 26:14-18). This was a different gospel from that to the nation of Israel (Gal 2:7). This had an initial purpose to provoke those of Israel to jealousy (Rom 11:11). However, there was a longer term plan as well. If Israel still failed to repent and receive the kingdom, gentiles would still be able to come to faith until such time a faithful remnant of Israel would be restored (Rom 11:12).

For gentiles and individual Jews who received the gospel Paul preached, they would be placed into the body of Christ (1 Cor 12:13) and be sealed with the Holy Spirit (Eph 1:13). This is what is available to all today. To take a look at how this works, we can see that God's grace is available to anyone who receives it by faith (Eph 2:8-9). The result is being "saved". This condition (being saved) has several elements such as eternal life (Rom 6:23), fellowship with Christ (1 Cor 1:9), fellowship with others who are also in Christ (Eph 4:2), having sins forgiven (Eph 1:7), access to wisdom (Eph 1:17), and the work of the Holy Spirit to make us better people (if we allow it) (Gal 5:16, 5:22-23).

If we receive salvation by grace through faith, faith might be seen as the conduit by which this salvation is accomplished. The next question would be how is

this faith established. We can see from the fact that one is more likely to trust (have faith) in his parents than a used car or insurance salesman. This is because faith (trust) is extended in proportion to that which is seen as true. There can be a depth to trust that is sometimes illustrated using the example of a tightrope walker about to cross over Niagara Falls on a tightrope pushing a wheelbarrow. He asked a man in the audience if he believed that he could do it, to which the man answered "Yes". He then asked, "Are you willing to ride in the wheelbarrow".

Faith is not so much something that is summoned by strength of will. Rather we are told that it comes from hearing the word of God (Rom 10:17). One might ask why all who hear the bible do not then come to faith. We see an example with the sower given by Jesus. In this parable he tells his disciples that not all of Israel that hear about the kingdom will be inclined to accept it. This is a good parallel to explain why different individuals are unmoved by the word of God and do not come to faith. He uses the example of seed as representative of the word of God and different types of soil as representative of the differing conditions of human hearts. Those that are of the right condition can receive the seed (word) and it will grow to produce a harvest. While some soil is so hard it is impervious to the seed, others are lacking water or choked with weeds

(worldly concerns). When Jesus told Pilate that all who were “of the truth” would hear his words (John 18:37), it might be seen that being “of the truth” is an example of “good soil”.

There are a variety of things that people can trust in such as uncertain riches (1 Tim 6:17), chariots (strength and power, Psa 20:7), influential friends (Luke 16:9), education (John 3:10), and popularity (John 12:43). People can live lives of consumptive indulgence where faith (trust) is simply the assumption that one will always be able to find sources of stimulation. Regardless if expectations are short sighted or based on long term projections, most people are not concerned with or interested in ultimate truth. For them relative truth is often the assurance that they can get what they want.

When one considers that God is truth and his word is truth, ultimate truth might be seen as that which defines reality and is absolute and unchangeable. It is this absolute quality that makes God and his word worthy of trust (faith). The relationship between truth and trust (faith) establishes how we come to faith and are able to receive the salvation that God offers by his grace.

Children are perhaps best able to receive the word from parents they trust. Not yet having developed much cynicism, they may be better positioned to

fully trust in what they are told is true. This can work against them if what they are told is true is not actually true.

There are some people who experience a life changing event such as a death, incarceration, divorce, loss of employment, or other intense emotional experience that can weaken the grip an established view of the world can have. This can open an opportunity to consider something new when that which had been previously trusted in fails. For example, the person who has had as his primary goal in life the group achievement of some group objective, may be jettisoned from the "team" when he was no longer needed. When everything one has assumed and counted on fails, there can be an openness to consider alternatives.

Some people are raised with specific instruction in life that is never fully accepted. These doubts and uncertainties can remain dormant or be brought to the surface by circumstances. If sufficiently bothersome, these can motivate a person to question and search for answers.

Regardless of if one is raised in truth, driven to it, or searching for it, there is a condition of "being of the truth" that inclines one to recognize it or discern when one is getting closer to it. In physics, this is called resonance. However, for the individual seek-

ing a truth in which he can trust, there are obstacles and difficulties that can impede a response of trust (faith) to the word.

The first category of obstacles is false teaching (Acts 20:30). These teachings are designed to misdirect people (2 Tim 3:7). These teachings are devised by Satan, but promulgated by those who may be sincere, but do not know any better. The result is often people thinking they are Christian but not of true faith. This causes significant confusion both within and outside Christian circles.

A second category of difficulty is human inertness. Inquiry can require effort and possibly raise objections from others. Some are even inhibited to put forth the effort of mental inquiry. Complacency can be seductive.

A third category of obstruction lies with a substitute “truth” as can be found in most colleges. Evolution (there is no God), relativism (there is no right or wrong), psychology (do whatever feels good), and Marxism (smart people should control everything) constitute a core curriculum that has turned many away from truth and undermined and destroyed the faith of many.

Paul and Thomas had real life encounters with Jesus, so that their faith (2 Tim 1:12), John 20:29) was solidly built on personal experience. Even those who walked with Jesus after his resurrection had this experience upon which to build their faith (Luke 24:32). It is understandable that today those who have only the bible or the testimony of friends and family may have weaker faith.

Faith can grow and strengthen. This usually happens in two ways. First, one comes to see with increasing certainty that the gospel is true and reliable. Paul sums up the gospel in his first letter to the Corinthians;

Moreover, brethren, I declare unto you the gospel which I preached unto you, which also ye have received, and wherein ye stand; By which also ye are saved, if ye keep in memory what I preached unto you, unless ye have believed in vain. For I delivered unto you first of all that which I also received, how that Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures; And that he was buried, and that he rose again the third day according to the scriptures: And that he was seen of Cephas, then of the twelve: After that, he was seen of above five hundred brethren at once; of whom the greater part remain unto this present, but some are fallen asleep. After that, he was seen of James; then of all the apostles. And last of all he was seen of me also, as of one born out of

due time. - ! Corinthians 15:1-8

Secondly, everything else becomes seen as sadly falling short of truth. Increasing clarity and discernment allows one to become detached from the influences of the world (1 John 2:15-16), the flesh (Gal 5:16), and the schemes of Satan (2 Cor 2:11). This increased discernment is expected as one grows in faith (Heb 5:14). As one sees the world in truth, the truth of the gospel becomes even more clear and the sure foundation for increasing faith.

Artificial Intelligence

Over fifty years ago I was working with others on a large computer system. Access to the system was through a terminal and keyboard. As a practical joke on one of the guys we changed the error message in the code to read “It must have been Joe who typed in that messed up message” When Joe sat at the terminal he eventually got a keystroke wrong and the message came up. He knew that it was not the computer that was teasing him.

Technology has advanced in the last fifty years. Now it is routine for people to talk to their cell phones and receive information. Since what is heard is usually taken as truth, those who control what is said have unprecedented power. Joe knew that it wasn't the computer that was giving him a hard time. However today most people have no idea that the thing talking to them is constructed and programmed in a similar way.

In the past in order to manipulate someone through lying you had to actually talk to them. With mass media came opportunities like advertising which could be used to sway large numbers of people in whatever direction one wanted. However, advertising campaigns were limited in their effectiveness because a single message may not be as effective for everyone in a group. With microchips capable of

synthesizing the human voice, the effectiveness of person to person lying can now be more fully simulated.

The effectiveness of a lie is in proportion to the trust one person gives another. Most people trust the information they get from a search engine or web site that always seems to be helpful. The trope of a country bumpkin being robbed in a visit to the big city has an application here. Being unaware of potential harm makes one vulnerable. Many people rely on physical “tells” that can raise suspicion of lying or misleading communication. These are absent with AI.

There are additional vulnerabilities as each of us has peculiar idiosyncrasies that are deduced from the searches and inquiries we make. These are accumulated to build a model of us more in depth than a best friend would know. The obvious use of this information is targeted advertising as we can be moved in directions that will profit others. However, as many companies have shown themselves aggressive advocates for various political and social issues, it should be expected that those who control access to information will do so in a way that achieves their objectives. Customers become simply pawns to be manipulated to achieve desired outcomes.

In primitive societies a priestly class would arise that would declare the favor or disfavor of the gods. It was an interesting scam in that even if they made predictions that did not come true, they could blame the people for having made some failure. In this way whatever they said could be managed. These “priests” could live labor free off the productivity of those they manipulated. Manipulation was achieved by control of what people thought was true.

As a society we have already come to the point where a high percentage of the population actually believes men can become women and women can become men. This is a populace primed to be told what is true by machines programmed to lead the gullible. The solution is real truth which is getting increasingly hard to find.

Creation Scenarios

When considering God, often questions arise as to why he created us in the way he did. By hypothesizing alternatives, one can begin to see that there were not a lot of other options. If God creates beings with eternal life, they will be with him forever. One can then ask what sort of people would you want to be with forever.

1. Robot scenario. God could have created people who never sinned and always did what they were supposed to. However, this would have made people little different from any other machinery.

Since giving people free will is essential, and since people will always choose to use free will against God, it can be interesting to speculate how else things could have been configured.

2. Spoiled children scenario. Many people complain that God created a world that is difficult, painful, and has suffering. If God created a world where everyone could have everything all the time, we would turn into the sort of monsters that unlimited selfish consumption can drive one to.

3. Persuasion scenario. If God used miracles, provided detailed explanations, and demonstrated his plans, people would set themselves up as judges of

God. Human life (in contrast to angelic life) consists of learning as we are born ignorant and without skills. However, since a third of the angels (who have more full understanding and knowledge) still rebel against God, it would seem that no amount of education would be sufficient.

4. Achievement scenario. God could have made eternal life available to those whose efforts (intellectual, endurance, or compassion for example) met some threshold of acceptance. However, this would only fill heaven with the boastful.

5. The Purgatory scenario. God could have instituted a system of painful rehabilitation that would motivate people to somehow become more worthy of eternal life. However, many people do not reform regardless of the degree of pain experienced.

6. Universal scenario. If God were to give eternal life to everyone, heaven would be populated with the same selfish people we see today. He could change everyone into robots, but then what was the purpose in having us live our former lives.

7. The faith scenario. By having eternal life predicated on faith, God is able to have people willingly surrender their pride and selfishness (a by-product of trusting in Christ rather than trusting in self). This is made available to all who value truth. Those who spread delusions, lies, deceptions, and false realities serve to filter out those who do not seek truth.

In order for the faith scenario to work, God had to send Jesus to pay for the sins of the world. Salvation could then be offered to anyone who trusted in Jesus by faith. Since Jesus had paid for all sins, he would be just to judge the works of those who were not interested in faith or even hostile to it.

Free Will

One view of Christianity (Calvinism) is that God determines every aspect of life. He chooses who will be saved and who goes to hell in addition to even the smallest aspect of life. At the other end of the spectrum is what is often called Open Theism where God is detached and simply watches the actions of each person. This spectrum is often called determinism versus free will.

That God does not control every action and event can be deduced from the many admonitions and exhortations made of Christians to stir themselves to seek maturity and to avail themselves of the resources they have been provided. This would be unnecessary if everything was decided by God. Conversely the many exhortations to prayer would also seem unnecessary if God remained aloof and uninvolved.

To observe the high percentage of those claiming Christ but are dormant and inert to the point where they are indistinguishable from non-Christians, one might suspect that God is quite distant. However, one might also conclude that God is seemingly distant for those who neglect him and first seek after the world or the flesh. For those who show Christian love (selflessness rather than emotion) have God more active in their lives (Rom 8:28-29).

Those who are unsaved can find a distant God who allows almost any behavior up to a point. In Romans we learn of a condition (holding the truth in unrighteousness) where God takes an active role with individuals. Two examples are given in chapter one. The first are the unnatural desires as a consequence for worshiping the creature more than the creator. The second example is a reprobate mind as a consequence for rejecting even the knowledge of God. These lives are set on a trajectory of self-destruction by God and perhaps serve as a warning to others against using free will to distort truth (hold it in unrighteousness).

It would seem that all people are allowed to use their free will (up to a point) including harming themselves and others. It would seem that even those who claim Christ are allowed to ignore God and follow selfishness (however, many of these may not actually be Christian). Perhaps the chaos resulting from the selfish use of free will creates such difficulties as to make what God offers more attractive. To surrender selfishness and trust in Christ opens the door to eternal life and provides access to truth and wisdom that allows us to better navigate this present age.

The Christian can have God actively working in him to conform his will to that of God's (Phil 2:3). This may be as the result of the work of the Holy Spirit (Gal 5:22-23). However, the Christian has the freedom to ignore or even halt this work (1 Thess 5:19)

Free will is a gift that most people usually use to create the illusion that we can chart a course away from God, make our own plans, and try to build a world of our own. "Success" is often measured in comfort, pleasures, and material resources. Often these do not satisfy but briefly. Also, they often come at a cost to be paid at a time of judgment (Luke 16:25).

God offers the opportunity to receive enough wisdom and truth so that we can use our free will in accordance with what he would have for us. This is not so much a surrender or abrogation of free will, but rather the intentional alignment of it with the will of God.

Here I Stand

The title phrase should be recognizable to Lutherans as it is a famous quote of a statement by Martin Luther. In using it he declared his opposition to some of the teachings of the Roman Catholic church. His courage was undeniable in that the Catholic church had a record of brutality against those who opposed their teaching. However, even the Catholic church eventually changed some of the more egregious errors (such as selling indulgences) as a result.

Today the “here I stand” attitude is often less an incremental step towards truth in the face of death than a Pharisaical (self-righteous) declaration of preference (this is what I believe, so I am right and you are wrong). This is often found as the cause for religious disputes (1 Cor 3:3-4). In addition, it is a sign of immaturity.

A pastor on a Youtube video once commented that he received a telephone call regarding a series he had done on the book of Daniel. The caller asked him what he thought the fourth kingdom was and the pastor answered, “Rome”. The caller then hung up. The pastor said, “Don’t hang up, if you have a different idea, I am interested to hear it”.

This represents an often missing element in Christianity today, the openness to inquire. There are sev-

eral reasons for the reluctance to grow in understanding.

1. Questioning can be unsettling and uncomfortable.
2. Fear of being mistaken or tricked.
3. Fear of exposing ignorance.
4. Fear of questioning a denominational package of doctrine.

The basic gospel is Jesus died for our sins and rose again (1 Cor 15:1-4). It is trusting in this that gives salvation. Everything else about the bible, Christianity, how we should live, and what is expected of Christians should be open for discussion. Being presented with a doctrinal “package” is like being told that someone else has done all the thinking for you. While seemingly efficient and attractively easy, Christianity was not supposed to be accomplished by specialists. We are all expected to grow into Christ-likeness (Eph 4:14-15).

There are a couple of problems with denominational doctrinal ‘packages’. The first is that they are static and imply that they are the end of all knowledge. This inhibits both questioning and further learning. Secondly, they often become elevated even over the bible. It is all too human to reduce things to per-

functory systems. This makes things easier, however, when one considers how many in Israel failed to recognize Jesus as their Messiah, one begins to see the dangers in a religion run as a system.

Rather than being steadfast and resolute in one's religion, having steadfast faith in the gospel and the freedom to continue to explore, question, and seek deeper truth in the bible can contribute to one's Christian maturity. The benefits of maturity are seeing truth so clearly as to avoid being taken in (Eph 4:14), free from contentions (1 Cor 3:3), becoming a better person (Gal 5:22-23), and better able to help others (2 Cor 1:4).

Learning and growing is a dynamic Christian faith. Being planted in a system that someone else has determined restricts one and may even present something other than the gospel of Christ as the basis for faith.

Christian “Commandments”

Some Christians try to define Christianity in terms of what is and is not allowed. For example, smoking, drinking, going to movies or playing cards are sometimes put forth as prohibited activities. Sometimes these restrictive measures are made with the best of intentions. However, a what might be called “legalist” approach to Christianity can actually divert people from Christ like the rule following of the Pharisees (Matt 15:9) which even made them hostile to Christ.

There are admonitions and exhortations made of Christians, but they are less specific requirements than they are principles that we are to learn how to incorporate into our daily lives.

1. Love one another. (Rom 12:10)
2. Don't live for yourself (2 Cor 5:15)
3. Don't be conformed to the world (Rom 12:2)
4. Be thankful (Col 3:15)
5. Walk by the Spirit and not the flesh (Gal 5:15-16)
6. Be peaceful if possible (Rom 12:18)

7. Have the mind of Christ (humility) (Phil 2:5-7)
8. Work quietly and industriously (1 Thess 4:11-12)
9. Put “on” Christ (Gal 3:27)
10. Put “on” virtue (Col 3:12)
11. Make no provision for the flesh (Rom 13:14)
12. Be filled with the knowledge of God’s will (Col 1:9)
13. Pray (1 Thess 5:17)
14. Prove or test all things (1 Thess 5:21)

From this partial list we can see that it is not as specific as the law which was given to Israel. The law was not possible to keep and served to show those of Israel that they needed a Savior (Gal 3:24-25). For Christians today, we are placed into the body of Christ and are sealed with his Spirit. Israel was to demonstrate their faith by keeping the law. Christians can remain immature (babes, 1 Cor 3:1). However, there is an expectation that Christians should desire to grow in their faith.

Christians can consider that they have met some “Christian” requirements such as learning the Cate-

chism, being baptized, tithing, saying a prayer, being the member of a church, etc. The problem is that these accomplishments are similar to how the Pharisees saw themselves, as complete.

There can be an element of pride that is fostered in an accomplishment system. If allowed to grow, it can lead to contempt for others (Luke 18:9). The “commandments” for Christians are more things to be kept in mind when considering what words to say or what actions to take. They are less a checklist for accomplishment than a reminder of how we should be living.

It is important for Christians to be immersed in God’s word (the bible) so that the numerous admonitions and exhortations continuously work to influence our daily lives.

Anxiety

Anxiety can range from a slight apprehension to a crippling paralysis. It can be neurological in origin or arise developmentally in disadvantageous circumstances. It can even be useful if it provides a sense of caution in a dangerous environment.

Sometimes anxiety can produce OCD like symptoms in which a person keeps anxiety at bay by familiar or repetitive actions. The comfort of the familiar can become a prison in its own right. For this reason it can be beneficial to attempt to occasionally intentionally to do something in a different way. This can, while perhaps uncomfortable, help a person keep “prison” doors open.

A type of anxiety like selective mutism can be location dependant (such as school vs. family environments) or can be individual related such as with a parent, boss, teacher, or cop. Anxiety can even be topic related such that things like religion, politics, or even something preferential like a favorite song can be seen as being “attacked” the response to which can be retaliation.

Most anxiety is dealt with through avoidance. However, being aggressive or assertive can also be used as a defense mechanism keeping others away. Most people with anxieties leave childhood without much

conscious control of their actions. The development of automatic protection mechanisms is often seen as just one's "normal" personality. The adult with these mechanisms may not even realize how they have come to dominate his life.

The person who is introverted or reclusive may find that social encounters produce the anxiety that he prefers to avoid. However, there may be a longing or desire for a relational connection that seems to produce an anxiety of its own. A solution to this dilemma is to stop thinking of people as a monolithic social construct and experiment with encounters with individual people who may not have as much of the anxiety producing characteristics that others may have.

A person who had a bad experience may reflexively act to avoid circumstances where that experience could be repeated. This reflex may operate by producing anxiety whenever even consideration is given to anything similar to the previous experience. Much of anxiety mastery lies in exercising manual control over reflexive defenses.

Anxiety mastery often begins with gaining a more complete understanding of the anxiety defense mechanism, its triggers, and what conditions allows it to dissipate. This knowledge is useful to construct experiments that can modify triggers and responses.

For example, a person who is anxious in social situations may pick a particular store clerk to experiment with using brief humorous statements and see if over time an anxiety response can be reduced. These sort of experiments can be useful to begin to take manual control over one's life.

One might find a clue to overcoming anxieties from the bible verse;

There is no fear in love; but perfect love casteth out fear: because fear hath torment. He that feareth is not made perfect in love. - 1 John 4:18

However, one has to understand that the "love", which is defined in 1 Corinthians 13:4-7, is essentially, selflessness. The idea being that as Christians transition from the destructive aspects of living for self to the Christ emulating process of living for others, fear has less of a grip on a person. The word "perfect" should be better understood to be "complete".

This might be understood by those who have been in combat and come to be resigned to the fact that they will probably be killed. That sort of condition can make many of the things that cause others anxiety seem irrelevant.

Being able to change perspective such that what one fears is less intimidating, is a good way to begin to get control over anxieties.

The Godly Life

Many people see Christians as hypocrites. This is often because many Christians present themselves as “godly” only to stumble in sin. Some mistakenly think that they can achieve “godliness” in their own strength by being “good” and resisting sin. This is a mistaken application of what the bible calls “the flesh” and can frequently result in failure. The bible has two verses that directly apply to the godly life;

For the grace of God that bringeth salvation hath appeared to all men, Teaching us that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly, in this present world; - Titus 2:11-12

Yea, and all that will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution. - 2 Timothy 3:12

We are told that Christians “should” live godly in this present world. It seems to be a matter of choice. It also seems that those who would chose to live godly “shall” suffer persecution. It would also seem that there would be little incentive to live a godly life. Jesus is our example of someone who lived a godly life and he was put to death at age 33 at the instigation of people who thought they themselves were “godly”.

At the time of Jesus it would seem that the people of Israel divided themselves into three groups. The biggest group was the general populace who seemed to consider godliness an option for those who were extra spiritual like the Pharisees. The Pharisees themselves, and the few like Anna and Simeon who actually were godly. Christianity today seems to have followed a similar pattern.

In praying to God the Father for his disciples, Jesus gives a good picture of some of the elements to be found in godliness;

I have given them thy word; and the world hath hated them, because they are not of the world, even as I am not of the world. I pray not that thou shouldest take them out of the world, but that thou shouldest keep them from the evil. They are not of the world, even as I am not of the world. Sanctify them through thy truth: thy word is truth. As thou hast sent me into the world, even so have I also sent them into the world. - John 17:14-18

There are two salient points that can be taken to have application for us. The first is the utter incomparability between godliness and the “world”. While we may have to live in the world, the Christian should be constantly aware of its hostile and corruptive nature. Secondly, being sanctified (set aside for a holy purpose) is accomplished through immersion in God’s word.

While not specifically mentioned in the prayer of Jesus, being freed from the influence of the flesh allows one to walk by the Spirit (Gal 5:16). Immersion in God's word provides sufficient appreciation for, and knowledge of, truth such that one can see his own need to reject the influence of the flesh.

The disciples would have the Holy Spirit to instruct them (John 16:13). For Christians today, we have the Holy Spirit whose work is to make us more godly (Gal 5:22-23) as long as we do not "quench" the Spirit (1 Thess 5:19). Through immersion in the word of God we grow in our knowledge of truth.

This greater insight gives us the understanding we need to abandon our connections to the world and our indulgence of the flesh so that by walking more and more by the Spirit his work in us opens the door to a godly life.

Test Everything

Prove all things; hold fast that which is good. - 1
Thessalonians 5:21

The word “test” was not used in English until after the King James bible had been written. The word “prove” is a good substitute in that it carries much of the same idea. Paul gives this instruction to the Thessalonians along with others at the end of his first letter to them. Christians today can also make use of this instruction as a way of making sure one is not deceived.

These were more noble than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness of mind, and searched the scriptures daily, whether those things were so. - Acts 17:11

Luke records in Acts that the Bereans were more noble than those in Thessalonica because they searched the scriptures to see if what they were told was true. This process of comparative examination could be called testing. The measurement standard of God’s word seems to be a good way to determine if something is true.

The bible calls four things “truth”, the bible itself (John 17:17), God the Father (Titus 1:2), God the Son (John 14:6) and God the Holy Spirit (John

16:13). For truth to be truth it has to be absolute and unchangeable. The historically recent advancement of relativism (there is no right or wrong) has undercut the foundation of truth for many such that today some even believe that men can become women and women can become men. While it is true that people can mutilate themselves to become sad parodies of the opposite sex, their DNA does not change. To encourage people in these delusions is cruel especially when half of them, when faced with the truth of reality, will try to kill themselves.

The world is filled with all sorts of assertions that are often taken as truth. In the movie *Caddyshack* a character declares, "I have to go to college" to which another character asks, "What, is this Russia?". If one begins to question the assertion that going to college is necessary (or even beneficial), one might consider that associating with the arrogant, putting oneself in debt, exposure to harmful philosophies, and the corruptive indulgences found in college may not be worth the chance of a higher income (Matt 16:26). This process of analysis can represent what is meant by "prove all things".

Sadly the process of “proving” is perverted when something like a bible fragment is used to defend a particular fleshly (as opposed to spiritual) undertaking. For example, taking native Africans into slavery and justifying it as for their own good when it was really for the economic greed (idolatry, Col 3:5) of the buyer is an example of this sort of perversion of truth. One cannot “prove” anything without an uncompromising appreciation for truth.

Jesus was called a “stumbling stone” (1 Peter 2:8). Jesus said himself he would bring division (Luke 12:51-53). This is because Jesus is truth. When faced with truth, people will pick one of two directions. They will either chose humility and truth or those beliefs that benefit them or will make them feel good. Those who value feeling good more will not be able to “prove all things”.

“Until Christ be Formed in You”

Paul in writing the Galatians describes this condition which he expects to occur with them. The Galatians had begun their Christian life on the right path, but had allowed themselves to be diverted to follow a path of works directed towards the Jewish law. This phrase used for the Galatians speaks to a vulnerability of new or dormant Christians to error.

In Paul's letter to the Ephesians we get a picture of Christian maturity (Eph 4:13, 15). This idea of “Christ-likeness” being expected of Christians might seem strange to those more familiar with denominational Christianity. Franchise brand Christianity can offer a package of doctrine and a set of requirements that imply assurance of a “ticket to heaven’ upon completion. For example, baptism, church membership, tithing, saying a special prayer, repentance, or making Jesus lord of your life can be presented as criteria. Once the minimum requirements have been met, one may be assured that there is nothing left to do.

The Galatians had also been assured that once they completed certain criteria that they also could be assured of their destination. In addition to new Christians being vulnerable to deception as were the Galatians, we find that Christians who have failed to mature are also vulnerable to contention with other

Christians (1Cor 3:1-3). In addition to the natural human tendency to remain at rest, modern Christians today through years of watching TV, sitting in classrooms, and even listening to preachers, have developed an additional passivity that further inhibits active seeking of Christ-likeness.

In Proverbs chapter 2:1-11 a description is given regarding obtaining wisdom and discernment. In it are the following verbs; receive, hide incline, apply, criest, liftest, seekest, and searchest. This level of initiative is also implied when Jesus told his hearers to enter in by the straight (narrow) gate. He said that few would “find” (implying active seeking) it. That modern Christianity often seems to be presented free of difficulty and with only minimum requirements was captured in 1843 with the publication of “The Celestial Railroad” by Nathaniel Hawthorn. In it he writes of a modern improvement parallel to Pilgrim’s Progress, a railroad that offers a fast and easy trip to supposedly the same destination.

Christians can be reluctant to consider any program of spiritual maturity (Christ-likeness) because significant effort such as with athletic achievement is anticipated. However, Christianity offers improvement results greatly aided by God himself, the only requirement is for us to stop that which hinders God. For example, our walking by the flesh hinders his Spirit from being able to make us better people (Gal 5:17, 22-23). Our attachments to the things of this world can prevent a renewed mind (Rom 12:2). Our pride can resist the humility that is the “mind of Christ” (Phil 2:3-7). Our selfishness can resist the selflessness that defines Christ (2Cor 5:15).

Perhaps the greatest hindrance to Christ being formed in us is neglecting our connection to God through his word. More than an historical narrative or story book, God’s word is active (Is 55:10-11, Col 3:16, Heb 4:12). God’s word is truth (John 17:17). It is the word of life (Phil 2:16). Christ is even called the word of God (John 1:14). The path to Christian maturity is not one of complacency, comfort, dormancy, or neglect.

Anti-Semitism

A recent poll showed 67% of young people hostile to Jews and Israel. One commentator speculated that it was those who administer the educational system that have infused young people with their poisonous attitudes. Prior to WWII biology was often seen as the determining factor in human behavior. After the exposure of the horrors of the Holocaust, people mostly saw in developmental environments and education an explanation of human behavior.

Perhaps a too often overlooked aspect to human behavior can be found with Satan. He sets the course of the world (Eph 2:2), holds captive those who do not believe (2 Tim 2:26), and has eager and willing followers (John 8:44). Satan does not need people who worship him, read the Satanic “bible”, or even believe he exists. He can introduce an idea, have it spread, and stimulate those he controls who hear it to accept and advance it.

I had a friend who was liberated from one of the concentration camps in Germany at the end of WWII. He said that no one knew what was actually happening to the Jews. This would indicate that at that time Satan was able to stir up a general hatred of Jews, knowledge of the actual actions taken would have been a “bridge too far” for the German

people. We are now almost 100 years since the first stirring of the Germans against the Jews took place under the Nazis.

According to the bible, there is still in the future a period called the time of Jacob's (the earlier name of Israel) trouble (Jer 30:7). The antichrist will make a treaty with Israel for seven years then break it in the middle and apply his full fury to Israel. It is unclear if the war against Israel described in Ezekiel 38-39 happens at this time as well. It should not be surprising that since God chose Israel as the nation he will use to bring the knowledge of him to the whole world, that Satan would use every tactic he can against them.

It does not matter if the message Satan wants his followers to accept is illogical or untrue. It will be accepted simply because Satan wants them to accept it. He does not have to persuade them. First with books, then with newspapers, then radio and TV and now with the Internet, Satan is able to get his ideas spread widely and quickly. We should expect a much wider and rapid growth of anti-Semitism than has been seen before.

Anti-Semitism is not the only lie Satan has working in society. One can see that he has also worked to break down families. One result is that as he isolates people they become even more dependent for information on those he uses to spread his lies. He can create anxiety and fear at a moments notice and make people act against others and their own best interests.

As more and more people abandon Christ and no longer have access to the truth, we should expect the world around us to grow darker. Satan now has the technological tools to enslave the world even to the point of controlling who can buy and sell. Those he does not need he allows to pursue paths of self-destruction such as with drugs. As he tightens his control over the world, those who still seek Christ may find persecution equal to that Satan has always desired for the children of Abraham.

What is God's Will?

The question of what is God's will specifically for a particular individual arises fairly often. However, as much as some would like specific individual instructions (like who to marry, what job to take, or where to live) we at this time only have what might be called guidelines that we are left to apply. The nation of Israel was given ten commandments and approximately 600 laws which rabbinical scholars expanded to thousands of laws in the Mishnah and Talmud. Regardless of their best efforts, not every life contingency can be covered by a law. If it could, God would have created robots.

We know that God created two types of beings, humans and angels. The angels were created all at once and with what we might assume to be full understanding. Both groups were given free will. We can infer that about a third of the angels rebelled (Rev 12:4). Humans were to come into being sequentially each born in ignorance. We do not have any indication of a plan to redeem lost angles, but we can know that God had a plan to redeem lost humans from before creation (Eph 1:4). Jesus told the Samaritan woman that God seeks those who worship him in spirit and truth.

We might assume that by giving us and the angels free will, God had hoped that we would chose to be

faithful to his way of running the universe, selflessness. One can observe in Satan and his angles as well as with most humans that the pursuit of selfish interests is a consumptive hunger that is never satisfied. Rockefeller was once asked how much money was enough. He answered always just a little bit more.

The opposite of the darkness of selfishness is the light of selflessness which we see in God (1 John 1:5). Light is an example of selflessness as it radiates outward giving illumination (showing truth and reality) as well as warmth (vitalizing energy). Christians are specifically called to this (2 Cor 5:15).

We can learn quite a lot about God's will by extracting principles from the law for Israel (such as don't kill, steal, or covet) and Paul's exhortations (such as love one another, pray without ceasing, and walk by the Spirit). However, if we take a step backwards and look at a bigger picture, we can get a context in which to place what we can learn about God's will from his word. The law given to the nation of Israel was useful in, not so much obtaining correct behavior, but in showing that we were not intended to be perfect by the law. Truth shows us we cannot keep laws (Gal 3:24, Rom 7:21). This is similar to human development in that a child needs the restrictions of rules, but as an adult has to be able to govern his own behavior.

We find an extraction of principles (reflecting the will of God) in the bible (Matt 22:37-40). As Christians, we have the advantage of the work of the Holy Spirit of truth within us. This allows us to grow in our understanding of God's will (Rom 12:1-2) (although this can be hindered by pride (Rom 12:3), we can reduce the selfish influence of the flesh (Gal 5:16), and become more open to seeing what we can do for others (Phil 2:2-5).

By looking at the ten commandments we can see how important it is to put God highest in our life, that coveting is very harmful to us, and that we shouldn't hurt others. This alone helps us be able to apply God's will on a daily basis. God's will is not so much found in specific instructions, but rather in the selflessness of love (1 Cor 13:4-7) and the reflex of a heart in which his Spirit dwells and has the freedom to work.

Dying to Self

He that loveth father or mother more than me is not worthy of me: and he that loveth son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. And he that taketh not his cross, and followeth after me, is not worthy of me. - Matthew 10:37-38

These words of Jesus often cause consternation. The word for love used here is *phileo* (brotherly love or affection). This carries more of an emotional component than another word translated elsewhere as love, *agape* (self-sacrificial love). It is reflective of what one values. This can be seen when Jesus also described who was unfit for the kingdom because they had competing interests (Luke 9:59-62)

While Jesus was offering the physical kingdom to the nation of Israel in fulfillment of prophecy, most people were uninterested because their daily lives had become more important to them than being faithful to the God who created their nation (Luke 19:44, 13:34). The reference Jesus makes to a “cross” is interesting because it is the other side of the “coin” that Jesus told Nicodemus, when he told him that he must be born again (John 3:3). Jesus was referring to the prophecy of Ezekiel (Ezk 36:25-27) where God describes what has to happen for those of Israel to enter the kingdom.

In order for something to be “born again” to something new, something old has to die. For Christians today outside of the promises to Israel, Paul describes it as putting on the “new man” and putting off the “old man” (Eph 4:22-23). For us the difference is that this is something we have to choose to do. For Israel, this is something that God will do to them. For both us and Israel it is a transition from living for self to living for God and others. A picture of this transition can be seen in the biological order God built into nature. When people grow out of childhood into parenthood, they transition from living for self to living for their children. Sadly many still live for themselves at the expense of their children.

Christians however do not automatically have a selfless life. We are told that it is expected (2 Cor 5:15) and we are exhorted to abandon the selfish desires of the flesh (Rom 8:13). We are even told how to accomplish this (Gal 5:16). Paul wrote about the frustration he had trying to keep the law only having the power of his flesh (Romans 7). He ended the chapter by asking who would save him from “this body of death”. The answer is found in the next chapter as Paul describes the life in the Spirit that one can expect when one becomes a true Christian.

Without the power of the Holy Spirit that Paul describes, one will find trying to be free from the desires of the flesh as frustrating as Paul did before he became a Christian. A person today may find his Christian walk similarly frustrating if he assumes he is a Christian because he was raised in a church or if he is a Christian but has never tried to walk by the Spirit. One becomes a Christian by trusting in what Jesus did on the cross to pay for his sins (1 Cor 15:1-4). One walks by the Spirit by prayer, bible study, and seeking truth. As one grows in discernment through practice and matures in faith and understanding, one has access to increasing wisdom and the attraction of the flesh diminishes.

Choosing to actively seek truth leads to Jesus who is truth (John 14:6). Jesus is the ultimate example of selflessness (John 10:15, 13:15). We are called to be like him (Eph 4:13).

The Father of Lies

Gen 3:4 *And the serpent said unto the woman, Ye shall not surely die:*

Joh 8:44 *Ye are of your father the devil, and the lusts of your father ye will do. He was a murderer from the beginning, and abode not in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he speaketh a lie, he speaketh of his own: for he is a liar, and the father of it.*

In the movie *Advise and Consent*, Henry Fonda played a character that asked his son to tell a caller that he was not home. His son asked him why he was lying to which the character responded its not a lie if the person you are telling knows it is a lie. In the TV show *Seinfeld* the character George Kas-tanza known for his ability to lie tried summoning his expertise to tell Jerry Seinfeld how to beat a lie detector. He said, “It’s not a lie if you believe it”.

In a way, these examples illustrate how accepting we are generally of that which is not true. It is almost expected that what is portrayed in advertising or told by salesmen should be suspect. There is almost a spectrum from those who speak what they have been told and believe that is in error to those who seek to benefit from their deceptions. Social media pages are almost always examples of little

“Potemkin Villages”. It has been said that because men have a visual orientation and women have a hearing orientation that women wear makeup and men tell lies.

Humans have been given a choice. We can choose to follow God by trusting in Christ or we can live for self. The angels were also given a choice. Satan was said to be perfect until a point where he departed from God (Isa 14:12-14, Eze 28:13-17). In a way, Satan represents the consumptive darkness of self. Those who also follow this path can be said to have Satan for a “father”. This relationship may go further than just similarity perhaps entangling even Christians (2 Tim 2:26). Those who are disconnected from truth are vulnerable themselves to deceptions (2 Tim 3:13).

We are told that we are not unaware of Satan’s schemes (2 Cor 2:11). He sets the course of the world with the ultimate objective of trying to be like God and ruling the earth, however, using lies, force, and coercion. We can get a small picture of what the world will be like for the brief time of Satan’s administration (2 Thess 2:9-12).

We can know that God is light and there is no darkness in him (1 John 1:5). God looks at humanity as a crop (John 4:35), seeking those who are drawn to light and truth (John 3:21). Satan seeks those he can

use. To this end he uses the attraction of comfort, ease, pleasure, and selfishness to draw people into constructing their own prison. The bible speaks of the dangers of pride, lust, and covetousness. These base motives are often what Satan exploits to draw us into captivity (2 Pet 2:19, 2 Tim 3:6).

Massive student debt justified by dreams of worldly success, marriages abandoned by dreams of sensual indulgence, and delusions of importance drawn from images of prominence and prestige all point to how easily Satan is able to use that which is not true to get us to move against our own best interests. The Christian who walks in truth and exercised discernment may be able to better avoid being sucked into schemes that advance Satan's plans (Heb 5:14).

Heb 5:14 *But strong meat belongeth to them that are of full age, even those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil.*

Feeling Good

There was a Mary Tyler Moore movie called “What’s So Bad About Feeling Good”. One might see in the title a theme for our society ever since the 1960s. Perhaps it can be helpful to ask if feeling good is an objective or a result. Seeking after feeling good as an objective is a little like putting the cart before the horse. If one lives a life of selflessness and raises a family navigating through all the perils of this life, one might find feeling good a satisfying result. If one pursues that which feels good as an objective, others tend to be seen as less important than satisfying one’s own need to feel good. The alcoholic and opiate addict are extreme examples of the self orientation to which this path leads. Even at a less intense level, one often finds that feeling good can be transient and lead to a consumptive life chasing a hunger that is never quite satisfied.

For Christians the “feel good” culture is especially dangerous. One is less inclined to grow in faith, discern deceptions, or seek after truth. There is an intrinsic opposition between truth and feelings. Truth is absolute, unchangeable, and reflects God, who is truth. Feelings are individual and resist truth (Jer 17:9). Christians are called to selflessness (2 Cor 5:15) to show a love that is essentially selfless (1 Cor 13:4-7). This requires us to forgo seeking after

what makes us feel good.

The path of truth does have good feelings that are consequential. However, these feelings are different than those that arise from the direct pursuit of feelings. The pursuit of feeling good is usually done to please the flesh. That the body enjoys pleasure and comfort is well known. What is less often sought are the good feelings that come from the Spirit (transcendent peace instead of comfort, joy instead of sensory stimulation, or the patient love of a mother for her child even when he has a tantrum.

The fact that one person likes classical music and another likes rap music and neither can understand why the other can tolerate their music preference indicates that we have a lot of freedom to select what we find enjoyable. Today many people slip into a comfortable marijuana haze as their years slip away, is not so different from an alcoholic haze, TV haze, or even a haze filled with various activities. It is similar to a very slow suicide because it results in the loss of eternal life. The rich man used to illustrate life after death in Luke 16 is told that in his life he had his comforts but now he has torments. This is even before any judgment and may suggest that the choice of a comfortable life now may contribute to significant discomfort after death..

For the Christian who truly trusts in the gospel and is placed in the body of Christ by the Holy Spirit there is no fear of torments. However, there may be shame at having wasted the opportunity to grow in faith, draw closer to God, minister to others, or even guide our children away from the deceptions of the world. (Rom 14:10, 1 Cor 3:15, 2 Cor 5:10)

Satan has designed the course of the world to be seductive to the flesh. We might think that because we have avoided “big” sins, that we have fulfilled all that God wants of us. However, if we can shake of the slumber that so easily brings us to Christian dormancy, we may be able to see the path the world is on and the destruction to which it is headed. This perspective alone may be sufficient to rouse us.

Eph 5:14 Wherefore he saith, Awake thou that sleepest, and arise from the dead, and Christ shall give thee light.

What is Truth?

Pontius Pilate did not appreciate the irony of his asking this question of the only person ever born that was truth. Since the bible only calls God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit truth as well as the word of God, we might conclude that truth is likewise absolute and unchangeable. It is ultimate reality and why God cannot lie.

For most of the history of the world the curse God placed on the earth impacted people's lives such that the brutality of nature, disease, and the difficulty of sustaining life kept most at least aware of the reality of God. With the Industrial Revolution, which began to collectivize people in cities and started the breakdown of the family, the impact of the natural world began to be put at arms length. As a result men began to see themselves as more significant than God.

As technology made life increasingly easier, people began to see truth as less about what was real and absolute and more about what made them feel good. Historically, periods of prosperity and ease resulted in weakness and indulgence. We can see this with Germany when the chaos of the 1920s was replaced with the order and prosperity of the 1930s, most Germans accepted Hitler as an "über menschen" (superior man) because they attributed their

better life to his efforts. At the end of a recent movie about Hitler's last days there was included an interview with the woman who had been his secretary. She commented at the end he was just some average guy and not the savior they had imagined.

The elevation of imagination and feelings is often a sure sign that one has diverted from truth. They often mask real dangers. In a way, it is a type of intentional blindness. Only a few generations ago saying something that wasn't true was the greatest social blunder one could make. Today saying something that makes someone else feel bad is the greatest blunder. Truth has been redefined as "that which gets you what you want". This is frustrating for those increasingly few that still seek truth. The majority that seek after that which makes them feel good and speak assertively those things that are false. If one seeking truth calls them on it, a rational dialog about what is true may be expected by the truth seeker, but more likely he is targeted as an enemy because he makes others feel bad.

Those who speak for truth are silenced. Lively conversations about why others hold differing views are not held. Even friends who unexpectedly discover differences retreat from certain subjects as if they were a minefield. Students direct their career path towards what will provide the most money as it is assumed that this will be the way to a more com-

fortable life However, it is seldom asked if comfort should be the highest human ambition.

Since truth is only found in God, distance from him is indicative of a degree of blindness. Consider Karl Marx who thought that it was religion that kept workers from rising in revolution against the ownership class. One might view his opposite in Adam Smith who saw in the various religious denominations the hope that Christianity would become anemic as those denominations surrendered their differences to be able to get along and thus stop being an impediment to business. Without knowing God and trusting in him, our distance from truth can cause us to trust in own ideas, imaginations, and ambitions which often lead us to destructive conclusions.

Christians should be at the forefront of those who stand for truth. Standing for truth is less about public demonstrations and confrontation and more about individual questioning, seeking, learning, and growth. In fact, without the pursuit of Christian maturity we can become as spiritually ignorant as the Corinthians. As we grow in the knowledge of God through his word, we can be free from the blindness and vulnerability to the lies of Satan and the deceptions of the world.

Then said Jesus to those Jews which believed on him, If ye continue in my word, then are ye my disciples indeed; And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free. - John 8:31-32

Agents of Satan

2Ti 2:26 And that they may recover themselves out of the snare of the devil, who are taken captive by him at his will.

After WWII a psychologist named Milgram constructed an experiment to learn why so many People in Germany went along with the extermination of Jews. His experiment consisted of a volunteer being told to give increasing voltage electric shocks to a subject (who could not be seen). The subject only pretended to be shocked. However, 85% of the people tested would give shocks up to lethal levels. He concluded that most people easily would consider themselves “agents” of whatever authority figure or organization they were a part of.

Seeing oneself as an extension of a group might be an explanation of “peer pressure” or gang culture. Public education systems may hold a key as to how people are so likely to serve the purposes of a group. John Taylor Gatto once compared public school to other large institutions like prison. For most of human history, children learned through various apprenticeships where active questioning and interaction were required. Apprenticeships were through family or family-like relationships. Classroom instruction does not foster interaction and children often learn to be passive objects serving

time finding greater opportunity for expression through a group perhaps even as a “replacement” family. The movie “Blackboard Jungle”, while not an accurate portrayal of post war adolescence, did capture some of the reaction people had to the changes they saw in youth.

In a family context children learn to curb the natural selfishness that we are all born with. Spending all day in a classroom is less effective. As a result, Children grow to place greater importance on sources of information from peers and social sources. In just a generation or two families are left with little to impart to their children anyway as a result of having been raised in the same system themselves. One can see how this played out in Germany in the 1930s, and not just with those who ran the gas chambers.

Having a compliant population is an advantage to one who desires to unify and control humans at every level. To achieve such control, it is also necessary to silence any voices that would speak for truth. To this end those who are able to discern truth and receive wisdom from God have to be silenced. This was accomplished by establishing schools and universities which were to be an alternative source of “truth” and where Christianity would first be excluded, then derided, and then come to be seen with hostility.

Today even the idea of an actual devil seems laughable or sadly superstitious to most. However, just a few years ago the idea of an entire population waiting to be told what to do by their cell phones would have been unimaginable. The only missing element is a digital currency without which one will not be able to buy or sell.

For those who follow Christ and have access to truth, seeing the world starting to advocate killing Jews again (particularly shouting “From the river to the sea” in support of Hamas) can be alarming. However, it is only the next step in the plan Satan has been advancing for centuries. Christian practice may have to transition (in the short term) to underground connections with other Christians similar to China, the old Soviet Union, or today’s colleges.

Church Attendance

A recent survey of 17,000 people in the US showed only 49% of Americans attended church services with any degree of regularity. South Dakota showed a better than average attendance rate of around 55%. However, one can see that regardless of the region, the decrease in church attendance is reflective of a larger disinterest in the things of God.

Most church services are reflective of what the Catholic tradition established. While the “mass” may not be performed in protestant churches, the pattern of a pastor (priest) giving a lecture is common. There can be varying degrees of ritual and sacraments, but by and large most denominational traditions involve driving to a service and singing and getting a lecture.

Many programs of church growth are marketed advocating elements that appeal to a consumer culture such as coffee bars, rock music, and even social activism. However, many pursuing these paths often fail to consider that a worldly appeal to the flesh can actually inhibit Christianity (1Cor 1:17, 1 John 2:16)). Perhaps some of the attendance decrease can be attributed to poorly executed attempts to imitate the world.

We can get a few glimpses of the early church in

the New Testament. Paul in addressing the chaos in the Corinthian church adds that women should be silent in church. Today this is almost universally seen as an attack on women rather than an appeal to order. His implication is more a rebuke to men for failing in their role to be teachers in the home. Often missed is the implication that the church service was interactive with question asking rather than a simple lecture format.

As typical church services turned from instructing Christians in how to grow in Christ likeness, they became less useful to adults. Perhaps their greatest contribution was Sunday schools where children could be introduced to Jesus and the gospel. However, children who fail to grow in faith often live worldly lives that also come to see little value in continued church attendance. One Lutheran pastor once told me that they lost 80% of their youth.

Most people receive their faith from their parents as a tradition. However, others can come by seeking and questioning. Martin Luther is an example of one who questioned. There can be a degree of animosity by traditionalists against seekers because those who question can be seen as attacking an established tradition. As a result, many (even those raised in a particular tradition) who question can feel unwelcome attending a church.

In a consumer society, Christianity in general seems to offer little of interest. Children raised in a church tradition often see little value as they grow older. Those who question can be made to feel unwelcome. In addition, Satan has set the course of the world (Eph 2:2) to make secularism into an alternative religion that appeals to comfort, ease, and pleasure. This new “religion” is based on doctrines such as evolution (there is no God), psychology (whatever you do to feel good is OK), relativism (there is no right or wrong), and the idea that “truth” is whatever you need to get what you want.

Churches of any type can have problems with personalities, doctrines, and structure. Perhaps least appreciated is structure. Run as an organizational system, a church may function with events, activities, classes, services and programs in a mechanical way that actually hinders the relational connections with others.

Perhaps the decline of church attendance is a good thing if it separates wheat from chaff. However, we should be prepared for increasing hostility toward those of us who desire to remain faithful to our Savior.

How Important is the Bible?

For many people raised in the Christian faith the bible is something they tried to read once and found it boring and difficult to understand. Much of it seems an historical account of the nation of Israel up until 2,000 years ago. Even the accounts of Jesus in the gospels can seem distant from us if not even disconnected. The idea that the bible could contain something useful for our everyday life seems at best unlikely and usually not worth studying because it seems so alien to our life today. It is often difficult for those outside of Christianity to see any value in the bible.

Most Christian traditions come to a point where doctrinal “bullet points” are extracted from the bible and presented to their members. This can be done to make the bible simple, remove the burden of study, or provide assurance that anything important has been taken care of by others. This approach, while common, fails to understand that the bible (God’s word) is more than a recipe, instruction manual, or historical record. It also has a supernatural aspect that is limited when so reduced.

God has a purpose in sending us his word (Is 55:10-11). It is useful (2Tim 3:16). It gives hope (Rom 15:4). It tells us about the failure of others who were supposed to follow God (1Cor 10:11) so that

we could learn from their mistakes. Most of the bible is a record of what happened to the nation of Israel. They were given God's law and discovered they could not keep it. Christians today are not required to try to keep the law (Gal 3:2). The advantage we have is the indwelling Spirit of God whose work in us (if we allow it) in conjunction with the bible can produce righteousness in us (Eph 5:9).

The bible itself gives us two examples of how to study the bible and neither one is similar to the classroom type instruction with which most of us are all too familiar. The first is the instruction that Jesus gave two disciples on the road to Emmaus shortly after his resurrection. The disciples remarked that their hearts "burned" within them as the scriptures were explained to them (Luke 24:32). This type of instruction is where a desire to understand is connected with the truth of the bible such that the pieces of what had been a puzzle come together in a picture of clarity.

The second method of bible study is more like an apprenticeship. Here the pieces of a puzzle fit together more slowly. As one grows in bible familiarity it can be used in a way that Paul wrote Timothy (2Tim 3:16). If one were to rebuke (call to notice) someone for doing something wrong, in order to "reprove" him one would have to have a standard of what was right to be the basis for correction. For ex-

ample, if a Christian brother were to comment on an opportunity to make some money at the expense of another, he could be shown (1Tim 6:9, 1Cor 6:7).

The Christian life is less about having the right rules to follow than extracting principles from the bible that can apply to all of life. For example, selecting a wardrobe that flatters or impresses can make some envious or ashamed. Selecting a wardrobe that does not call attention to oneself may take the feelings of others more into consideration. We can find in the bible a statement that the selflessness of love (1Cor 13:4-7) is a fulfillment of the law (Rom 13:19).

The bible might be viewed as God's pipeline to us. Through it we can receive knowledge, understanding, and wisdom. We can also grow in our ability to discern truth. All we have to do is immerse ourselves in it.

Forgiveness

There can be a lot of confusion regarding the subject of forgiveness. It can help to see it in context as the last step in the repair of a relationship that was broken by injury (either real or perceived). The degree of injury can run from the severe like child abuse or other criminal activity to something relatively minor like a verbal slight. Given the spectrum of injury and a range of reaction, it can be difficult to try to use a biblical “procedure” to achieve a remedy.

Relationships usually are best understood in the context of family. The bible describes those in the “family” of Israel and those in the “family” of the body of Christ. John tells the believing remnant of Israel that if they confess their sin, then God is faithful to forgive (1John 1:9). While this does not have direct application to the body of Christ (as Christians already have their sins forgiven), it does give a picture of a requirement for forgiveness. Both parties have to be on the same page. For example, David did not recognize how much he had harmed Uriah until Nathan confronted him (2Sam 12:10). That David then understood his sin can be seen in Psalm 51.

As the erosion of the family has accelerated over the last 100 years, we have come today to a state

where relationships in general are pretty anemic. In addition, most people today are reluctant to admit that they have done anything “wrong” much less ask for forgiveness. When considering the fact that so many people today are also “triggered” by the slightest perceived offense, trying to apply biblical principles of forgiveness can be difficult.

Just as there are some who would punch you in the face and then want you to apologize for hurting their knuckles, there are some that will never recognize their fault. Some in the church try to force a “confession” through confrontation. This is perhaps drawn from Galatians 6:1. However, this echoes Proverbs 26:4-5 where seemingly conflicting advice is given (answer a fool according to his folly in contrast with do not answer a fool according to his folly). The distinction here is to gauge the situation in terms of if it might be possible to help someone or not. Few like David can be confronted to recognize the damage they have caused. In general it is better to wait for the one who caused the harm to recognize it and ask for forgiveness.

The bible tells Christians (1Cor 5:9-12) not to avoid the sinful in the world, rather those within the church. This is because Christians should not have close relationships with non-Christians (2Cor 6:14). When Christians encounter one who calls himself a “brother” but acts like someone who is not, he

should be avoided. This implies less of a confrontational A person in life will generally suffer several “wrongs” and may never encounter someone who asks for forgiveness.

True “forgiveness” (the restoration of relationship) cannot be accomplished without the offending party desiring and asking for it. However, Much can be done on the part of injured party to reduce lingering effects. Burning and seething resentment and bitterness can be reduced by seeing the other party not as a malicious offender, but rather as someone who is ignorant and sadly unable to conduct themselves any better. This can help disconnect one from a desire for revenge as that only poisons ones life. Since Christ paid for all sin, he owns the right to execute judgment.

Rom 12:19 *Dearly beloved, avenge not yourselves, but rather give place unto wrath: for it is written, Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord.*

What Will Heaven be Like?

People can have a large number of differing ideas about what they are likely to find in heaven. For many the image of having wings like an angel and sitting on a cloud playing a harp comes to mind. Once a teenage boy asked me if there would be cars in heaven. I responded that without roads or gasoline, a car would not be much of an advantage.

After the future millennial kingdom (Rev 20:3) and the Great White Throne judgment (Rev 20:11) there is a condition called the “eternal state” (Rev 21:1). This is described as a new heaven and new earth. One characteristic of the new earth is that there is no more sea. It is interesting to note that entrance to this new earth is associated with the loss of memories (Rev 21: 4). This is an interesting statement because so much of our present life is structured by our memories. In trying to imagine what existence would be without prior memories, we might speculate that our faith, character, and beliefs might be all that survive the transition to our new environment.

It could be a mercy to have old memories removed because who of us in an environment of perfection would not be overcome by the knowledge of all the wrong we did and the right we failed to do. There is a description given to the city of a new Jerusalem that descends from heaven above. It is described as

without a temple because God and the lamb are its temple.

There is limited information available as to what life in the eternal state will be like perhaps because it will be so different from what we know today that we couldn't fully understand. We do know that there will be nations (Rev 22:2). While the sun and moon will no longer be needed, it is not clear if they no longer exist (Rev 21:23).

Perhaps one way to imagine the future state is to contrast the world today as directed by Satan (Eph 2:2) with the future state. Satan epitomizes selfishness and self-seeking (Is 14:12-14). The selfish pursuit of lust and pride sort of define this age (1Jn 2:16). Alternatively God, who is love (1Jn 4:8), offered Jesus to pay for the sins of the whole world so that those who trust in him could be with him forever in heaven.

Love is an interesting quality. The the bible defines it pretty much as selflessness (1Cor 13:4-7). Selflessness is what Christians are called to (2Cor 5:15). Jesus is our example of selflessness (Phil 2:5-8). We can have a taste of heaven whenever we experience compassion, love, mercy, or other acts of selflessness. In heaven the corruptive influence of selfishness will be absent (Rev 21:27).

So much of our life today is allocated to earning the money to buy food and pay the rent that it is easy to lose sight of that which has eternal value. Living a life of selfless love can seem as unreal as considering what heaven will be like. When we die today we go to be with Christ (1 Thess 4:14, 2Cor 5:8). At the return of Christ our new bodies will be spiritual and immortal (1Cor 15:53-54).

In a new world with no more curse (Rev 22:3) we might expect the weariness of the flesh and the toil of each day to be absent. We might not need sleep. From our current perspective this might suggest boredom, however, with the record of those others that serve the Lord there does not seem to be the discontent that some might imagine (Rev 22:9).

Knowledge, Understanding, Wisdom

One might see in these attributes a sort of hierarchical sequence, when one has knowledge he can then achieve understanding and then have the wisdom to act upon what he understands. Sadly, this process also has a worldly counterpart to what the Lord would have us learn. Those in the world are called “wiser” (Luke 16:8) than Christians in that many can figure out how to advantage themselves at the expense of others in pretty crafty ways.

The progression of learning that is available to Christians might be seen as starting with bible stories in Sunday school which begins to teach the knowledge of God, Jesus, and the history of Israel. We can grow in understanding like the disciples did when they had the parables explained to them by Jesus. However, wisdom is from God and through his Spirit which dwells with those that the Spirit has placed into the body of Christ through faith.

There is a degree to sequential attainment of knowledge, understanding, and wisdom, but they also overlap significantly. For example one can read the bible many times only to “discover” a meaningful verse that was overlooked in the past. It is expected that we will continue to increase in knowledge (Col 1:10) all the while we also increase in understanding and wisdom (Col 1:9).

The path of knowledge, understanding, and wisdom that is available to Christians is not available to others (1Cor 2:14). Those who have the wisdom of the world find that they might be successful in their schemes to satisfy their lusts, desires, and ambitions, however they may discover that the price they pay is very high (Luke 16:25, 1Tim 6:10). There is a degree of delusion that accompanies the “wisdom” of the world (Rom 1:22). This highlights a key distinction between the wisdom of the world and the wisdom from God, that of .truth.

With God, truth is absolute and unchangeable. In the world what is called “truth” is more of a tool to get what one wants. It can be used to deceive, blind, or comfort (1Cor 3:19). Perhaps a good first step for a Christian is to begin to appreciate how different the world is from that to which we are called (1John 2:16). Satan has designed the world to appeal to our flesh. Discernment is critical to the Christian to avoid those paths that would obstruct, hinder, and cripple our spiritual growth (Prov 16:25). Discernment is said to increase in proportion to “exercise” (Heb 5:14).

There are several ways Christians can increase in knowledge, understanding, and wisdom. Reading the bible is key. Prayer for ourselves and each other is also important. We sometimes can think of our

Christian life like school work, where only the smart can succeed in their studies. Christianity is not something that needs to be memorized to pass a test, it is more like an exploration with speculation and questioning. It can be like being engaged with puzzle solving.

Perhaps one of the biggest reasons many Christians come to see their faith as unrelated to real life is that they have not been shown that solving problems of understanding can be fun and profitable (Luke 24:32). Just being able to avoid some of the many deceptions of the world is a great advantage. I knew a woman who taught second grade. She commented once that the kids she saw as eager to learn in second grade seemed to be cynical, world weary, and disinterested by fourth grade.

We should pray that God would give us youthful hearts with a joy to question and explore the “why” of the things of God such that we might draw nearer to him in knowledge, understanding, wisdom and truth.

Darkness and Light

The bible says that God is light and in him is no darkness at all. It can be useful to consider what light is. Light radiates outward from a source. It brings warmth and illuminates what is around us. In a way it vitalizes and exposes truth and reality. We might consider “darkness” as represented by Satan in Isaiah 14 where his ambitions, lusts, and consumptive desires are listed. This gives us a picture of selfishness (darkness) contrasted with selflessness (light).

As infants we learn to cry to get food or to express discomfort. As we grow we can learn more subtle techniques to get what we want. Those who do not learn to use stealth, deception, and guile often end up being taken advantage of by others or in prison as the result of a poorly executed attempt to satisfy one’s desires. The nation of Israel was given laws to help them learn to limit the destructiveness of their own desires. Paul wrote the Romans about the difficulty he had in trying to keep the law, Man in his natural state has little to resist the power of what the bible calls the “flesh” (our inclination towards selfishness that is the result of our fallen state).

What changed almost 2,000 years ago was the offer of grace to those who trusted in the gospel of Jesus of his death, burial, and resurrection to pay for our

sins. In addition to eternal life, those who have faith are given the Holy Spirit by whose power we have the option to turn from darkness to light. This seems foolish to those who see greater comfort, pleasure, and advantage in self-seeking. The self-seeking of the flesh brings us into contention with others (1 Cor 3:1-3). Being able to transcend our baser nature is the dream of Buddhists and the Enlightenment tradition of secular liberals but is only actually achievable through the power of the Holy Spirit to those who are in the body of Christ.

Sadly few Christians show this transcendence in their lives. This is because many mistakenly claim to be Christian but have only accepted a "Christian" tradition, a belief (acknowledgment) instead of faith (trust) in the gospel, or have remained immature in their faith like the Corinthians. Compounding this is that few understand how isolated and ignorant we are of others in today's society such that we seldom know others well enough to observe what a real and mature Christian life can look like. In a world of growing darkness individual light is seldom not noticed much less its source.

False selflessness comes in many forms such as phony charities, the self-righteous and bullying indignation of the social activist, and even poorly thought out attempts of actual charity such as governmental welfare programs that result in ingratitude, hostility, and dependence. While the light of God can shine through faithful individuals, collectives seem only suited to serve darkness. Another distinctive between light and dark is that of the difference between the transient and the eternal. Sensations are often called transient (2Cor 4:17, Heb 11:25, 1 John 2:17).

Luke contrasts the “children” of the world with the “children” of light (Luke 16:8). The word used for “children” is *uihos* in Greek and is used to denote kinship of varying degrees. For those in Christ, we should seek to draw closer to the light of our Savior and walk less after the darkness of our flesh and the world.

Eph 5:8 For ye were sometimes darkness, but now are ye light in the Lord: walk as children of light:

True Riches

Luk 16:11 *If therefore ye have not been faithful in the unrighteous mammon, how will ye commit to your trust the true riches?*

The world we live in offers the potential for things the natural man desires such as wealth, power, fame, and pleasure. However, the Christian should be able to see in these nothing that satisfies or lasts. Consider a high school student who wants to find acceptance with a social group. He might seek approval by buying the right clothes, saying the right things, or mocking the targeted people. Even in the unlikely event he gains group approval, such acceptance is shallow, temporary, and ultimately unsatisfying.

It is true that those in the world look favorably on those who embrace its values (John 15:19). However, Christians should see themselves as living in a different world. Many in the world would see rejecting their world as crazy because it would mean the loss of advantages like wealth, fame, power, and pleasure. However, these “advantages” are consumptive and do not last. Moses made a choice to turn his back on these “advantages” because he sought something of greater value (Heb 11:25).

One might see in parenthood two different ways

that describe true versus false riches. It used to be that only the very rich could hire people to raise their children for them. However with public education, daycare, and social media, even parents who want to make an investment of themselves in their children find it difficult. Additionally, parents who themselves were raised in a similar system can find that they themselves have acquired little with which to invest.

Components of true riches are depth, that which lasts, selflessness, and that which is true. In the parable Jesus instructs his disciples that rather than use the resources of the world to gain an advantage in later employment, that those resources, if used to exhort others to faithfulness, would result in their being welcomed into the age to come.

Christians may not often consider that they are running an account (Phil 4:17). That we will be called to that account (Rom 14:12). We also will have that account judged (1Cor 3:11-15). While we live for now in a world that is transient, we will live for much longer in a world that is eternal. It is with this in view that we may make investments in those “riches” that last rather than investing ourselves that that which is only for a moment.

To be effective in true riches, we might consider using Jesus as an example (Eph 4:15). Jesus is called the word of God (John 1:1-4). It would follow that the more we immersed ourselves in the bible, the more we would be changed to be useful to God (1Thess 2:13). Additionally, Christians have the indwelling Holy Spirit. The Spirit would like to work in us to make us more Christ-like (Gal 5:22-24). Our participation in the work of the Holy Spirit is to not hinder him by indulging the flesh (Gal 5:16-17).

Satan tempted Jesus with all the kingdoms of the world (Luke 4:6). This may not have been as powerful a temptation as Satan imagined. One who can see truth would not find all that the world offers as that compelling. Especially for one who is truth (John 14:6).

Vain Imaginings

Rom 1:21 *Because that, when they knew God, they glorified him not as God, neither were thankful; but became vain in their imaginations, and their foolish heart was darkened.*

The word “vain” usually is taken to mean empty or useless. However, in this context we might also add “harmful”. Humans have the creative ability to imagine various things such as how an invention might work or how an artistic composition might be arranged. Sadly this capability can also be used to deceive ourselves. This deception can take various forms but often is done to give ourselves pleasure.

The bible warns us to not think more highly of ourselves than we ought (Rom 12:3). This is because distancing ourselves from truth can be dangerous. The bible often associates what is vain with deception. Self-deception is a sort of prison from which escape is difficult because one usually is unable to see any reason to escape unless reality brutally intrudes. For example, an alcoholic might make changes when he loses a job or his family abandons him. Similarly a person caught in self-pleasuring imaginings of popularity, wealth, or other delusions may only be free when he encounters some difficult reality.

Even Christians can fall victim to pleasure inducing imaginations, Consider the Christian who sees in every incident of life the providential hand of God. They may mistakenly see themselves as particularly pious when what they experience is the pleasurable sensation of feeling special. The prophet Elijah was feeling singularly special (1 Kings 19:10) and while God was trying to comfort him he also told Elijah that he had 7,000 people who could replace him (1 Kings 19:18).

God gave us feelings to enjoy life as well as to be a sort of fire alarm to let us know when things are wrong. However, It can be all too easy to let our feelings become predominant such that we are taken captive by our desire to feel good. Consider a dining companion who announced what was probably a commonly pious blessing at a meal with Jesus (Luke 14:15) only to be told a parable that showed that his “feel good” “piety” had led him to miss the reality of what to expect.

The drug addict or alcoholic might be an example of how the seductive nature of feelings can lead us incrementally to a condition where we are distant from truth. In a way, the drug addict or alcoholic has an advantage in that they may face physical consequences that can provide a “wake up call”. The person with vain imaginations may never escape. Consider the Pharisees who thought they were of superior righteousness. A lack of humility may be a good indicator that one is distant from truth.

While the verse from Romans talks about unsaved people who “hold the truth in unrighteousness”, there can be a valuable lesson for those in Christ as well. If we use our imagination to fuel pleasurable sensations, we can blind ourselves to truth and be ineffective or even in opposition to what our Savior would have for us.

The Mystery of Godliness

But if I tarry long, that thou mayest know how thou oughtest to behave thyself in the house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth. And without controversy great is the mystery of godliness: God was manifest in the flesh, justified in the Spirit, seen of angels, preached unto the Gentiles, believed on in the world, received up into glory. - 1 Timothy 15-16

Paul in writing to Timothy mentions a “mystery of Godliness”. It is inserted between describing how Timothy should act and a summation of God sending Jesus into the world. One might extrapolate that what was “hidden” (a mystery) was that the opportunity to obtain godliness was a result of what Jesus did.

We might see in what those saved by the gospel of grace (1Cor 15:1-4) have that was not available to Israel previously (Phil 2:13, 1Th 2:13, Eph 3:20). However, this is not so much bestowed on us as it requires our participation. Paul wrote in Romans chapter seven a painful recounting of the frustration he felt trying to keep the laws given to Israel. It was only after he received the Spirit of God that he was able to have success in “godliness”. This is recounted in Romans chapter eight as the work of the Holy Spirit that is now available.

One characteristic of God is light (1 John 1:5). We are called “children of light” (1Th 5:5). This is accurate in that as children, we are supposed to grow into the image of our parents (Eph 4:13). Since light proceeds outward from a source it can be seen as giving and selfless. As we grow in godliness we also shed selfishness to become more giving than taking (2Cor 5:15). This is accomplished over time as we allow the Holy Spirit to work in us (Gal 5:22-24).

One reason many Christians present no discernable godliness is that they are unaware of this mystery or that it is available to all who are Christians by faith. They have not taken steps to walk by the Spirit as opposed to the selfishness of the flesh (carnality). They remain Christian “infants” (1Cor 3:1-3).

For a Christian to make effective use of the mystery of godliness, he needs two skills. The first is the ability to discern events and people around him in truth so that wise choices can be made regarding paths to take, people with whom to associate, and how to conduct himself. The second set of skills are those that make accurate and deep assessments of ourselves. Honest self-assessment can only bring humility which is a sort of gate through which more grace can be received (Jam 4:6).

There is a level of activity over time required to make use of the mystery of godliness. This level is seldom reached with complacent Christianity. If one can resist the comforts of the world and see them as unappealing, one may be able to immerse himself in the bible, learn and grow in wisdom and understanding, and begin to apply this to his life. Otherwise, throughout eternity he may regret a significant missed opportunity.

Seeking Truth

Twelve years of public education tends to shape one to take in whatever is heard as truth. It can be comfortable to simply accept whatever is presented and one finds most others similarly inclined. However, in reading the bible one does not find sailing through life comfortably as the highest good. (3 John 1:4). One can even make a case that truth and feeling good are mutually exclusive.

Consider what is taught in school about history. We get a superficial, two dimensional, almost cartoonish presentation of people and events that a real understanding would show to be the complexity of the vain, selfish, greedy, and ambitious. A political TV show once presented a frustrated civil servant disparaging the public by saying that they just want to know “who are the goodies and who are the badies”. In a way this captures a little of the desire most have for comfort over truth.

It has been said that more people will respond to the gospel in prisons and hospitals than in country clubs. This can give a little insight into why someone would endure discomfort to seek truth. Prison and health difficulties are usually not sought, however, they can force one to confront reality in a way that makes them willing to hear truth.

Most Christians have inherited a family tradition of a religious practice. Often the routine of this practice comes to be a comfortable part of one's life. A few others may visit a church because they are seeking truth. Some are driven by difficult life circumstances while a few others might be driven by some internal need to resolve truth. The seekers may have the advantage over the inheritors as they subject what they hear to a critical assessment. The inheritors often simply assume what they have inherited is true.

A seeker can be unwelcome if his questions are unsettling. Many seekers simply search the Internet these days as it is easier than sifting through various denominational presentations of Christianity. However, it can also be lonely. A key component of Christianity was supposed to be relationships (us with God and each other). Questioning, seeking, evaluating are critical aspects to learning and growth. This also places the seekers in a more advantageous position than the inheritors.

If an inheritor were to want to start a program of growth (knowledge and understanding of truth), there are two paths. One is to resolve differences such as is baptism necessary for salvation (since there are denominations that have opposite answers). Another approach is to try to answer questions such as was the great commission given to Israel or the church? The more one reads the bible, the more one can find questions that arise. For example the Christians in Corinth are told that they will judge the angels as if they had already understood this. If this also applies to us several questions would arise such as when and under what circumstances would this happen, good or bad angels, and how could we judge anything without information as to who did what.

I can testify that having inherited a Christian tradition only to embark on a journey of seeking that the answers one finds are rewarding as one grows in finding and understanding truth. I would encourage inheritors to start seeking as the rewards of growing in truth can outweigh the comfort of complacency.

Judgment for Christians

Rom 14:10 *But why dost thou judge thy brother? or why dost thou set at nought thy brother? for we shall all stand before the judgment seat of Christ.*

Most Christians have some idea of what awaits them after death. It might be a cartoonish idea of playing a harp and sitting on a cloud. However, when considering what the bible says about it (1Cor 3:10-15), it would be advisable to apply what we can know about what awaits us to our lives today.

There are two possibilities described in Paul's letter to the Corinthians. Both speak of rewards the Christian might expect. The first is described as gold, silver, and precious stones. This reflects differing levels of reward for having built on the "foundation" of Jesus Christ that which abides. In contrast, wood, hay, and stubble are used to describe varying degrees of mistaken construction of the foundation of Christ. These are described as being burned up, yet the person still retains his salvation.

When considering how a Christian could come to a point so as to be so mistaken about what he was "building" that his works would be "burned up", we might consider some of the various ways Christianity is practiced and presented today. Some see

Christianity an opportunity to experience various sensations. These can be stimulated sensations in worship, the self-righteousness of both legalism and social activism, or the comfortable assurance that one has fulfilled all the requirements. These can represent a sort of consumer Christianity that is directed towards self.

Those who have an outwards direction to their view of the Christian life can also fall into a “wood, hay, and stubble” result if they, for example, give money that is not wisely spent, support that which is in error, or exhort others in error. While many can be misled into error, we each have the responsibility to question, learn, grow, and avoid error.

However, perhaps the greatest number of Christians will fall into a category not specifically mentioned, that of no rewards at all resulting from an inert Christian life. Many people inherit a Christian tradition that assures them of a rosy future based on various criteria the completion of which allows them to ignore any further application of Christianity to their life in any real way.

For those who have rewards of “gold, silver, and precious stones” consideration should be given as to how to build on the “foundation” of Christ. Many think in terms of money or labor when considering accumulating value to be given. However, a better perspective might be to consider that as we have been placed into the body of Christ and have his Spirit in us, we should walk after the Spirit and not after the flesh (Gal 5:16). This allows the Spirit to work in us to make us better people (Gal 5:22-24), and thus better able to offer service that has eternal value.

We are not given specific descriptions of the rewards we may expect, perhaps because we would be unable to understand them this side of heaven. However, Jesus describes in a parable rewards for those faithful of Israel as the rule of cities. While this might not apply directly to us, it might be indicative of greater responsibilities and opportunities to serve God.

Collectivism

Gen 11:6 And the LORD said, Behold, the people is one, and they have all one language; and this they begin to do: and now nothing will be restrained from them, which they have imagined to do.

In the course of human events God directly intervened to limit collectivism. It is true that a collective can accomplish more than a single person, however, God wanted us to rely on him individually and not be diverted towards our collective efforts. He made an exception in order to make a nation out of Israel to be used to bring the knowledge of God to the whole world. However, the Old Testament is almost a perpetual story of how the nation continually disappointed God.

Satan has made use of collectives as he sets the course of the world (for now and insofar as he is allowed by God). His ambitions are described in Isaiah 14 to rule the world. To do this he needs to leverage his influence through collectives. He has used the collective enterprise of Western Civilization to develop the technological tools he needs to attempt to control the world. Now that this end is in sight one might think he is having us in the West destroy ourselves so that we would not represent a potential obstacle to his plans for control.

Public education was perhaps Satan's greatest accomplishment towards collectivism. Children become shaped to take their place as willing components in a collective largely because of their school experience. Parents come to see "education" as they key to their children's potential success in life.

There are some "successes" to be had in collectivism. A few at the top can have larger incomes and more comfortable lives just as on a plantation field slaves could aspire to be house slaves.

Consider what economic collectives accomplish. There are no more mom and pop hardware stores, grocery stores, or pharmacies. Even doctors and dentists have been forced to collectivize. The family farm is more of a myth today as the modern equivalent of share cropping has emerged with those bidding for an opportunity to farm themselves becoming almost collectivized.

As bigger corporations purchase smaller ones, we are all being brought into one big collective that might be seen as when corporations more completely merge with the government. There are several effects of collectivization. Relationships become superficial and even infrequent. People become more dependent. A circumscribed life promotes less maturity. People become lazy and more self serving. Most bureaucracies in history can show the detrimental effects of collectivization.

Christians have often allowed their assemblies to become organizational systems run in almost mechanical ways with programs, events, lectures, and other scripted activities. The individual, while often cajoled on to some greater effort, is seldom engaged as an individual by someone who cares about them personally. This is perhaps one reason why so many are not interested in Christianity, because they see it as an activity rather than something transformational.

Pleasure

An experiment was conducted with rats such that an electrical wire was placed in the pleasure center of their brain and access given to a paddle that when pressed would give a brief electrical stimulation. The rats would starve to death seeking pleasure. The bible speaks to some who lives for pleasure as being “dead” while they live (1Tim 5:6).

The ability to experience pleasure is not bad in itself. However, the direct electrical or chemical stimulation of pleasure sets one on a trajectory that is generally self-destructive. Children begin life with a similar pleasure seeking inclination. Parents should help their children develop what is called “delayed gratification” such that they can chose to forgo momentary pleasure for longer term objectives. This opens insight into a characteristic of pleasure that is not often appreciated, that it can be configurable.

There are some that take pleasure in a job well done, while some others may take pleasure in getting an advantage over others or even actually hurting them. The values one develops often shapes how one experiences pleasure. God experiences pleasure when he sees those who show love, kindness, and faithfulness (1Ch 29:17). One can derive pleasure seeing one’s children choose to avoid bad

companions or make sound decisions. Much can be learned about someone from the choices they make that give them pleasure.

One can see how what one takes pleasure in is formed so deeply and over time that it can seem impervious to change when one considers a favorite sports team. One can take pleasure in their successes and feel discomfort at their losses. If one relocates to another city, slowly over time one might shift their allegiance to another team but it would be difficult. For many getting money is foundational to their value system. In a consumer society money becomes amplified in importance. A promotion is often seen less in terms of the work required than the monetary compensation.

Fame can also be sought for the pleasurable sensations anticipated by vanity. However, the reality of fame often becomes less pleasurable. Similarly lottery winners can find their relationships destroyed by what they thought would give them pleasure. More commonly, those who find pleasure in group acceptance can find themselves prisoners of the group. The saying, "Be careful what you wish for, you just might get it", reflects the often mistaken idea of what would be pleasurable.

Christians often do not fully recognize the degree to which our desires have been shaped by what is

called the world. Our actions may be shaped by what others believe more than what God would have. For example a parent may send his child to college with the full expectation that going through this door would give his child a happier, successful, and more comfortable life. He might be surprised when his child becomes a militant social activist atheist with a student debt that is almost impossible to pay off with a degree in art history.

David laments of previous generations that had not “set their hearts aright” (Ps 78:8). This speaks to the neglect to take control of what one desires and takes pleasure in. Christians today have an additional advantage over those of ancient Israel with the indwelling Holy Spirit that we do not have to fight an uphill battle within ourselves. We can simply chose not to walk after the flesh or take pleasure in short sighted indulgences (1Th 5:5-8). However, this requires us to be aware of ourselves and our environment and actively seeking to grow in wisdom and understanding.

The Use of Force

We are familiar with the use of force by our military and police. We are even familiar with the use of force with children to help them internalize external discipline as self-discipline. Some parents choose to indulge their children to such an extent that it becomes necessary for the police to apply force to them later in life. Force is necessary because there is that within all of us that would harm ourselves and others. In a society that is mostly Christian, the indwelling Holy Spirit can manifest through Christians to such a degree that many mistakenly come to believe that force is unnecessary. Many progressive ideas of the natural perfectibility of man are mistakenly drawn from observations of Christian behavior.

When looking at the use of force, it is not often that subtler forms are considered. Advertising is an interesting use of force in that it seeks to create a force within a person that will drive them to make a particular purchase. For example greed, vanity, or fear can be tapped into and a particular product of service can be associated such that making a purchase will (in the mind of the target) either acquire what is desired or avoid what is feared. Here the manipulation of someone is accomplished by creating a “reality” in the mind of the target such that the purchase seems not only logical, but even necessary.

Both the gang member and the salesman use the tactics they have available to them to get what they want. One may use a gun, the other may use persuasion, but both have objectives they are trying to achieve. If we consider the objective of God, we can see that he would have all people saved and come to a knowledge of truth (1Tim 2:4). However, even though God has all the power in the universe to accomplish his goals, he has allowed us the free will to ignore him.

When Jesus came to offer the promised kingdom to the nation of Israel, he did not use force. In fact, he even occasionally avoided clarity so that those who were unworthy would not understand (Matt 13:13). At first glance this may seem inconsistent with the objective that all would be saved. However, it might clarify things to say that the objective is that all would choose to be saved. However, the use for force (of any kind) would be antithetical to free will.

The “force” of God will be observed in his wrath. This can be seen with the flood. This force was not to persuade, convince, implore, or cajole. Rather God’s force is used to cleanse. Similarly the future tribulation will cleanse the earth of iniquity. This can seem unlikely to some in that God is not constantly pouring out his wrath on the wicked every

day. The bible describes a process of “storing up wrath” until a level is reached that triggers the dispensing of wrath. This delay allows people to deceive themselves into thinking that their choices have no consequence (Gen 15:16).

Consider the principle of land defiled by the shedding of blood (Num 35:33). When a people practice murder like those that worshiped Molech (Ps 106:38), the land accrues a debt that has to be paid. Since Jesus paid the full price for all the sin of the whole world, he has the right to execute judgment (Rom 12:19). Unlike children who are to learn from the force their parents apply to their actions, God tolerates our sin up to a point where wrath is poured out to cleanse.

People frequently ask, “If there is a God, why does he allow suffering and inequity”. The answer is that God tolerates (up to a point) the result of our own evil so that some may come to him in faith. For God, our ease and comfort is not the highest good. He did not design the world to be our amusement park. Rather it is an arena where we can discover that his way (selflessness) is a more sure thing in which to trust that selfishness (which is self destructive)..

What is Love?

This word has caused a lot of confusion as it can mean several different things. Basically it can refer to an emotional condition with elements of desire, expectation, affection, anticipation, and even lust. This state seldom lasts and is often what is meant by falling into and out of “love”.

For the Christian the word love means less of what happens to you and more what you decide. The Greek word eros is used to describe the sensations that many associate with the English word love. The Greek words philo adelphous refer to brotherly love. The Greek word agape carries with it a more noble aspect that can be seen when the bible defines it in 1 Corinthians;

1Co 13:4 *Love suffereth long, and is kind; love envieth not; love vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up,*

1Co 13:5 *doth not behave itself unseemly, seeketh not its own, is not provoked, taketh not account of evil;*

1Co 13:6 *rejoiceth not in unrighteousness, but rejoiceth with the truth;*

1Co 13:7 *beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things.*

This gives us a picture of the choice to put others ahead of ourselves. It may be that the KJV translators chose the word “charity” to translate *agape* here to differentiate it from the more sensual aspect of the English word “love”. In a way it is a picture of the love God has for us. People often accuse God of being cruel because of all the suffering and inequity in the world. However, he “beareth” all things (the consequences of our evil) because he would see some of us turn from sin to faith.

The passionate sensations often called love seldom retain their intensity. Some chase after new sources of sensation with serial adultery as if they were drug addicts looking for the next fix. Those who desire to build a marriage and family need to understand that feelings can be variable (come, go, and come again), the choice to extend what might be called self-sacrificial love is the real foundation of a deep, lasting, and strong relationship. Two people interested in giving to each other will have a happier life than two people who only seek to take from each other.

While people can surrender self for another, it is generally uncommon and sporadic. This is where Christianity offers a real advantage. If allowed, the indwelling Holy Spirit works to make us more capable of real self-sacrificial love;

Gal 5:22 But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith,

Gal 5:23 Meekness, temperance: against such there is no law.

Both truth and love are crippled by what the bible calls the “flesh”. Our baser nature desires comfort and pleasure. This is what drives consumptive selfishness. This often distorts reality with delusion and deception. It can be difficult to differentiate when someone says, “I love you”, if they are experiencing powerful emotional sensations, attempting to deceive you, or are making a declaration of their desire to sacrifice themselves for you. This is where discernment and truth can be useful.

Tar Baby

In the Uncle Remus children's story about Br'er rabbit, his enemy Br'er fox is lured into arguing with an inanimate lump of tar dressed in clothes as if it were alive. The fox becomes so ensnared with the tar that he is unable to continue his harassment of Br'er rabbit. The phrase "tar baby" has come to be an iconic metaphor for a situation that entangles you.

Satan has made use of a human weakness to entangle Christians so that they are unable to mature. The weakness is our emotional nature (Jer 17:9). This portal to the flesh can stimulate self-righteousness and inhibit the honest self-reflection that can lead to maturity. It is somewhat similar to the Pharisees who thought they had their own righteousness and subsequently despised others (Luke 18:9).

Two polar manifestations of this effect can be seen with both liberal and conservative political philosophies. With one, a sense of superiority is maintained by seeing oneself as "loving, accepting, and affirming" of every self-destructive act of perversion there is. The opposite philosophy is one of a sense of superiority to those giving in to their indulgences. This duality might be seen throughout human history such as with the epicureans and the stoics.

Perhaps the largest group is one that avoids political contentions because of the personal discomfort it can cause. These people value comfort more than self-righteousness. As a result, there is no maturity because to question, learn, and grow would require an unsettling discomfort. The denominational approach to religion offers a soothing package from which one can draw assurance that everything is right and complete (regardless if anything asserted is true). While the indolent passivity of group identity does assure comfort, it can tend to contribute to conflicts between groups such as with Sunni and Shiite Muslims (most of whom might not be able to articulate their doctrinal differences).

Regardless of indolent comfort, vanity, or even contempt for others, our emotions can keep us walking in the flesh and the Holy Spirit can be unable to do much work in us. Tar baby entanglements are seldom recognizable for what they are. Jesus told his disciples that they would be killed by religious leaders who thought they were acting for God (John 16:2). We should take warning from how easy it seems that people can act so passionately against God's will thinking the whole time that they are doing God's will.

To escape a “tar baby” one has to first know that one is ensnared. This is made difficult because it can be difficult to consider that what one thinks may have been a deception. Emotions will resist (sometimes strongly) any suggestion that one is not “in the right”. Logic can overcome emotions but usually only slowly as one considers evidence and concludes that perhaps some change is needed. The Christian can be aided in this if he takes advantage of the clarity that can be imparted by the Holy Spirit of truth.

Then said Jesus to those Jews which believed on him, If ye continue in my word, then are ye my disciples indeed; And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free. - John 8:31-32

Fool's Gold

Dreams of easy riches often drive men during a gold rush. Unbridled ambition can lead men to acts of desperation, cruelty, and even murder. In a way what is hidden deep in our nature is exposed. We usually recoil from considering that we have such darkness in us. We should be thankful that in Christ we have the opportunity to transcend our fallen nature.

During the frenzy of a gold rush, men sometimes become blind to what is true. The mineral iron pyrite looks similar to gold and can be mistaken for it by one not looking closely or knowing what real gold looks like. In a way Satan has guided the world to offer a sort of “fool’s gold” substitute to what God offers. In response to the first humans choosing to sin, God put a curse on the earth not so much as punishment, but as a limit on the degree to which our own selfishness could carry us to destruction.

We can see what happens to people who live without the limits God placed in nature. The aristocracy and wealthy throughout history have shown the corrosive effects of prosperity both to individuals and societies. In such environments vanity, delusion, and greed can grow without restriction.

Satan knows that we are attracted to what is fast,

cheap, easy, and feels good. He structures his deceptions using what appeals to us. For example, instead of sinners in need of salvation, we are told that we are evolving and are better than primitive people in history. Instead of the self-sacrificial love needed to raise children, we are sold the idea that killing (IUDs and oral contraceptives) children with birth control is responsible so that we can live in prosperity. By using money as the measure of all things, other things like character, knowledge, self-discipline, and God become neglected.

The Internet and cell phones seem to bring in a new age of convenience. However, few can see that with the flick of a “switch” one can be completely cut off from society and the means to live (food clothing, shelter, etc.) (Rev 13:17). The Industrial Revolution and the advances in technology seemed to assure us that as humans we were on a trajectory towards utopia. The destruction of families, impoverishment of character, and the establishment of a seemingly permanent underclass all point to the possibility that the future is not as bright as some would have us believe.

It can be difficult for those who seek to carve out a life separate from the lemming like pursuit of a Potemkin future similar to the cardboard sets of the TV show Star Trek. The Christian view of the future should not be based on the false view of man's achievement, but on the payment for man's sin made by Jesus 2,000 years ago. Christians have the opportunity to have discernment and see the truth of man's miserable state apart from Christ. It can be painful to see so many caught in a tidal wave of deception, delusion, and desire that blinds them to the actual destination their path is taking them.

Christians have the opportunity to have real "gold" now as opposed to chasing after the deceptive "golden" future that always seems just out of reach. Serving the Lord by building on the foundation of Christ can accrue rewards that are called "gold" (1Cor 3:11-12).

What is Important?

Bill Cosby once observed that as an adult one has the ability to do what was only dreamed of as a child. He said that he could now walk into an ice cream store, put a \$10 bill on the counter and ask for 100 ice cream cones. (This was back when an ice cream cone was 10 cents.) This illustration captures a little of how much our values and desires change as we age. Many upon reaching adulthood think that they have finished changing. However, one learns throughout life that changes in perspective or understanding often leave us not only with different priorities, but also with regret.

Consider the gal who succeeds in marrying the high school football hero only to realize later that having waited for someone who was kind and had a sense of humor would have been a better choice. The guy with student debt for a degree in art history who found work as a welder may consider his youthful ambitions to have been unrealistic. The retired grandparent may regret not having invested more of himself and his time in his children.

Much of early adulthood is spent dealing with the consequences of debt, poor choices, and a hectic schedule. Often these choices were made independent of any input from the older generation. One reason for the reluctance to hear from those that are

older is that suggestions ring false to those that are younger because what they see now seems paramount. It has been said that there are two ways of learning, either through your own experiences or through the experiences of others. The experiences of others can be less painful for you if you are able to discern them correctly.

A drowning man may feel that a rope is the most important thing in the world, while a man that is bored might think that an amusing diversion would be the most important thing in the world. What one thinks is important changes with circumstances, age, and desires. A person who has no interest in eternal life may not be receptive to warnings that there could be painful consequences for a dissolute life. Even the person who trusts in Jesus for the ultimate salvation of his soul may not see any immediate need to live any differently than everyone else.

A young parent may see a task they are working on as important and the interruption by their child a frustrating intrusion. In a similar way some Christians see a call to a more active Christian life a demand of scant resources (especially time) in pursuit of that which is ill defined. However, just as younger people may not fully appreciate what they will value later in life, we Christians often fail to appreciate what will seem important as we both grow older and more understanding of our faith.

The writer of Hebrews describes spiritual maturity as a result of exercise (Heb 5:14). The folk song “Desert Pete” captures a little of the faith life where trusting that investing in spiritual growth will lead one to invest in that which will produce it. Perfunctory bible reading can be a good start. However aggressive questioning and digging into the word can accelerate learning. Many of us equate bible study with tedious memorization that was required of school work. However, reading God’s word facilitates God (through the Holy Spirit) to work in us to make us better able to discern that which is truly important.

What is Your Religion?

Earlier in history one's religion was associated with their ethnic group, region, or tribal identity. In today's mobile society people are often disconnected from past associations and come to see themselves more in terms of education, career, or special interest. In past generations people might have more identified as Lutheran or Catholic. Today even distinctions of Christian or Muslim are beginning to disappear. .

As technology and prosperity advance, so does consumerism such that one sees themselves less as a Lutheran or Catholic and more in terms of their favorite sports team, TV program, or leisure activity. When what we consume identifies us more than what we believe, have not we changed to a "religion" of consumption.

A "religion" often requires one to be willing to sacrifice money, time, and even one's life because the belief is held that something is worth more than self. Consumerism is an interesting belief system in that the priority of self is at the core. This is what makes it so attractive to our baser selves. The problem with "self" as a "religion" is that it is a hunger that is never satisfied. One becomes compelled to seek after more and more frequent things to consume. Like alcoholism there is a self-destructive

spiral where one ends up consuming oneself.

Often called “materialism” the consumptive life is the elevation of self and what self can acquire to consume. Similar to the concept of a “black hole”, the materialistic life is a sort of ultimate darkness. Because serving self feels good, this path can often be observed to elevate emotions and sensations that stimulate self. Perhaps most significant is the distortion wrought by seeing “truth” as whatever gets one what one wants, makes one feel good, or sustains comfort.

The idea that truth could be absolute and unchangeable brings often unwelcome light into the darkness of consumptive self-gratification. Most people do not think of themselves as similar to drug addicts or alcoholics however, they take such pleasure in their less obvious comforts that their reluctance to welcome truth is not always discerned. Even people who attend church regularly can place more trust in their social position, education, retirement account, or vacation home such that their “true” religion is materialism more than faith in their professed Savior.

We can draw a valuable lesson from the kingdom gospel offered to the nation of Israel. Jesus highlighted the notion of faith that they should have known all along (John 8:24). The nation had so focused in on law keeping that they needed to be told the importance of faith. James writes those of Israel to describe the importance of faith. He describes it further with an example;

Jas 1:27 Pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this, To visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction, and to keep himself unspotted from the world.

The gospel of grace that was offered to gentiles is different in that once a person trusts in Jesus and his death on the cross for our sins, he is sealed by the Holy Spirit into the body of Christ. For us the difference is that we do not need to show works to prove our faith. However, we can be mistaken that we even have saving faith. For this reason it can be a good idea to reflect on one's life to consider what religion we have actually been following, God or mammon (Matt 6:24).

Necessary Questioning

Our public school system tends to operate in an economic industrial fashion as if the children were tubes of toothpaste to be filled. One result is that there is a deficiency of critical thinking that leaves these children more vulnerable to deception than those who have grown up in environments where navigating duplicity, deception, and even well intentioned error are normal skills.

The common presentation of Communism and Socialism is the premise that everyone can have everything all the time. While sounding attractive, it can be useful to subject such assertions to questioning and scrutiny to see if they are actually true. A former citizen of the Soviet Union once told me of a common saying, “They pretend to pay us and we pretend to work”. Being familiar with proof that an assertion is wrong is very helpful.

Christians can be presented with numerous and even conflicting doctrines (teachings) and it can be beneficial to question even those teachings in which one was raised to assure that one is not mistaken regarding where truth can be found. This can be difficult because questioning is often seen as criticism and can trigger strong emotions.

Consider asking the question, “What is the future

for the nation of Israel?”. Some say there is no future, some say that Christians are now “spiritual Israel”, and still others say that a faithful remnant of Israel will receive their promised kingdom. One questioning the “God is finished with Israel” position might ask about all of the prophecies in the bible for Israel that have not yet been fulfilled. This is sometimes answered with the statement that everything was fulfilled in Christ. Here we are presented with an answer that is less than satisfying. This is a key point in the questioning process, that of how to evaluate answers.

Christians have the bible as a source of truth to which answers can be compared. However, this can be difficult when something seems to have biblical support. For example, prosperity Christianity can seem to gain support from verses in the Old Testament reflecting promises made to Israel. Knowing to whom a promise was made and under what conditions can very much aid in reducing confusion in using the bible.

Another method of evaluating something is to subject it to an almost mechanical modeling process. For example, if someone asserts the benefits of Communism, one can create a mental model of a system and see that how what one knows about people would not work in a Communist system.

In contrasting spiritual maturity with spiritual infancy we are told that discernment is developed through exercise (Heb 5:14). The tendency to be persuaded by various assertions is also compared to spiritual infancy (Eph 4:14). Constant questioning both of what one is presented and even what one has accepted is beneficial to sharpening discernment. This allows the discerning of what is true and is the path to spiritual maturity. Discernment is less about selecting a spiritual parking place than it is about a continual process of discovering increasingly deeper truths.

Science, so-called

O Timothy, keep that which is committed to thy trust, avoiding profane and vain babblings, and oppositions of science falsely so called: - 1 Timothy 6:20

The Greek word translated “science” in the KJV is “gnosis” in The Greek and meant “knowledge”. However, it was also used to describe the secret knowledge that initiates to any of thirteen various “mystery religions” around the Mediterranean Sea would receive. One might see a Satanic hand in the establishment of so many mystery schools such that when Christ appeared, the gospel message would seem to be simply just another mystery. These religions operated more like a Masonic lodge in that the practices, rituals, and secrets were not to be shared with outsiders.

When Christianity was first spreading another “religion” arose to try to hijack Christianity called Gnosticism. The term was used of “intellectuals” and the “secret knowledge” was often the result of contributions of those who had various “insights”. As a result, it came to appear to have diverse contributions such as from Buddhism to Neo-Platonism. It was perhaps an effective way to inject into Christianity some of the destructive components of the Greek Academy.

In Greek culture, which revolved around the “polis” (city), one’s prominence was determined by one’s family position and financial resources. One could also achieve a degree of prominence through oratory. The ability to persuade could gain one a reputation such that one could be hired to teach the children of the wealthy. Many were called “Sophists (after the Greek word for “wisdom”). It is from this name that the term sophistry comes down to us today meaning to deceive through the cleaver use of words. Plato objected to the Sophists because they were more pragmatic as opposed to a more noble pursuit of truth. However, Plato himself could be faulted for his advocacy of government by intellectuals such as himself.

As Christianity became collectivized in an organizational system, the church collected various intellectuals over the centuries. Instead of seeking the approval of the wealthy for employment as teachers, these new “Sophists” advanced themselves through the church bureaucracy. Francis Schaffer’s uses the date 1500 as when one can begin to observe what is called “science” as being divorced from Christianity. Deductions about the natural world were made that began to be collected as what we consider today as science.

There is that in creation that reflects the creator. By getting glimpses of truth through astronomy, chemistry, physics, and biology, we can see the hand of God. However, divorced from God, these characteristics (truth) of God were hijacked to build a credible foundation for a Satanic alternative to truth.

This allowed the legitimacy of God's creation to be used to support all sorts of foolishness that has come down to us today. We should remain aware that the lies that are perpetrated today might be packaged differently, but are still the same as that which was foisted through "mystery" cults and gnosticism. Satan does not limit himself to only one type of lie.

Professing themselves to be wise, they became fools, - Romans 1:22

Who changed the truth of God into a lie, and worshipped and served the creature more than the Creator, who is blessed for ever. Amen. - Romans 1:25

Triggered Christians

One of the most effective results of public education is a large number of people fearful of group disapproval. This pressure towards conformity was captured in the song “Little Boxes” by Malvina Reynolds in 1962. As Satan collectivizes the world, he needs people to be responsive to his instructions. Like the Stasi in the old East Germany many people see themselves as agents of the state to enforce the social order. For example, if one expresses an opinion on race, sexuality, religion, or politics, one is likely to get a public rebuke for saying something someone else does not like. This knee jerk reflex is called triggering and occurs as a person observes or even hears anything they do not like. Like an emotional land mine, they make themselves obnoxious when triggered by any one of a number of things. The fear of encountering one of these “weapons” inhibits a lot of potential discussion.

I had a great grandfather that was spit on by his sister because he married a Lutheran. Being triggered is not a new phenomena. However, Christians should consider if being triggered is an indulgence they should allow themselves. Those who retain the name Christian but follow after the world may see being triggered as the responsible act of a socially aware Christian. However, while being triggered may create pleasant feelings of self-righteous indig-

nation, it is still bullying. The Christian is not called to apply coercive force to get others to comply with one's desires or expectations.

Christians are encouraged to see their differences with other Christians in terms of weaker or stronger brothers rather than a "us verses them" dichotomy. Since it is in the nature of a denomination to present a package of doctrine as complete and correct that an adherent could see others as heretics. Interestingly, the word heretic comes from the Greek, *heresis* and simply meant the "divisions", that Paul spoke against (1Cor 1:11-13).

In addition to contributing to friction with other Christians, denominations can actually inhibit Christian maturity by assuring one that their brand of doctrine is complete. However, the Christian is only complete when he is like Jesus (Eph 4:13). If one cannot silence other views, one can avoid them to avoid being triggered. This can result in seeking a bunker-like enclave and the comfort that can be derived from association only with those with identical views.

If triggering is caused by encountering that which is different, perhaps a better strategy than either attempted correction or avoidance may be helpful. Resolving differences can contribute to growth in that one can apply reason to determine truth. For example one divisive doctrine in Christianity is baptism. One might feel that this sacrament is how babies gain eternal life, another might see it as an ordinance for one who has faith. Still another might see it as a practice for Israel in anticipation of an earthly kingdom. One has the option of seeking from the bible that which can shed light or one can remain entrenched with a particular tradition. The difficulty is that traditions are not necessarily correct (Eph 4:14, Mark 7:7).

It may be more advantageous for a Christian not to confront or hide from differences, but to investigate and determine what is true. Since God is truth, such an investigation will lead closer to him.

Christian Mystery

The word “mystery” is used in the bible to describe something hidden or previously unknown. Paul refers to the gospel of grace as something that had been kept hidden. There is much in the bible about the future of Israel that had been prophesied. Much of it has already come true. However, that salvation would be offered freely to all who trusted in Jesus because he paid the price for all the sin of the whole world was something that was not previously known.

One reason the sacrifice of Jesus was unknown was that if Satan had learned that Jesus would regain dominion over the earth (that Adam had lost), he would have never instigated his death.

But we speak the wisdom of God in a mystery, even the hidden wisdom, which God ordained before the world unto our glory: Which none of the princes of this world knew: for had they known it, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. - 1 Corinthians 2:7-8

Jesus told Nicodemus that to enter the kingdom he would have to be “born again”. This referred to the prophecy by Ezekiel that those of Israel would be changed (Ezek 36:24-27). The gospel of grace given to Paul for the gentiles was a mystery (Eph 3:1-4).

It was also a mystery that gentile salvation would also require a transformation (Col 1:27). Often called “regeneration”, this is when a person becomes a Christian he is placed into the body of Christ. It is this new life in and through Christ that allows us to regain the eternal life that was lost in the Garden of Eden.

While not a “mystery” in the biblical sense, many Christians are unaware of the continuing transformation expected of them after they become Christian (Rom 12:2, Gal 5:6, 2Cor 5:15, Phil 2:5, 1Tim 6:8-11, 2Tim 2:22). Many assume that if they do not steal, kill, or become alcoholic that they have met the full requirements for being a Christian. Christianity is not a matter of following a set of rules as it is more the daily application of principles. The Christian should be aided in his continuing transformation by the Holy Spirit that is all too often quenched (1Thess 5:19). The two ways we often quench the work of the Holy Spirit is to walk in the flesh and follow the course of the world.

In all fairness the individual Christian does not need to carry the entire blame for his spiritually impoverished state. Satan has worked for centuries to establish systems that are designed to keep people from becoming Christian in the first place and failing that, to divert Christians such that they remain ignorant and ineffective. This is why Christians often seem little different than anyone else, because what is available for them often remains a hidden “mystery”.

For I would not, brethren, that ye should be ignorant of this mystery, lest ye should be wise in your own conceits; that blindness in part is happened to Israel, until the fulness of the Gentiles be come in. - Romans 11:25

Another mystery to consider is that the gospel of grace for the gentiles is time limited. At some future point God will deal with the whole earth through a faithful remnant of Israel and they will be the nation of priests God had initially intended (Ex 19:6).

Are Christians Hypocrites?

The word hypocrite is from the Greek and was used to describe one who spoke from under a mask. Since this was a theater term, it also included the idea of internationality for the purpose of deception. Since Jesus used the word to describe the Pharisees, one would also include self-deception in the idea.

The bible does not describe Christians as sinless but rather having the option to lead better lives if they walk after the Spirit instead of the flesh. The idea that Christians sin less and are “better” often comes from Christians themselves who misunderstand Christianity as rule following. If a Christian claims to be better and then falls short, he is justifiably called a hypocrite. However, even if he does not apparently commit some egregious sin, he would still be a hypocrite.

Seeing the Christian life in terms of accomplishment or performance (also theater terms) can lead one to the posturing and affectations seen with the Pharisees (as well as actors). This is the sort of self-deception can lead to the self-righteousness that sees others with contempt (Luke 18:9).

In answer to the question, “Are Christians hypocrites?”, the answer is all too often for many, yes. Jesus even warned his disciples about this danger

calling it “leaven”. Leaven is the yeast that causes bread to become soft through the excretion of CO₂ gas. The phrase “puffed up” captures this inflated idea of self that can make an internal prison that is almost impossible to escape because it can feel good.

Some coworkers who knew I was a Christian asked me once to explain another coworker who made a show of his Christianity. I thought about how I could explain it and came up with the illustration that if you compared yourself to the worst person you knew, you might think pretty highly of yourself. However, if you compare yourself to Christ, you would come up with a more realistic opinion. Many people fail to appreciate how fragile truth is. Once the connection to truth is lost there is little to stop self-deception.

James Clavel once wrote about the Chinese that they had six different faces and none of them were true. This may be the result in living in a culture so brutal that any revelation of true thoughts left one vulnerable to exploitation, disadvantage, and even persecution. Even today Western society is tending in that direction As Christianity becomes increasingly less well thought of, one should expect to see less Christian hypocrisy because there would be little advantage in it.

In a way hypocrisy severs the connection to truth. As Christians are supposed to walk in truth, seek truth, and grow in truth, at best a Christian that shows hypocrisy is retarded in his development and at worst not even a Christian at all. One should be cautious as there would be judgment for those who bring the name of Christ into disrepute.

Having Children

For most of human history biological and romantic drives have produced children. While some may not have been able to have children, most were able to produce a surplus even with high infant mortality rates. There always have been those who either desire to avoid having children or once pregnant use whatever chemical or surgical means available to end a pregnancy. Some would even deposit their young children in an incinerator to placate a god Molech (Lev 18:21).

Only recently has the chemical technology been available to prevent pregnancy with oral contraceptives. However, while most think that this works by preventing ovulation, the abortive effects are not generally recognized. The bible describes children as “from the Lord” (Ps 127:3). Using contraceptives seems like telling God, “We have our own plans”.

Raising children is difficult, and can be painful. In a way we learn a little about how God must see us, selfish, ungrateful, and often filled with malice. Parents in the 1950s sought the ease of having children raised by schools, churches, and TV. Their neglect resulted in children raised even more poorly than they had been.

Mobility and technology allowed family life in the

twentieth century to shrink in both breadth and depth. Passenger cars shrunk to comfortably hold only four people and the average home was more like a boarding house for four people each with their own work, school, friends, and activities. As regional, and ethnic culture was replaced with consumer culture, the burden of raising children became more and more obvious. As a result the birth rate has dropped below replacement levels.

The individual effect of this path of avoiding having children is loneliness in old age. This has been mitigated somewhat by the various entertainment media. At a societal level, the decrease in native population usually creates a weakness that is often exploited by invasion. Cumulatively 75 million deaths through surgical abortion pales in comparison to what is probably over a billion abortions as a result of oral contraceptives. This results in what the bible calls "blood on the land" (Num 35:33). This might be seen as similar to what Israel practiced (Ps 106:38). Perhaps less immediately obvious is the judgment and wrath that accrues for a people as a result of killing children.

Man was told that as a result of sin he would face hard work (Gen 3:17). Woman was told that she would have multiplied sorrows regarding children. Both of these consequences were for the benefit of humans to keep us from the delusions, selfishness,

and indulgences that destroy people as a result of prosperity, leisure, and self-focus. It should not be surprising that a nation that turns away from the burden of children would see its national character devolve.

The decision to limit children not only accrues the wrath of God for those who are disposed of, but also corrupts us by allowing our natural selfishness to lead us into all sorts of delusional, dissipative, and consumptive indulgences. One can deceive himself that he is being responsible, when he is indulging convenience. It is understandable that people might want to avoid having children when doing so often ends their own childhood.

When I was a child, I spake as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child: but when I became a man, I put away childish things. - 1 Corinthians 13:11

Loneliness

Perhaps the best illustration of the growing condition of loneliness is the establishment of a governmental ministry to address the problem in the UK. Satan sets the course of the world and to achieve his desire to rule the whole world, he has had to advance collectivism so that he can leverage his influence. This required people to be disconnected from their families and used as “cogs” (components) in the organizations and collectives he established. This mechanical usage provides little of benefit to the basic human need for relationship.

Satan has provided a wealth of entertainment and diversions to help fill the time and so distract people from the relational void in their lives.

When Adam chose to follow his own way apart from God, God made life for humans difficult. This was not meanness on God’s part as it was for our benefit. The difficulties in life forced us to work together and strengthened families. When Satan introduced electrical and petroleum power to replace muscle power, life became much more prosperous. Just as with the aristocracy of the past, prosperity allows the worst aspects of human nature to emerge. The consumer culture shows the extent to which our natural selfishness is manifest.

Selfishness is antithetical to relationships. A fiction writer once in talking about collaborative writing said that as long as each person thinks he is doing 80% of the work and is OK with it, it will work. In a prosperous society those who have fame, wealth, or are entertaining will have “friends”. However, if someone feels they are giving 80% into the relationship and not getting much in return, relationships wither. In a selfish society relationships are sought for superficial reasons such as wealth, popularity, and physical appearance.

Perhaps the deepest relationship one can have is in marriage. However, making a selection based on superficial criteria often makes for a lifetime of regret. A person can foster a deep desire and see in another only the reflection of their own desire. However, time tends to expose reality and one can pay a very high price for self-deception.

The relationship between parents and children has also become very thin. In less prosperous times a child's family was essential for his survival. Today the more quickly one can jettison his family, the sooner he is free to soar to whatever heights he expects to encounter. This might be seen with most teenagers attempting to avoid being seen when out with their parents.

Perhaps it is only after the first flush of youthful expectations that one begins to feel the pangs of loneliness. With Christians, one can find that spiritual growth also contributes to loneliness as few others are like-minded. The answer to this is sufficiency in Christ. Our life in this world is relatively short.

While we might wish for fellowship and relationship with others, we have work right in front of us ministering to other Christians as best we can.

And that he died for all, that they which live should not henceforth live unto themselves, but unto him which died for them, and rose again. - 2 Corinthians 5:15

Broken Cisterns

For my people have committed two evils; they have forsaken me the fountain of living waters, and hewed them out cisterns, broken cisterns, that can hold no water. - Jeremiah 2:13

It can be difficult today with public water systems to appreciate life in a semi-desert region where whatever rainfall occurs has to be captured in a cistern so that water can be available in seasons of drought. The apostate nation of Israel can serve as an example for us of two fold self-inflicted damage.

By neglecting the connection we can have with God through Jesus, we shut off the “faucet” (quench) of the life giving water (work of his Spirit in us) that God would provide us. We often consider what we can provide for ourselves (wealth, education, or social prominence) as that in which we can reliably trust.

The suburban culture of the 1950s perhaps captures the “broken cistern” phenomena. Parents seemed to have little of value to impart to their children other than go to college and get a good job. Things of real value like how to discern truth, self-discipline, how to persevere, to show kindness and patience were not taught much as they were little known by the parents themselves.

In the movie “ET” the wise alien imparted the sage advice to the film’s protagonist to “Beee good”. Sadly this might be seen as representative of the depth of instruction available to successive generations that only have broken cisterns. The influence of the world and its systems is more geared to get what you can while you can. Even if successful, what is gained seldom has lasting value.

If one can recognize the impoverished state of a broken cistern, there is hope that one can return to he who waits to give “living water”. Water is that which sustains. We can think that the things of the world can be stored up in a “cistern” we construct that will sustain us. However, as they slip away, we can begin to see that it is far better to be sustained by the living water that God provides. This is a picture of living dependent upon God as opposed to thinking we can depend on ourselves.

Perhaps the best way to measure if we are living in dependence upon God or self is to gauge how much we serve self. Another measure is to see the relative importance we give to character qualities as opposed to material ones. For the unsaved, there is only the option of trying to fill a broken cistern. For those who have trusted in Jesus, there is the possibility of access to living water except if we, like apostate Israel, turn our back on God and follow after the self that is drawn to the flesh and the world.

For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, is not of the Father, but is of the world. - 1 John 2:16

Elevating Christ

One would think that those who claim Christ would honor him. However, in many ways we Christians live as if Christ is incidental to our lives. Most frequently we take him for granted even so far as forgetting he is an actual person who in paying for all of our sin has done us the greatest good possible. Taking generosity for granted in a common human failing. However, more than generosity, Christ demonstrates the selfless love to which we should all aspire.

Many religious people think of their lives as blessed by God to such an extent that everything that happens to them is a result of God's intervention. This can lead to an elevated sense of one's own worth. Also, it can be done at the diminishment of Christ. It can help to remember that Christians are placed into the body of Christ. It is the love of the Father for Jesus that touches us, not our own importance.

Moses warned the nation of Israel that once they entered the promised land, they were in danger of forgetting God and thinking that everything they had received was gotten by their own hand (Deut 6:12). This is similar to a Christian who because of the business of daily life sees the world as if he were not a Christian Those of Israel were called to faithfulness to the Lord and to keep his laws. Christians

are also called to faithfulness to the Lord, but being saved by grace without the law, we have perhaps a more difficult task.

For many Christians Christ can seem almost an abstraction, something to do with heaven and disconnected from the daily grind of making a living and family responsibilities. It can help to have daily bible reading, but often this can seem like an expendable chore. Perhaps a technique to create a disconnect from the influence of the world is to develop a judgmental reflex so that the idiocy of the world and those lost in their fleshly indulgences is recognized. There is a danger in that such recognition can lead to self-righteousness. This is why it is important to elevate Christ. If the idiocy of the world can be seen as something we would all be involved with if it were not for Jesus having saved us, we can keep the humility and reverence for Christ that is essential to walking in truth.

Humility is essential for gratitude. Truth is essential for humility. If we can come to truly recognize that Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life (John 14:6), we can begin to give him his proper place in our life. It can be helpful to cultivate a daily prayer life and with it to reflect on what Christ has done for us as well as what awaits us. It is our intentional actions to consider and recognize Christ that begin to help us grow in faith, knowledge, and understanding.

That he would grant you, according to the riches of his glory, to be strengthened with might by his Spirit in the inner man; That Christ may dwell in your hearts by faith; that ye, being rooted and grounded in love, May be able to comprehend with all saints what is the breadth, and length, and depth, and height; And to know the love of Christ, which passeth knowledge, that ye might be filled with all the fulness of God. Now unto him that is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that worketh in us, Unto him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus throughout all ages, world without end. Amen. - Ephesians 3:16-21

Shoehorn doctrines

In a comedy western movie an attempt was made to rehabilitate a bad guy by giving him a job in a shoe store. He was handed a shoehorn and told that it was to be used to help a customer get his shoe on. He put the shoehorn at a customers throat and commanded, "Get that shoe on". The customer quickly complied to which the bad guy looked with amazement at the shoehorn and declared, Well I'll be, it really works".

There can be a real temptation in seminaries and the pulpit to make doctrines either fit or be used to accomplish objectives. For example using verses about the tithing laws given to the nation of Israel are often cited to coerce more giving. Some who preach a prosperity gospel explain away the failure to cure illness or get rich as the fault of someone who did not have enough faith.

Presenting oneself as one with all the answers is a common human characteristic. The potential for trouble exists when one is questioned. Questions can expose a poor, false, or misunderstood foundation. It is at this point where one in a position to answer a question can choose if he has the courage to admit that he does not know the answer, is unsure of the answer, or can suggest some possibilities. The alternative is to provide an "answer" that will

seem plausible to the questioner or at least discourage further questioning. Those whose first priority is to maintain their image of expertise usually choose the second option.

Francis Chan once described his disappointment with trying to mentally move a pencil after hearing that the disciples were told that they would be able to move mountains. A “blow off” or shoehorn answer as to why he could not move the pencil would be that he did not have enough faith. This might seem to be supported in that the verses describing this were about having enough faith. However, a more complete answer might be that when the kingdom promised to the nation of Israel would be finally established, those in this kingdom might have that power. Support for this might be seen with the “taste” of spiritual gifts given to the early believers awaiting this kingdom (Heb 6:5)

A common problem is for those who declare that God controls every action in the world no matter how small. While couched in terms of intentional and permissive will, it still lends itself to a more pagan view that if you do good, God will reward you and if you do bad, God will punish you. Consider that a man hit by lightning was not because Zeus was angry with him, but more likely because of the electrical charge built up by his being on a hilltop during a thunderstorm. The person declaring God's will in every act is left in the position of trying to explain something like Hitler. One may try to declare that God is sovereign and we should not question him. A better answer might be that God instituted natural limits on our biology and environment so that life would be more difficult for our benefit. The greater evil in the world comes both as a result of Satan and our own selfishness.

A questioner upon hearing a shoehorn answer to a question can either abandon questioning or dig deeper elsewhere. Shoehorn answers disregard truth. Whether for convenience, to avoid anxiety, vanity, or to manipulate, distortions of truth are harmful. One expects baloney from salesmen and politicians, however, those who present themselves as speaking for God should value truth over appearance.

Teenage Suicide

A child who is three years old when told, "Yes, he can have a cookie tomorrow", can be puzzled because he hears the word "yes" and "cookie" yet does not have a cookie. The concept of tomorrow lies outside his understanding of reality that can stretch from five minutes in the past to five minutes into the future. When the same child is a teenager, his perception of time may have increased to a week or two in the past and future.

In a Universe that may only be four weeks wide, things that go wrong can be magnified much larger than for a forty year old whose sense of time might be a decade or more. In addition, there is a change in thought process where a young teen finds the ability to think abstractly suddenly comes upon him. This depth of thought often first manifests as uncertainty and concern about what others think of him. It might be seen as suddenly waking up to find yourself telepathic. It would be overwhelming to be bombarded with the thoughts of others. However, after ten years or so, the effect would be less significant.

What teenagers lack is a frame of reference of accumulated experience from which current experiences can be moderated and given perspective. In the last 100 years families have shrunk in both depth and

breadth. Prior to that, one's closest friends were siblings and cousins. Today one's friends are those in school. However, that is also where one encounters enemies. The volatility of emotional expression can also contribute to friends who become enemies.

The contemplation of suicide can be brought about by a crucial event or through a process of continual depression and hopelessness. Both are magnified in adolescence. Parents are often surprised at the speed at which a child can be overcome with hopelessness. Since it is common for teens to withdraw into themselves, parents can even be more surprised to learn of something that has devastated their child.

Since parents usually have an expanded frame of reference, they may even communicate a sense of triviality to their teens regarding their struggles further accentuating a feeling of isolation. Sometimes even a church youth group can increase feelings of isolation as they are often conducted in a similar way as school. Social media often even further amplifies the social problems of youth as it offers a Potemkin-like facade to the world behind which a real person exists even more concerned with how they are perceived.

It would be advantageous for a child to enter adolescence with a Christian frame of reference such that the world and the cruel people in the world would be understood for what they are. It would be useful for parents to be seen not as something of which to be ashamed but as sources of truth and love that could be depended upon. Additionally a slightly older peer that took a personal interest and could reinforce a Christian understanding of the world would help resist the “slings and arrows” of a world hostile to youth. Sadly, many Christian parents trust the world systems to raise their children.

Eph 6:4 And, ye fathers, provoke not your children to wrath: but bring them up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord.

Transcendence

In the 1960s people started to inquire of Eastern religions (Hinduism and Buddhism in particular) to find meaning for their lives. In large part this was due to established Christian traditions not seeming to offer much substance. What seemed attractive in these alternative religions was the possibility that one could evolve or gain enlightenment. What people who pursued these practices often found was also a lack of substance.

Many sought tranquility, peace, and understanding as if it were just another drug to experiment with. Being raised in a consumer culture was just the frame of reference to experiment with new things to find what was useful or even, like drugs, briefly pleasurable. Even though schools and scientific culture assured everyone that humans were evolving, these experimental forays seemed to fail by offering little in the way of improved thinking, understanding, patience, or insights.

Ironically, this was all available to people through Christianity. However over the centuries Christian practice and tradition was more ritualized and systematized until what was of real value was not often discernable. Today most Christians do not even know what riches could be theirs.

There are some branches of Hinduism that promise enlightenment if one survives dealing with demonic spirits. Other religions have requirements such as severe asceticism to achieve progress. What is interesting about Christianity is that striving and accomplishment achieve nothing. The higher life is a result of surrender and yielding.

Christianity is about the transition from the selfish nature we are all born with to the giving nature found in Christ. This is first accomplished when we can surrender our trust in ourselves to trust in the gospel of Jesus (1Cor 15:1-4) by which we are placed into the body of Christ by the Holy Spirit. This allows us to be regenerated spiritually and have the life of Christ in us.

Where most Christians fall short is that the transition from our natural selfishness to the selfless love of Christ requires us to conduct ourselves (our “walk”) in a way consistent with what the Holy Spirit in us would accomplish. This introduces a degree of internationality to our lives that we may not be used to exercising. To consider each thing we do, why we do it, and what effects it could have may be a new experience for some. Simple faith in Christ frees one from the compulsive baser nature. However, we can still choose to indulge ourselves in what the bible calls the flesh (Gal 5:19-21). Being in Christ gives one the option to exercise free will to choose transcendence. The work of transcendence is accomplished by the work of the Holy Spirit if allowed.

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, Meekness, temperance: against such there is no law. And they that are Christ's have crucified the flesh with the affections and lusts. If we live in the Spirit, let us also walk in the Spirit. - Galatians 5;22-25

Pastors

The word “pastor” (shepherd) is used once in Paul’s letters to the churches as a noun and is joined with the word teacher such that the idea is presented of shepherding through teaching (Eph 4:11). Paul uses the word overseer once (1Tim 3:1) (the KJV translators erroneously added “the office of” to oversee). Paul uses the word elder twice making it synonymous with overseer. The idea of a pastor as a teacher is strengthened as Paul cites “being apt to teach” as a requirement for an overseer.

The idea of a pastor as a “preacher” is commonly held. However, in the bible to preach was to proclaim and more within the purview of an evangelist. The bible describes those who would oversee as selected or chosen by one who could insure that what was entrusted was to “faithful men”. The idea of seminary certification today is of convenience more than a biblical mode;. I asked a seminary teacher once why so many of their graduates were squirrely. He said that they could only consider classroom performance in giving a graduation certificate. Their home church was supposed to be responsible for anything else..

The classroom / lecture format of seminary is largely responsible for the lecture / audience format of most church services. This format was also influ-

ential in the formation of the public school system. One of the deficiencies of both church and school is the tendency to inhibit maturity and create dependency. I once observed a congregation leaving church only to observe an approaching thunderstorm. Everyone returned to the church to ask the pastor what they should do.

A friend who had been a drummer in a rock group once shared an observation that lead guitarists and singers who were subjected to intense and constant praise from an audience often came to believe themselves superior. One might see where pastors could be subject to the same corruptive effects of flattery.

The power dynamics of groups can result anywhere from a pastor dictator to a pastor bullied by powerful members of the congregation. The mechanical nature of organizational systems can result in a pastor almost being a prisoner of the system he is trying to administer. Sadly, most measure pastoral success as how well the machine can be kept running. How different it would be if pastoral success was measured by how much like Christ each church member was becoming (Eph 4:11-13).

In addition to the arrested development of church members, a pastor is often inhibited in his own growth. Lacking the freedom to question and grow himself, many pastors can become almost Pharisaical (pride, rule setting, superficial) in their administration of a church

Institutions and systems run by their own inertia and can be impervious to any attempts to institute changes. Those seeking to question, learn, and grow may have to do so with an older wiser Christian who can take the time to instruct them individually. Christianity was always supposed to be about relationships, us with God and each other. A pastor may have a sincere desire to help those members of his church but be limited because of tools at his disposal.

Magical Thinking

This particular form of reality denial captures some of where society has come to. For example, the attractiveness of Communism is the assertion that everyone can have everything all the time. Similar to killing the goose for the golden eggs inside, attempts to realize what is not real tend to be disappointing. In the song “Post world war two blues” the lines “Sgt. Pepper seemed real to me” and “songs and poems were all you needed”, reflect some of the delusion that people can accept as an alternate reality.

From Harry Potter to Peter Parker and an almost endless series of stories of magical transformations and miraculous solutions to exaggerated problems have left an imprint on many such that whatever they imagine can be real. The exceptionally high suicide rate among transsexuals also speaks to the consequences of indulging magical thinking. As children are even more vulnerable to the influence of imagination, they can become addicted to the pleasurable sensations that can be generated by contemplating a magical existence.

Perhaps less considered are the results of a less intense form of magical thinking. For example, not believing that there is a God is one form of denying reality. These would usually say that they are em-

bracing reality because they see God as imaginary. However, there are pleasurable sensations to be obtained from thinking one is the most evolved being in the universe.

Magical thinking can be a good way to see the larger problem of a life lived for pleasure. For the last fifty years our society has turned from truth to what feels good as the primary driving social force. As a result, we have gone deeper into debt, printed more money so that what we have is worth less, think we can control climate, end hunger and poverty, and kill children without consequence..

One can see examples of magical thinking with the Pharisees (they sought positions of honor, were self-righteous, even cheated people). If one starts with a pleasant assumption (that God should be grateful I am on his side, Luke 18:11-12), one can justify all sorts of evil (John 8:44). The basic problem is that delusion feels better than truth. Just as neglected reality tends to bring the drug addict to ruin, those who pleasure themselves with magical thinking also find neglected reality can bring consequences. For the Pharisees, the consequences were to be eternal (Matt 7:22-23)

The Roman emperor Marcus Aurelius was also a stoic philosopher whose administration was marked by pragmatism. His son Commodus might be seen as one who plunged into magical thinking that can be seen with his neglect of administration, and indulgence in mass entertainments even declaring himself the new Romulus and portraying himself as Hercules. He was assassinated by those he intended to have killed.

While magical thinking is not new, it does show the critical importance of truth and that the Christian can benefit from avoiding it entirely. One key element to avoid being drawn into magical thinking is to value truth even when it would feel good to do otherwise. Mastery of one's emotions is crucial to being able to walk by truth.

