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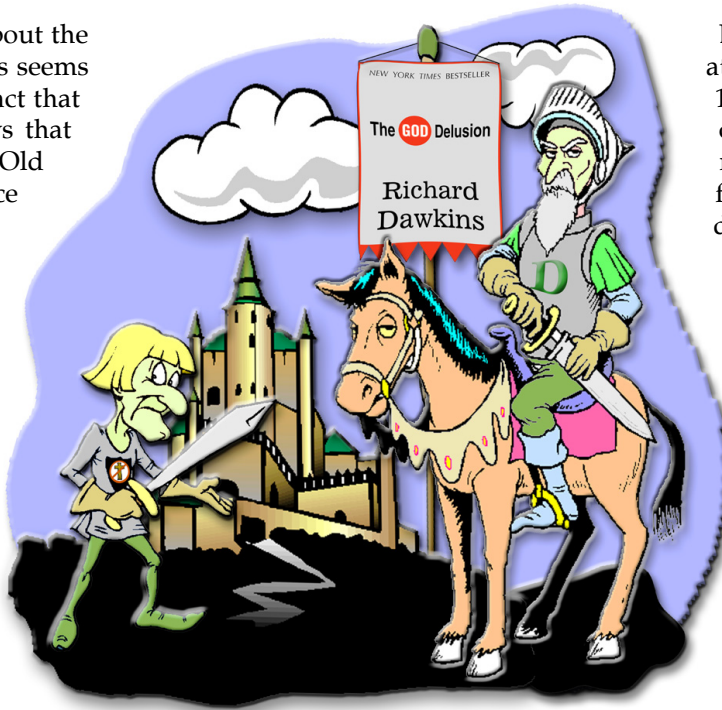
## The Godless Crusade of the New Atheism

### Understanding the Militant Anti-Theistic Movement of the 21st Century

by Gary E. Gilley

There is much buzz lately about the so-called "New Atheism." This seems to be an odd term given the fact that there are not very many ways that a person can spin atheism. Old Atheism denied the existence of God and New Atheism does the same.

It is true that practical atheism can be traced throughout history. Psalm 14:1 speaks of such a man, termed a fool, who says in his heart, "There is no God." Most see this fool not as a philosophical atheist who mentally denies the existence of God, but as one who lives as if God does not exist, even though intellectually he knows better. Of course, the practical atheist is far more common than those who adopt atheism as a worldview. Most people, especially in the Western world, give God a nod — 80 percent of Americans say they believe in God — then go about living their lives as if He did not exist.



Biblically speaking, the issue of atheism is problematic. Romans 1:18-23 indicates that God made creation to be a constant reminder of His existence. That a few deny this evidence does not diminish the fact that to some degree they know better. And Romans 2:15 confirms what we already know to be true: God has placed in the hearts of each of us a moral standard. His fingerprints are found on our conscience.

A human is not just another mammal; we are different; we bear the marks of the image of God and on some level even self-avowed atheists know this to be true. But such is the hardening of the  
(continues on page 14)

#### Inside this Issue:

- NEW JESUS NOVELS ARE NEITHER NEW NOR NOVEL ..... PAGE 2
- PUTTING GOD IN A SHACK..... PAGE 4
- WHEN IMAGINATION BECOMES REVELATION ..... PAGE 5

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# Editorials

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## NEW JESUS NOVELS ARE NEITHER NEW NOR NOVEL

Solomon said, “there is nothing new under the sun” (Ecclesiastes 1:9), and the Apostle Paul predicted that people would “turn their ears away from the truth and be turned aside to fables” (2 Timothy 4:4). Fables are myths and fiction.

Solomon’s statement applies to Satan’s lies and to novels written about Jesus that turn the Bible on its head, redefining and reshaping Jesus into someone who bears no resemblance to the Jesus of the Gospels.

The so-called “Jesus Quest” has added to the confusion. The Gospels are ignored or twisted to create a range of fictional Jesuses: an itinerant cynic philosopher, eschatological prophet, a man of social change, a sage with great wisdom, or a marginal Jew. These books present every kind of Jesus but the biblical one. There is no other true Jesus but the one found in the Gospels.

As early as 1835, German cynic David Friedrich Strauss suggested that the Gospels were myths and then created his own Jesus — devoid of miracles and deity — in his book, *Life of Jesus*. Strauss, a pantheist and Darwinist, was booted out of his seminary. (See the entry for Strauss in Elgin S. Moyer’s *Who Was Who in Christian History*.)

*The Da Vinci Code* created a Jesus who is not divine, but a person imbued with the idea of divinity by misguided Church councils that got the vote wrong.

Deepak Chopra has come up with what he calls the “Third Jesus.” This is a Jesus made in the image and likeness of Chopra — a mongrelized, Buddhist Christ.

Anne Rice, author of several famous vampire novels, has joined the “let’s create a Jesus” movement with her two novels about Jesus in which she tries to fill in some of the gaps in Jesus’ early life with both Gnostic and fictional accounts. According to the *Christian News*:

“The content of these novels is taken from apocryphal writings like the Gospel of Thomas as well as her own imagination. She conjures up things Jesus said to his parents, things he felt and events in his life that are not given to us in the Bible. In the first novel, *Christ the Lord: Out of Egypt*, she depicts Jesus as a 7-year-old boy who gets the things he wishes for, like the death of another young boy who annoys him. No Christian would commend anything Rice has ever written. Her earlier works were a glorification of evil themes. Her novels on the life of Jesus violate the strict commands of the Bible not to add to or take away from the Word of God. And finally, her spiritual biography tells of her return to cafeteria Catholicism where she picks and chooses which parts of the Catholic faith she will accept. For

(continues on page 21)

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## WORLDWIDE FANFARE MARKS DARWIN'S 200<sup>TH</sup> BIRTHDAY

February 12, 1809, was a unique day in history. On that date two prominent historical individuals with very different beliefs about and effects upon humanity were born. The one, Abraham Lincoln, battled for the parity of all mankind proclaiming that "all men are *created* equal." The other, Charles Darwin, devalued man by maintaining that all species of life, including humans, have evolved over time from a common ancestor.

This past February marked the 200th anniversary of the birth of both men. And there is little doubt that the fanfare for Darwin vastly surpassed any celebration or recognition of Lincoln's birth. Websites proliferated that heralded the "Darwin Day Celebration" which is described as "a global celebration of science and reason held on or around Feb. 12." According to one of these websites, there were more than 370 events scheduled in 31 countries for Darwin Day 2009.

Wikipedia, the online encyclopedia, described "Darwin Day" as a "celebration intended to celebrate the anniversary of the birth of Charles Darwin on February 12, 1809. The day is also an opportunity to highlight Darwin's contribution to science and to promote science in general." In the United Kingdom, a two-pound special commemorative coin was released. The coin features profile images of Darwin and an ape facing each other, arched by the inscription 1809 DARWIN 2009. The coin's edging contains the inscription, ON THE ORIGIN OF SPECIES 1859. This coming Nov. 24 will mark the 150th anniversary of the publication of Darwin's *On the Origin of Species*, which is said to be his "landmark work in evolutionary biology." The Perth Mint, Australia, also planned to issue a 2009 dated commemorative (1 oz.) silver legal tender coin depicting Darwin.

And, it seems, that everybody — even those who should resist Darwin's theory — wanted to get in on the celebration. Last September, "the Vatican said the theory of evolution was compatible with the Bible" and announced that it was planning to host in March "a new interdisciplinary conference to celebrate the 150th anniversary of Charles Darwin's Origin of the [sic] Species," according to *The Christian Post*. The Church of England even released a news article conveying that the 200th anniversary of his birth was the right time to issue an apology to Darwin "for misunderstanding you and, by

getting our first reaction wrong, encouraging others to misunderstand you still."

The self-proclaimed agnostic died April 19, 1882, and is buried at Westminster Abbey, London's gothic monastery church.

—MKG

## YOUNGER SCHULLER TO START OWN CHURCH

The Rev. Robert A. Schuller, son of Crystal Cathedral founder Robert H. Schuller, has resigned as the church's senior pastor with plans to begin his own ministry. According to a brief news release posted on the Crystal Cathedral website, "The Executive Team of Crystal Cathedral Ministries has received and accepted the resignation of Rev. Robert Anthony Schuller as Senior Pastor of the congregation. Robert continues to be a valued and long-standing member of the Classis of the Reformed Church in America." The notice was posted Nov. 29, 2008.

The younger Schuller was deposed last October by his father as the sole preacher on the church's popular *Hour of Power* television broadcast. He had inherited the role from his father in 2006. The elder Schuller said a "lack of shared vision" which placed the entire ministry in "jeopardy" led to the removal of his son. The move only ousted the younger Schuller from the television program, and was not intended to take away his role as the church's senior pastor.

Upon the resignation, Juan Carlos Ortiz, who founded the church's Hispanic ministry, will assume the position of senior pastor until a permanent replacement is found.

—MKG

## WITHOUT WALLS CHURCH MAY BE WITHOUT BUILDINGS

They were once the up-and-coming darlings of the Charismatic world and co-pastors of Without Walls International Church, a Tampa, Fla., mega-church. But the fame and prosperity that Randy and Paula White

(continues on page 21)

# Putting God in a Shack

*The Unshackled Heresy  
of Wm. Paul Young*

by Gary E. Gilley

One of the most popular and controversial Christian books of recent years is the fictional work by first-time author William Paul Young. Evangelical recording artist Michael W. Smith states, "THE SHACK will leave you craving for the presence of God."<sup>1</sup> Author Eugene Peterson believes, "This book has the potential to do for our generation what John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* did for his. It's that good!"<sup>2</sup>

On the other hand, seminary president Albert Mohler says the book "includes undiluted heresy"<sup>3</sup> and many other apologists concur. Given its popularity (more than 4 million copies sold and No. 1 on the *New York Times* best-seller list for paperback fiction), influence, and mixed reviews, Christians need to take a careful look.

Good Christian fiction can convey a message in an indirect, yet powerful, way. Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* is the most successful in the genre and has been mightily used of the Lord to teach spiritual truth. Christian fiction's value is determined by its adherence to Scripture. This is how we must evaluate *The Shack*.

While well-written, *The Shack's* storyline is not one that would attract many people. The plot is developed around the abduction and murder of 6-year-old Missy, beloved daughter of

Mackenzie Philips — Mack — who is a nominal Christian. This tragedy has shaped the lives of Mack and his family. Mack's life is simply described as living under "The Great Sadness."

Then one day God drops Mack a note in his mailbox and invites him to the shack where Missy was murdered. Mack takes a chance that God will show up and heads to the shack. There God, in the form of all three members of the Trinity, meets with him for the weekend. God gives Mack new insight about Himself, about life, pain, and tragedy. Mack goes home a new man.

The Trinity takes human form in the novel: the Father (called "Papa" throughout) appears as a large African-American woman who loves to cook; the Holy Spirit is called "Sarayu" (Sanskrit for "air" or "wind") and is a small Asian woman who is translucent; and Jesus is a middle-aged carpenter, presumably of Jewish descent. Much interesting dialogue takes place as the members of the Trinity explain to Mack what they want him to know.

*The Shack* decries theology on the one hand while offering its own brand on the other. A story has the advantage of putting forth doctrine in a livelier manner than a systematic work can do. This is one reason we find most of Scripture in narrative

form. However, the question is whether Young's theology agrees with God's as revealed in Scripture. The short answer is "sometimes," but it often totally misses the mark.

## SCRIPTURE AND THE CHURCH

Young's message centers on the Trinity and salvation, but it is significant that he has a couple of axes to grind concerning the Bible and the Church. Young rejects the cessationist view of Scripture, which his character Mack was taught in seminary:

"In seminary he had been taught that God had completely stopped any overt communication with moderns, preferring to have them only listen to and follow sacred Scripture, properly interpreted, of course. God's voice had been reduced to paper, and even that paper had to be moderated and deciphered by the proper authorities and intellects. ... Nobody wanted God in a box, just in a book."<sup>4</sup>

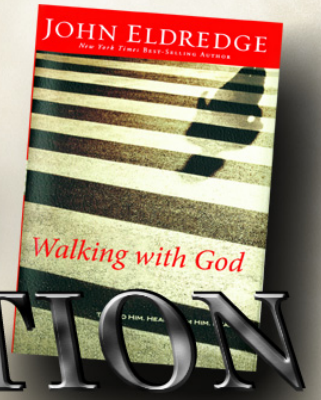
Young would prefer a God who communicates with us in our thoughts rather than on paper (i.e., the Bible).<sup>5</sup> Realizing the subjectivity of such revelation, he assures us that we will "begin to better recognize [the Holy Spirit's] voice as we continue to grow our relationship."<sup>6</sup> Scripture

(continues on page 12)

# WHEN IMAGINATION BECOMES REVELATION

## MYSTICISM AND MADNESS FROM JOHN ELDREDGE'S WILD HEART

by G. Richard Fisher



John Eldredge's latest book, *Walking with God*, prompts a lot of questions, but gives few solid answers, especially biblical ones.

In today's publishing world, money trumps truth and best-selling authors such as Eldredge, founder of Ransomed Heart Ministries and author of *Wild at Heart*, have unsurpassed liberty with respect to theology. Thomas Nelson Publishers should be ashamed for releasing this ride into fantasy and mysticism.

This book could be called *Walking with Eldredge*, because it is first and foremost about Eldredge's experiences, feelings, impressions, and sensations. Even though Eldredge counsels, "Our tendency is to go with whatever we're feeling. It is not a reliable guide,"<sup>1</sup> he regularly disregards his own advice.

In the introduction, he writes:

"This is a series of stories ... describing my experiences and putting words to the things God is showing me, I can shed light on your experiences ... what I offer here is a series of stories of what it looks like to walk with God over the course of about a year. I am going to open my journals to you."<sup>2</sup>

The key to the book is his experiences, not what the Bible teaches. This presumes that all of Eldredge's expe-

riences are good and right. His writing is sometimes like a free-association session in which he throws out a word or phrase and then has to interpret it. It is reminiscent of the magic eight-ball toy: Whatever pops up in the little window might be the word of direction.

Eldredge makes a feeble disclaimer: "In sharing these stories, I am in no way suggesting that this is the only way to walk with God."<sup>3</sup> However, he quotes George MacDonald to the effect that what is in his heart is in every heart,<sup>4</sup> leaving one with the idea that Eldredge's way will be our way in the end.

Eldredge boasts that his personal narratives "will open up new horizons for you."<sup>5</sup> He promotes his website, which he says adds "another dimension to this book" that will "provide further guidance, clarification and counsel through video" and "will help a great deal in your walk with God."<sup>6</sup> So it is clear he means his practices are to be emulated. Eldredge also makes it obvious that this is not only about our experiences and his experiences, but it is about *interpreting those experiences*.<sup>7</sup> Interpreting one's experiences can be as tricky as looking for images in clouds or ink blots.

Preoccupation with self is one of our major problems. We are called by Jesus to deny self (Matthew 16:24).

The focus on our experiences and their meaning is as subjective and complicated as calling the psychic hotline or consulting the horoscope. The best course is to let Scripture guide and regulate our experiences and to talk to a mature, knowledgeable, and trusted Christian friend capable of counseling with the Word.

### O CHRISTMAS TREE — MUCH ORDEAL DOST THOU BRING ME

One of Eldredge's illustrations is a story of him taking his family out to cut down a Christmas tree. The night before their trip, two feet of snow fell. The wind-chill factor was minus 10. Their Suburban slid into a ditch and got two flat tires. Eldredge called the outing an ordeal.<sup>8</sup>

Eldredge then writes that he ignored God's counsel to go out the previous weekend, claiming that on the Friday after Thanksgiving, "I sensed God saying we were to go up the following day" and "the whole ordeal could have been avoided had we simply listened."<sup>9</sup>

The event could be interpreted in a number of different — and more biblical — ways. Eldredge himself admits, "Our assumptions control our interpretation of events."<sup>10</sup> So there is no proving that this had anything to do with listening for a voice from God.

Some would call it poor judgment to venture out after a blizzard with a wind-chill factor below zero. Others might argue that bad things happen and God can teach us through those circumstances, according to Romans 5:3. Others would say that what matters is how we respond to those events and that we handle them in a biblical way. Those obsessed with sin and the devil might assert that such troubles stem from unconfessed sin or a demonic curse.

Thus, interpreting our experiences is problematic. It is far better to make wise choices at the start and handle unplanned and unexpected consequences God's way. One with biblical wisdom would know already that God would never want us to put our families in jeopardy for something as trivial as a Christmas tree.

### **JESUS SPEAKS, ARE YOU LISTENING?**

Eldredge writes that we need to hear the voice of Jesus.<sup>11</sup> And while this is a valid premise based on John 10:27 — “My sheep hear My voice” — the real issue is the source of that voice. The answer determines whether we get lost in subjectivism, mysticism, and delusion and whether we really find the voice of Christ. Mystics, such as Eldredge, say we go inside ourselves as we try to sense something. However, the biblical answer is that we hear the voice of Christ in the pages of Scripture. We cannot know the words of Jesus without the New Testament (John 12:47-50, see also Matthew 22:31b, James 1:25).

Early in his book, Eldredge exhibits a sloppy handling of Scripture as he reads concepts into the Bible that are not there. For example, under the subheading, “Does God Still Speak?,” Eldredge describes God seeking out Adam and Eve in Genesis 3:8-9 as “a beautiful story.”<sup>12</sup> When God showed up in Genesis 3:8, the fallen man and woman were trying to hide from Him. God's coming to them was to judge them and strip them of His blessings. It certainly was not for guidance. God tracked them down to

pronounce judgment (Genesis 3:10-19). That was hardly beautiful.

Eldredge writes, “Intimacy with God is the purpose of our lives. It's why God created us.”<sup>13</sup> However, this is not what Scripture teaches. Intimacy with God is a wonderful thing that we find in prayer and Scripture, but Ephesians 3:14-21 is clear that the primary purpose of our lives and the purpose of the Church is the glory of God. The chief cause of man is to be theo-centric, not ego-centric. We are to glorify God in good days or bad. And in times of intimacy with God, as well as dry times, we are to live for the glory of God and exist to bring praise to His name. Even our most unpleasant times can be His glory times because we know all things work together for good to those that love God (Romans 8:28). Isaiah caught this priority when he declared, “For the LORD has redeemed Jacob, and glorified Himself in Israel” (Isaiah 44:23).

We are not saying God does not want intimacy, but only that His glory is to be the major focus and the purpose of our lives. Jeremiah 9:23-24 reminds us:

“Thus says the LORD: ‘Let not the wise man glory in his wisdom, let not the mighty man glory in his might, nor let the rich man glory in his riches; But let him who glories glory in this, that he understands and knows Me, that I am the LORD, exercising loving-kindness, judgment, and righteousness in the earth. For in these things I delight,’ says the LORD.”

The Apostle Paul extols God and says, “For of Him and through Him and to Him are all things, to whom be glory forever. Amen” (Romans 11:36). And to the Corinthians, Paul says, “as it is written, ‘He who glories, let him who glories glory in the LORD,’” (1 Corinthians 1:31) and “glorify God in your body and in your spirit, which are God's” (1 Corinthians 6:20). Focusing on our intimacy makes man the focal point. However focusing on God's glory makes God the center of attention and main attraction.

In another story, Eldredge establishes a scenario in which two friends meet, but one never says anything. He throws into the mix a father who never speaks to his children.<sup>14</sup> This is an attempt at a straw man, with God being the friend or father who never speaks. Eldredge acknowledges that God does speak to us from the Bible — he again employs his feeble disclaimer: “I am not minimizing in any way the authority of the Scripture.”<sup>15</sup> But his admission actually refutes his own position, which he implies by way of his one-sided relationship illustration. His point is that a Christian should not think God speaks only through the Bible. Thus, for Eldredge, God's infallible, inerrant, eternal, and powerful Word is not enough. He apparently does not believe the Bible is sufficient to make us wise unto salvation and all that we need for doctrine, reproof, correction, and instruction in righteousness as 2 Timothy 3:14-17 confirms. Paul, in Romans 15:4, says the Word of God is our comfort. God conveys and speaks His comfort through Scriptural promises.

Those who affirm that the Word is sufficient will be grieved to read Eldredge's denigration of the Word of God. His position intimates that with only the Bible and without the mysticism we could never really know true and deep intimacy with God. This is not too far from the position espoused by many prominent cults, which teach that the Bible falls short of God's complete message. Eldredge also confuses special direct divine revelation of the past, which is now part of Scripture, and believes it ought to be happening today.

### **AND HE WALKS WITH ME AND HE TALKS WITH ME**

Beyond just listening for God's voice, Eldredge writes about an “intimate, conversational walk with God,” which he says “is meant to be normal.”<sup>16</sup> Yet Eldredge is not clear about what he means. He writes, “I can sense the Spirit saying,” and at other times admits, “Sometimes we can get clarity, and sometimes we can't.”<sup>17</sup> This sounds more confusing

than conclusive, more like guesswork than guidance. It's much easier to follow Scripture than to have a conversation in one's head while trying to sense something.

The Puritans thought of Scripture as a direct connection with God. They were committed to the sufficiency of the words of the Bible to convey God to them. They saw mysticism and the seeking of voices as a departure from God and a delusion. To them, true spirituality did not consist of private whisperings or audible voices. Consider their statement in the Westminster Confession:

"...therefore it pleased the Lord, at sundry times, and in divers manners, to reveal himself, and to declare that his will unto his Church; and afterwards, for the better preserving and propagating of the truth, and for the more sure establishment and comfort of the Church against the corruption of the flesh, and the malice of Satan and of the world, to commit the same wholly unto writing; which maketh the holy scripture to be most necessary; those former ways of God's revealing his will unto his people being now ceased."<sup>18</sup>

These men concluded that God certainly is revealing Himself, not in the old former ways of direct revelation, but in the Word. They believed that God stood before them in the pages of Holy Writ. They further wrote:

"The whole counsel of God, concerning all things necessary for his own glory, man's salvation, faith, and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture: unto which nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new revelation of the Spirit, or traditions of men. Nevertheless, we acknowledge the inward illumination of the Spirit of God to be necessary for the saving understanding of such things as are revealed in the word; and that there are some circumstances

concerning the worship of God, and government of the Church, common to human actions and societies, which are to be ordered by the light of nature and Christian prudence, according to the general rules of the word, which are always to be observed."<sup>19</sup>

Bernard Ramm states clearly the orthodox proposition that, "*everything essential to salvation and Christian living is clearly revealed in Scripture.* ... What is essential to salvation and sanctification is treated *extensively* in Scripture either in terms of distinct passages or abundance of references. We are in constant danger of extending our theology beyond the information given in the Scripture. This danger can be checked only when we limit our theology to extensive references in Sacred Scripture. We may consider a doctrine Scriptural when there is extensive treatment of it in Scripture, not when we can find only a passing reference to it."<sup>20</sup>

### CAN YOU HEAR ME NOW?

Eldredge tries to teach his readers how to hear the voice of God. He writes that one way to accomplish this is to come up with a question and ask quietly in your mind, "*What is your counsel?*"<sup>21</sup> Eldredge further describes the basics:

"Start with small questions. Repeat the question quietly in your heart to God. Bring yourself to a posture of quiet surrender. ... Pause and listen. ... Quite often we can sense God's direction on a matter before we hear actual words."<sup>22</sup>

While one may think he has escalated to a heightened realm of spiritual communication with such effort, it is much safer — but not as thrilling — to ask what the Bible says either directly, indirectly, or in principle. But that is not where Eldredge is taking us. Another step contained in Eldredge's directive is to "seek further direction by listening."<sup>23</sup> If nothing is heard, Eldredge instructs his readers to prompt God by asking other generic questions such as *We should go?*

or *We should stay home?* This practice advances into even more subjectivism as Eldredge explains that "over time, those deep impressions begin to form into words."<sup>24</sup>

So this is really about our faulty impressions and hunches. Eldredge claims he can end up hearing a voice through this process.<sup>25</sup> What is very obvious in this is that this is about talking to oneself and developing impressions. It is fraught with a propensity for self-delusion. Time is better spent studying God's Word rather than sitting around muttering to oneself and trying to interpret random thoughts and ideas. Psalm 1 directs us to meditate on God's Word.

It is not our intent to be too unkind or harshly judge Eldredge by saying he is tapping into an occult force or a demonic realm, but it must be asked, "To whom is he speaking?" His readers will have to decide. One thing is sure, the inner conversations Eldredge describes for himself are so mundane and unbiblical they could not be of God. One must never confuse imagination with revelation. Herein is the key to Eldredge's error.

### CONFESSIONS OF A MYSTICAL MIND

Eldredge is on target biblically when he says, "There is no substitute for the written Word of God. No matter how precious a personal word may be to us, no matter how cool some insight may be, it doesn't compare to the written Word. I've seen too many immature Christians chase after 'revelation' and go wacky because they are not rooted and grounded in the Scripture."<sup>26</sup> Yet this is really double talk because what Eldredge affirms on one page, he is really condemning on other pages — and in his own practice. Eldredge cannot have it both ways. This is a vain attempt to try to sell his goods to both mystics and non-mystics. He has already told us to try to hear a "gentle whisper" or a "still small voice" earlier in the book.<sup>27</sup>

Eldredge may also lure sensitive young disciples into confusion by his

mystical approach to ascertain what to read in the Bible. After saying he's "all for" programs which help one "read through the Bible in a year or study a certain book,"<sup>28</sup> he dulls the process by writing:

"But in addition to all that, let me add how rich it can be simply to ask God, *What would you have me read today?*"<sup>29</sup>

Eldredge would have better served his readers by staying with his first recommendation. God can and will use His Word when and where He sees fit.

It is comical, and even sad, to read Eldredge relate how he ran frantically throughout his house asking God where his misplaced watch might be.<sup>30</sup> There is only silence, but Eldredge advises in our times of not hearing from God to "Keep listening."<sup>31</sup> Eldredge never did hear a voice telling him where the watch was. But after 90 minutes and another prayer, he does something he's never done before: he sits on the floor to put his socks on. And from that "particular spot" he can see his watch under the bed. His point seems to be that God leads in other ways. One wonders if God really does help Eldredge find lost and misplaced items each and every time, or if there are times when misplaced belongings never turn up in spite of his entreaties to the Almighty.

Misplacing items should alert us that perhaps we need to be more organized, because God is a God of order. Eldredge should try to find out how the watch got under the bed and eliminate that possibility next time. God can trust us to do small things like take care of our watch and be good responsible stewards over our property.

### DIMINISHMENT AND OTHER FOUL SPIRITS

Eldredge also errs in his understanding and methodology of fighting against demonic powers. At one point he has writer's block and asks God with what he is dealing:

"*Diminishment*, he says. Oh yes, that's been an enemy of mine for many years. A spirit of Diminishment. Okay. I bring the full work of the Lord Jesus Christ against Diminishment, and I bind Diminishment from me.' Remember, Jesus says to 'tie up the strong man' (Matthew 12:29). Clearly the context of his instruction is dealing with foul spirits, because in the preceding verse he has just said, 'But if I drive out demons by the Spirit of God, then the kingdom of God has come upon you' (v. 28). Then he says to bind the enemy."<sup>32</sup>

The notion that Jesus commanded His followers to "bind the enemy" is not biblical. Eldredge is confusing his flesh and his weaknesses with the demonic. His premise that we have to "tie up the strong man" and "bind the enemy" is wrong.

There are many deliverance clichés and traditional myths that have been repeated for so long that people think they are true. David Kirkwood deals with many of the myths and in his book, *Modern Myths About Satan and Spiritual Warfare*, he titles one section, "Didn't Jesus Instruct Us to 'Bind the Strong Man'?"<sup>33</sup> Kirkwood writes:

"Three times in the gospels we find Jesus making mention of 'binding the strong man.' In none of those three cases, however, did He tell His followers that 'binding the strong man' was something they should practice. ... Thus Jesus spoke metaphorically of Satan, comparing him to a strong man guarding his possessions. The only one able to take the strong man's possessions would be someone even stronger, namely, Himself. This was the true explanation as to how He cast out demons. Satan is the 'strong man,' and Jesus is the one who overpowered him to plunder his house. Isn't that exactly what Jesus did through his sacrificial death? He broke Satan's power over all those who would believe in Jesus. His casting out

of demons was a foreshadowing of an even greater deliverance that He would accomplish for Satan's captive!"<sup>34</sup>

So it is clearly unscriptural for anyone to go around trying to bind some alleged demonic strong man. Jesus is the deliverer, not us. Here, in Matthew 12:29, is Jesus' argument:

"No man can carry away the furniture from a strong man's house until he has overpowered and bound the strong man. So I could not remove the inferior devils out of the bodies of men, unless I had first conquered and bound their master, Satan himself."<sup>35</sup>

Eldredge introduces another idea: "agreements."<sup>36</sup> The novel speculation of agreements he puts forth is that we unknowingly agree with a demonic attack by thinking the demonic attack is something else, such as one of our own thoughts. This is not easy to follow because Satan's "attacks are often quite subtle, masquerading as something else (like writer's block)."<sup>37</sup>

So by his own diagnosis, Eldredge claims he did not really have writer's block, but a demonic block. Such judgments present a false dilemma: follow Eldredge's advice or risk collusion with demons.<sup>38</sup>

### RECKLESS ABANDONMENT

Eldredge explains how he and friends sat around the living room trying to sense if anything is blocking one of them from hearing a voice from God. Eldredge begins to doubt he should be doing this, but then someone says, "Well, I hear the word *abandonment*."<sup>39</sup>

Anne, the woman who heard the word "abandonment," confesses that in the past she thought because her "first baby had terrible colic and screamed all day," God abandoned her.<sup>40</sup> The group then led the woman in a ritual prayer to "break the agreement."<sup>41</sup> "Having done that, we could then bring the work of Jesus Christ against the spirit of abandonment and

against every lying spirit that had brought this to Anne," Eldredge writes.<sup>42</sup> But here again, only misconstrued Scripture — Eldredge applies Ephesians 4:26-27 — is provided for these strange practices and questionable rituals that would be at home in any occult setting.

Eldredge says he hears the voice of God and Anne says she does too. Anne's message from the voice was, "He said he loves me."<sup>43</sup> But she should already know that from the Bible. Romans 8:31-39 assures us that God's love is always there with eternal and enduring power. Such a thought would fortify her in the future when her feelings become unstable. The Apostle Peter clearly says the Word takes precedence over experience, emotions, and feelings (1 Peter 1:16-19).

For a time Eldredge says he heard the words "My love" over and over and over for months.<sup>44</sup> However, he maintains he never was certain why God was saying this. Eldredge spends so much time in introspection and self-analysis that could be spent learning the promises of God.

Eldredge moves into even more dangerous territory when he instructs readers that "you'll soon find that it is far easier to hear the voice of God for someone else than it is to hear it for yourself."<sup>45</sup> Case in point: he hears the voice of God for a lady named Sally. While making coffee one morning, he prays:

*"Jesus, what's up? What's assaulting Sally? I heard Jesus say, Desolation. The spirit assaulting Sally was Desolation. ... My hunch was that Desolation was taking advantage of Sally's emotional distress."*<sup>46</sup>

When we are dealing with the difficulties of others, we cannot be going just on hunches. What started as a guessing game for Eldredge has now progressed into a guessing game about others' lives. Eldredge figured out that Sally somehow made an agreement with "Desolation." Then, following prayer, Sally "began to hear

the voice of God," to which Eldredge rhapsodizes, "Oh, how I wish this kind of intercession was more widely practiced in the body of Christ."<sup>47</sup>

It gets even more bizarre when Eldredge tells us:

"Remember, warfare works like a virus. It tries to transfer around as much as it can, especially when you've been involved in trying to set someone free."<sup>48</sup>

Eldredge further warns that if one is having a down day, "don't just assume the attack you are under on any given day is yours. It might be someone else's battle, trying to transfer to you."<sup>49</sup> Here Eldredge does not even try to produce a Scripture. There are many things that can cause a down day. It does not have to be an attack or warfare. Perhaps Eldredge gives us a clue as to what this has done to his life when he says:

"I hate the pace of my life. I don't live. I get things done. My life is entirely task oriented. I wake and pray, because if I don't pray I get taken out by warfare. ... I used to enjoy asking people, 'How are you?' Now I avoid the question, because it's an invitation to a conversation I don't have time for, and, it's going to take us into issues I am going to feel obligated to do something about."<sup>50</sup>

His admission is stunning. This is what can happen when one gets involved with unbiblical teachings and practices and we spend time trying to ferret out demons that we imagine are afflicting ourselves or others.

### **A LION, A LAMB, AND A DOG NAMED SCOUT**

Eldredge also shares the story of his dog's sickness. Scout had cancer and Eldredge writes that he "began to ask, *Jesus, do you want to heal Scout? Is that what you want to do here?* I sensed the answer was *No. Not this time.*"<sup>51</sup> Eldredge then tells his readers a story about the aftermath of Scout's passing:

"Now, I don't know what you are going to make of this, but I have to tell you the rest of the story. When Scout died, I heard him bark. Not in my memory, not in the past, but in that moment. In the kingdom of God. I thought, *Really? Did I just hear that?* I believe that God preserves the life of animals. After all, the Scripture says the lion will lie down with the lamb. Then there must be at least lions and lambs in the kingdom. Why would God stop there? Many good theologians believe we will see our beloved animals in heaven. But I won't go into a theological debate here. I asked Jesus, *What do dogs do in the kingdom, Lord?* And he said, *They run.* And then I saw Scout, with the eyes of my heart, running with a whole pack of very happy dogs, near the feet of Jesus. I shared my story with Stasi and the boys, and Blaine said, 'Yes. I heard something too. Right after Scout died. Jesus said, *'He won't give me the ball.'*" That was Scout's trademark, to come up to you to play ball, tennis ball already in his mouth, but then he wouldn't give it to you. To hear that from Jesus was more precious to us than I can say."<sup>52</sup>

Beyond the mystical and whimsical details of this story again lies an even more serious concern: Eldredge's handling of Scripture. He either ignores or does not know the context of Isaiah 11:1-10 and handles it in a subjective, cavalier way. First, and of minor emphasis, is Eldredge's premise of the lion lying down with the lamb. Isaiah never said that, but rather said the wolf will dwell with the lamb and the leopard will lie down with the young goat (Isaiah 11:6).

Second, and of major importance, is his hermeneutic of confusion. Eldredge shuffles the earthly millennial kingdom passages in Isaiah 11 and thinks that those passages are speaking about heaven. Isaiah 11 describes the Messiah's reign on *earth* (v. 10). The setting is clear in verse 4

where the earth is mentioned twice and again in verse 9 declaring that, "the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the LORD." In the millennial earth there will be a return to Eden-like conditions as the curse is lifted and animals no longer are ferocious. In this idyllic setting, "the wolf also shall dwell with the lamb" (v. 6).

Hebrew scholars concur that, "The meaning of 'the earth' is also determined by that of 'all my holy mountain.' The *land of Israel*, the dominion of the Son of David in the more restricted sense, will be from this time forward the paradisaical centre, as it were, of the whole earth, — a prelude of its future state of perfect and universal glorification."<sup>53</sup>

Beyond the poor exegesis, all of what Eldredge claims is speculation. There must be a reason God has left these details out of Scripture. Obviously we do not need to know about the postmortem state of animals, neither do we need to animate our imagination where the Bible is silent. If God wanted us to know these things, He would have given them in Scripture. Where Scripture is silent, we should be too.

Saying that Jesus is playing ball with dogs in heaven is trite and unscriptural. Scripture is clear as to exactly what Jesus is doing in heaven. The Bible tells us, "He continues forever, has an unchangeable priesthood. Therefore, He is able to save to the uttermost those who come to God through Him, since He *always lives to make intercession for them*" (Hebrews 7:24-25, emphasis added). His focus is on His redeemed.

### VOICES OVER VERSES

As one would expect, Eldredge's advice for personal "day-to-day decision making" is also overtly subjective and even dangerous. He instructs us: "Ask God. Listen for his voice. Together. Surrender to what you hear."<sup>54</sup> But how do we know what we are hearing is really God's voice? Perhaps we are hearing our own imagination. Eldredge, himself, warns of *the snare of speculation*.<sup>55</sup> Even more

deadly would be a demonic voice. Remember, Satan is the master deceiver and can appear as an angel of light (2 Corinthians 4:3, 14). Because most of Eldredge's "voices" are not biblical or capable of being checked by the Bible, he cannot know that what he is hearing is not demonic.

Carolyn Nystrom, in her online review of *Walking with God*, faults Eldredge in this regard:

"...this kind of moment-by-moment seeking of God's will is not for the marginally sane — which includes many of us at various stages of our lives. Seeking God's guidance for each momentary choice can become so paralyzing that a praying Christian fears to take even one step out of his or her current circle because it might go in some wrong, un-God-guided direction. Alternatively, a person accustomed to constantly listening for an inner voice from God may begin to mistake all sorts of inner urges and motives for God's voice and thus lose the basic spiritual skill of self-examination. And, sadly, some Christians really do hear voices and see visions brought on by schizophrenia.<sup>56</sup> Schizophrenics fairly often mistake the hallucinatory voices of their illness for the voice of God."<sup>57</sup>

Consider the following: Abraham had few scripturally recorded, direct divine revelations in his whole lifetime. Joseph had fewer than Abraham. Job had one. Esther had none. We have all of God's revelation complete in the Bible to guide us in our own decision making. What we have by comparison with even the greatest prophet or patriarch is overwhelming.

One of the building blocks of orthodox theology is the commitment to God's special revelation in Jesus Christ and in the Bible. It is fixed, firm, and sure. It is forever settled in heaven (Psalm 119:89). It needs neither addition nor alteration. It is all that we need, and more than we need. The Psalmist found so much light,

insight, and direction from God's Word that he proclaimed:

"The law of the LORD is perfect, converting the soul; the testimony of the LORD is sure, making wise the simple; the statutes of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the LORD is pure, enlightening the eyes; the fear of the LORD is clean, enduring forever; the judgments of the LORD are true and righteous altogether. More to be desired are they than gold, Yea, than much fine gold; sweeter also than honey and the honeycomb. Moreover by them Your servant is warned, and in keeping them there is great reward" (Psalms 19:7-11).

### ELDREDGE'S PRESCRIBED PRAYERS

Eldredge has also developed a number of ritual prayers, some of them for protection from demon powers.<sup>58</sup> Some of them seem excessive and preoccupied with the demonic. Colossians 3:1-4 directs us to set our affections on Christ in the heavenlies and not on demons.

Nystrom further writes:

"...the book gives the Devil perhaps more than his due. Yes, spiritual warfare is real — as Eldredge says in his statement of core values. But to remain on constant alert for dark forces entering the home through, for example, some unidentified etchings on the handle of a dagger seems to me unnerving and draining of time and energy that might better be put to considering how we might use (and not use) that dagger. Such mundane musings must seem shallow to those who feel divinely driven into spiritual warfare."<sup>59</sup>

Absent from Eldredge's presentation on how we should conduct our spiritual lives is any suggestion of a believer being regularly under the preaching of the Word of God. Eldredge never mentions the need to sit under sound biblical preaching.

However, the New Testament exalts it as a priority in Acts 6:1-4, 1 Timothy 4:13, 5:17, and 2 Timothy 4:1-3. Craig Larson reminds us:

“But the leaders of the Reformation placed primary attention on public teaching and preaching, and Karl Barth, writing to well-educated Westerners, regarding the proclamation of the Word as one of the three fundamental ways that people experience the life-changing Word of God.”<sup>60</sup>

Larson summons our attention to the truth that preaching keeps us from self-deception, brings the special presence of the Holy Spirit in God’s Word, challenges us to action, moves us to corporate obedience, protects us from error, and can be listened to with a very low threshold of difficulty. The Apostle Peter tells us how to grow in the Lord, and it is not by sensing our impressions and dredging up hunches, but rather “as newborn babes, desire the pure milk of the word, that you may grow thereby” (1 Peter 2:2).

In closing, Nystrom summarizes the weaknesses of Eldredge’s book:

“This book’s greatest flaw is its failure to recognize the *guarding* aspect of God’s guidance. In even the smallest matter, Eldredge would say, ‘I’m praying about it, trying to get some guidance.’ While not wholly undesirable, this approach seems to miss the point of a benevolent God who genuinely cares for and protects his children — the comforting message of Psalm 23. There we don’t see a shepherd hiding behind rocks playing peekaboo with his sheep, but one who proactively walks ahead of them, who comforts, provides food, protects, and restores so that they need ‘fear no evil.’ The Puritans had a way of assuming God’s guarding guidance by saying, ‘I will do thus unless providentially hindered.’ In this view of divine guidance, God lays out before his people a veritable smorgasbord of opportunities,

saying, ‘See what a wonderful table I have placed before you. Choose; enjoy. I am with you.’ To trust God’s guarding guidance is wonderfully freeing when it comes to geographic moves, marriage proposals, vocational choices, or even routes for horseback riding. Depending on the weight of the matter, we draw on common sense; the teachings of Scripture; the advice of wise, godly friends; the guidance of the church; and our own interests, abilities, and inclinations. We pray throughout this process — and then we choose. If that door is closed from the other side we can smile with relief, even if disappointed, because God our guarding guide has protected us. And so we move on under his continued care, continuing to graze on his smorgasbord of opportunities.”<sup>61</sup>

#### Endnotes:

1. John Eldredge, *Walking with God*. Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2008, pg. 132.
2. *Ibid.*, pp. ix, xii.
3. *Ibid.*, pg. xii.
4. *Ibid.*
5. *Ibid.*
6. *Ibid.*, pg. xiii.
7. *Ibid.*
8. *Ibid.*, pg. 4.
9. *Ibid.*, pg. 5.
10. *Ibid.*, pg. 7.
11. *Ibid.*, pp. 7-8.
12. *Ibid.*, pg. 11.
13. *Ibid.*, pg. 12.
14. *Ibid.*, pp. 12-13.
15. *Ibid.*, pg. 13.
16. *Ibid.*, pg. 17, italic in original.
17. *Ibid.*, pp. 18, 19.
18. G.I. Williamson, *The Westminster Confession of Faith for Study Classes*. Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 1964, pg. 1, quotation rendered in italics in source.
19. *Ibid.*, pp. 9-10, quotation rendered in italics in source.
20. Bernard Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation*. Boston: W.A. Wilde Company, 1956, pp. 122, 124, italics in original.
21. *Walking with God*, op. cit., pg. 31, italics in original.
22. *Ibid.*, pp. 31-32.
23. *Ibid.*, pg. 32.
24. *Ibid.*
25. *Ibid.*
26. *Ibid.*, pp. 42-43.

27. *Ibid.*, pg. 30. (For a biblical understanding of “the still small voice,” see G. Richard Fisher, “What is the Still, Small Voice? Manufacturing Mystics Young and Old,” *The Quarterly Journal*, October-December 2007, pp. 5-7.)
28. *Ibid.*, pg. 43.
29. *Ibid.*, italics in original.
30. *Ibid.*, pp. 48-50.
31. *Ibid.*, pg. 50.
32. *Ibid.*, pg. 55, italic in original.
33. David Kirkwood, *Modern Myths About Satan and Spiritual Warfare*. Pittsburgh: Ethnos Press, 1994, pp. 89-91.
34. *Ibid.*, pp. 89-90, 90-91.
35. J.R. Dummelow, *A Commentary on the Holy Bible*. New York: Macmillan Company, 1958, pg. 668.
36. *Walking with God*, op. cit., pg. 57.
37. *Ibid.*
38. *Ibid.*, pp. 57-58.
39. *Ibid.*, pg. 58, italic in original.
40. *Ibid.*
41. *Ibid.*, pg. 59, italics in original.
42. *Ibid.*
43. *Ibid.*, pg. 60.
44. *Ibid.*, pp. 75-76, italics in original.
45. *Ibid.*, pg. 110.
46. *Ibid.*, pp. 110-111, italics in original.
47. *Ibid.*, pg. 111.
48. *Ibid.*, pg. 112.
49. *Ibid.*, pg. 113.
50. *Ibid.*, pg. 115.
51. *Ibid.*, pg. 122, italics in original.
52. *Ibid.*, pg. 125, italics in original.
53. C.F. Keil and Franz Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1983, Vol. VII, pg. 287, italics in original.
54. *Walking with God*, op. cit., pg. 137.
55. *Ibid.*, pp. 132-136.
56. Sadly, what the medical field sometimes quickly labels as schizophrenia can be a matter of extensive sleep loss, a brain tumor, early dementia, food deprivation, or just bad reactions to prescription drugs. Doubly sad is the fact that some authors claim that these untreated situations and maladies (with their hallucinations) are the voice of God and publishers collude with them for the sake of some profit.
57. Carolyn Nystrom, “Should I Fish or Lay Low?,” *Christianity Today* online edition, posted Sept. 18, 2008. Document available at: [www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2008/september/28.89.html](http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2008/september/28.89.html).
58. *Walking with God*, op. cit., pp. 149-153.
59. “Should I Fish or Lay Low?,” op. cit.
60. Craig Brian Larson, “The Blind Spot of the Spiritual Formation Movement,” *Christianity Today* online edition, posted Sept. 24, 2008. Document available at: [www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2008/septemberweb-only/139-31.0.html](http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2008/septemberweb-only/139-31.0.html).
61. “Should I Fish or Lay Low?,” op. cit., italic in original.

comes in second to inner voices in Young's theology. The Bible puts God in a box; inner voices make God alive and fresh. This is what Young wants to convey.

Young also has little good to say about the Church or other related institutions. While Mack had attended seminary, "none of his old seminary training was helping in the least" when it came to understanding God.<sup>7</sup> He consistently depicts the activity of the Church in a negative light. Mack is pretty sure he hasn't met the Church Jesus loves,<sup>8</sup> which is all about relationships, "Not a bunch of

an earlier occasion Jesus tells Mack that he can get out of his mess "By re-turning. By turning back to me. By giving up your ways of power and manipulation and just come back to me."<sup>14</sup> Yet nowhere in *The Shack* is the reader given a clear understanding of the Gospel. When Mack asks God what Jesus accomplished by dying, Mack is told, "through his death and resurrection, I am now fully reconciled to the world." When pressed to explain, God says that He is reconciled to "The whole world," not just the believer.<sup>15</sup> Young never goes so far as to say all will be saved, but he certainly gives that impression when Mack's father, an awful man who showed no signs of being saved, is found in heaven;<sup>16</sup> when God says

question, "Is that what it means to be a Christian?" Jesus says:

"Who said anything about being a Christian? I'm not a Christian. ... Those who love me come from every system that exists. They were Buddhists or Mormons, Baptists or Muslims, Democrats, Republicans and many who don't vote or are not part of any Sunday morning or religious institutions. ... I have no desire to make them Christians, but I do want to join them in their transformation into sons and daughters of my Papa, into my brothers and sisters, into my Beloved."<sup>20</sup>

The reader may find himself, like Mack, confused. "'Does that mean,' asks Mack, 'that all roads will lead to you?'" Jesus denies this, but then says, "What it does mean is that I will travel any road to find you."<sup>21</sup>

Jesus apparently means that He will travel any road to "join them in their transformation."<sup>22</sup> The implication is that people are on many roads that lead to their self-transformation. Jesus will join people where they are on that road and apparently aid in that transformation. This is certainly not the teaching of Scripture, which tells us that we must come to the one road, the narrow way that leads to God through Jesus Christ.

### THE GODHEAD

The main thrust of the novel concerns itself with an understanding of God and how we are to be in relationship to Him. As already noted, the method by which mankind comes into the right relationship with God is cloudy at best in *The Shack*. Young's Trinity is equally confusing. The author does not develop his understanding of God exclusively from Scripture and, in fact, often contradicts biblical teaching. The first issue is that of imagining and presenting human forms for the members of the Trinity. While some slack might be given for Young's portrait of Jesus, who came in human form (although we don't know what He looks like),

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*Young's Trinity is equally confusing. The author does not develop his understanding of God exclusively from Scripture and, in fact, often contradicts biblical teaching.*

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exhausting work and long list of demands, and not the sitting in endless meetings staring at the backs of people's heads, people he really didn't even know."<sup>9</sup> Sunday school<sup>10</sup> and family devotions<sup>11</sup> both take hits as well. Systematic theology itself takes a postmodern broadside as the Holy Spirit says, "I have a great fondness for uncertainty."<sup>12</sup> While Scripture does not place such words in the mouth of the Holy Spirit, Young's love for uncertainty becomes frustratingly clear as he outlines his concept of salvation.

### SALVATION

When Mack asks how he can be part of the Church, Jesus replies, "It's simple, Mack. It's all about relationships and simply sharing life."<sup>13</sup> On

repeatedly He is particularly fond of all people; when God claims that He has forgiven all sins against Him;<sup>17</sup> that He does not "do humiliation, or guilt, or condemnation;"<sup>18</sup> and contrary to many sections of Scripture, God is not a God of judgment:

"I don't need to punish people for sin. Sin is its own punishment, devouring you from the inside. It's not my purpose to punish it; it's my joy to cure it."<sup>19</sup>

While Young's comment has some validity, it does not faithfully reflect the teaching of Scripture, which portrays God as actively involved in the punishment of sin.

Young further muddies the waters as he has Jesus reply to Mack's

the first two of the Ten Commandments forbid depicting the Father or the Holy Spirit in physical form. When we create an image of God in our imagination, we then attempt to relate to that image, which is inevitably a false one. This is the essence of idolatry and is forbidden in the Word.

Further, the portrayal of God throughout the novel is one that humanizes Him rather than exalts Him. Young quotes Jacques Ellul: “No matter what God’s power may be, the first aspect of God is never that of absolute Master, the Almighty. It is that of the God who puts himself on our human level and limits himself.”<sup>23</sup> This contradicts the entirety of biblical revelation, which first and often declares God to be absolute Master, yet in no way mitigates the incarnation, as Young and Ellul are trying to claim.

Young further humanizes God and contradicts Scripture by teaching that all the members of the Trinity took human form at the incarnation: “When we three spoke ourself into human existence as the Son of God, we became fully human.”<sup>24</sup> This sounds like modalism, an ancient heresy which teaches that the Trinity is not composed of three distinct members, but three distinct modes in which God appears throughout human history. Even if he doesn’t believe in modalism, it is clear that Young believes that the Father died on the cross with the Son and bears the marks of the cross to this day.<sup>25</sup>

He also does not believe that the Father abandoned Jesus on the cross, as Scripture declares.<sup>26</sup> And any concept of authority and submission in the Godhead is denied,<sup>27</sup> although 1 Corinthians 11:1-3 is clear that such authority and submission exists. More than that, Young teaches that God submits to *us* as well.<sup>28</sup> By the end of the book, God is reduced to being our servant as we are His (it’s all about relationships, not authority).<sup>29</sup>

The very essence of God is challenged when Young, quoting from Unitarian-Universalist R. Buckminster Fuller, declares God to be a verb, not

a noun.<sup>30</sup> In a related statement, Young has Jesus say of the Holy Spirit, “She is Creativity; she is Action; she is Breathing of Life.”<sup>31</sup> Yet the Bible presents God as a person (noun) not an action (verb). When this truth is denied, we are moving from the biblical understanding of a personal God to an Eastern understanding of God in everything.<sup>32</sup>

Thus, we are not surprised that when Mack asks the Holy Spirit if he will see her again, he is told, “Of course. You might see me in a piece of art, or music, or silence, or through people, or in Creation, or in your joy and sorrow.”<sup>33</sup> This is not biblical teaching. This idea seems repeated in a line from a song Missy creates, “Come kiss me wind and take my breath Till you and I are one.”<sup>34</sup> At what point do we become one with creation? Again, this is an Eastern concept, not a biblical one. Young reinforces his Eastern leanings with a statement right out of New Age teachings: Papa tells Mack, “Just say it out loud. There is power in what my children declare.”<sup>35</sup> Rhonda Byrne would echo this idea in her book, *The Secret*, but you will not find it in the Bible.<sup>36</sup>

Further, we are told that, “Jesus, as a human being, had no power within himself to heal anyone.”<sup>37</sup> So how did He do so? By trusting in the Holy Spirit. Jesus, the Spirit says, “is just the first to do it to the uttermost — the first to absolutely trust my life within him.”<sup>38</sup> There is enough truth here to be confusing but not accurate. Jesus, never ceasing to be fully God, had all divine power dwelling within Him. That He chose to limit His use of that power and rely on the Holy Spirit while on earth in no way diminishes His essence.

While Jesus is our example, He is not a guru, blazing a trail in which in this life we too can be like God. This idea smacks of New Age teaching, not Scripture. Jesus even tells Mack that “God, who is the ground of all being, dwells in, around, and through all things — ultimately emerging as the real.”<sup>39</sup> This is pure New Age spirituality.

*The Shack*, while occasionally getting things right, is, in the end, a dangerous piece of fiction. It undermines Scripture and the Church, presents, at best, a mutilated Gospel, misrepresents the biblical teachings concerning the Godhead, and offers a New Age understanding of God and the universe. This is not a great novel to explain tragedy and pain. It is a misleading work which will confuse many and lead others astray.

#### Endnotes:

1. Wm. Paul Young, *The Shack*. Los Angeles: Windblown Media, 2007, back cover.
2. *Ibid.*, front cover.
3. Albert Mohler, “A Look at ‘The Shack,’” The Albert Mohler Radio Program, April 11, 2008.
4. *The Shack*, op. cit., pp. 65-66.
5. *Ibid.*, pg. 195.
6. *Ibid.*, pg. 196.
7. *Ibid.*, pg. 91.
8. *Ibid.*, pg. 177.
9. *Ibid.*, pg. 178.
10. *Ibid.*, pg. 98.
11. *Ibid.*, pg. 107.
12. *Ibid.*, pg. 203.
13. *Ibid.*, pg. 178.
14. *Ibid.*, pg. 147, italic in original.
15. *Ibid.*, pg. 192.
16. *Ibid.*, pp. 214-215.
17. *Ibid.*, e.g., pp. 118-119.
18. *Ibid.*, pg. 223.
19. *Ibid.*, pg. 120.
20. *Ibid.*, pg. 182.
21. *Ibid.*
22. *Ibid.*
23. *Ibid.*, pg. 88, italics in original.
24. *Ibid.*, pg. 99.
25. *Ibid.*, pp. 95-96, 164.
26. *Ibid.*, pg. 96.
27. *Ibid.*, pp. 122, 145.
28. *Ibid.*, pg. 145.
29. *Ibid.*, pp. 236-237.
30. *Ibid.*, pp. 194, 204.
31. *Ibid.*, pg. 110.
32. God “in” everything is known as pantheism — an Eastern belief akin to pantheism which teaches that God “is” everything. In reality there is very little difference between the two.
33. *The Shack*, op. cit., pg. 198.
34. *Ibid.*, pg. 233, italics in original.
35. *Ibid.*, pg. 227.
36. For more information on Rhonda Byrne and *The Secret*, see J. Greg Sheryl, “Do You Want to Know ... The Secret?,” *The Quarterly Journal*, October-December 2007, pp. 1, 11-21.
37. *The Shack*, op. cit., pg. 100.
38. *Ibid.*
39. *Ibid.*, pg. 112.

heart and the blinding power of the evil one that some can turn their backs on what they intuitively know to be true and create a worldview that eliminates God altogether. That New Atheism is gaining traction among many such people is evidenced by the sales of this genre of books and the attention afforded its leaders. More of this in a moment, but first let's turn to Old Atheism for a backdrop.

### THE FOUR HORSEMEN + FOUR MORE

Albert Mohler identifies Friedrich Nietzsche, Karl Marx, Charles Darwin, and Sigmund Freud as what he calls the "four horsemen" of Old Atheism.<sup>1</sup> These nineteenth-century men have had an incredible impact on modern society as each of them shaped his respective field around atheistic views: Nietzsche influenced philosophy and is sort of a poster boy today for many postmodernists; Marx changed how much of the world understood society and government; Darwin rewrote the scientific textbooks; and Freud redefined the human mind. It would be hard to find anyone in the Western world who has had more influence on how we think and live today than these four men. Each of them, including his body of work and influence, was largely the product of his denial of the existence of God.

Friedrich Nietzsche might be worth a little attention as he is representative of the views of Old Atheism. Nietzsche is famous for his statement, "God is dead." By that Nietzsche was not so much saying that God actually lived at one point and had died, but that God was no longer needed by society. There was apparently a time when a belief in God was necessary in order to bring about moral order within the human race, but it was now time for people to grow up and move on.

Once accepted that God was dead, there would inevitably be an adjustment period that would prove painful for mankind, but ultimately something

far better would emerge. Nietzsche knew, however, that with the loss of an Absolute would come nihilism and despair. Without God where would humans find their reason to live, their purpose, their foundation for morals and values?

Nietzsche took this problem seriously and worked to replace God with what he called the "will to power." Once God was disposed of, men could finally stop wasting time on religion and turn to self-development and to the value of the world itself. Nietzsche believed that the shadows of God would linger for a long time, possibly even thousands of years as the transition from a theistic based world to an atheistic one would be painful. Nevertheless this transition must be completed for the good of all. Still, in Nietzsche, as with most of those representing Old Atheism, there is a sense of loss. Nietzsche is right; despair is hard to shake if there is no God. As a result, Nietzsche, and many other early atheists, lived with unresolved tension between their philosophical systems, which denied God, and the actual reality of living in a universe which seemed to need God to survive and have purpose.

Fast forward to the New Atheism and, according to Mohler, its four horsemen: Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, Sam Harris, and Christopher Hitchens.<sup>2</sup> These men claim to have moved beyond the nihilism of a godless universe and are living Nietzsche's dream: framing the world around the creation — which of course has no creator — rather than around the Creator Himself.

The new four horsemen are thrilled with their beliefs and eager to spread their atheistic gospel. They want converts and they are aggressively taking their message to the masses in popular, easy to digest lectures, books, and articles. Richard Dawkins makes clear his intention when he writes early in his book *The God Delusion*, "If this book works as I intend, religious readers who open it will be atheists when they put it down."<sup>3</sup>

This evangelistic fervor has gone mainstream in some places. For

example, the American Humanist Association launched an ad campaign for Christmas 2008 in Washington, D.C., in which signs were placed on buses that read, "Why believe in a god? Just be good for goodness sake."<sup>4</sup> In Britain a similar campaign, orchestrated by the British Humanist Association, placed messages on London buses stating, "There's probably no God. Now stop worrying and enjoy life."<sup>5</sup> These groups define humanism as "a progressive philosophy of life that, without theism, affirms our responsibility to lead ethical lives of value to self and humanity."<sup>6</sup> This is the "good news" the New Atheists want the world to hear.

### MAJOR THEMES WITHIN NEW ATHEISM

If the New Atheists want followers, how are they packaging their gospel to attract disciples? Dawkins, the best known of this new breed of atheists, is a good example.

*They attack Christianity.* While atheism is the denial of any form of theism, it is Christianity which is largely in its sights. Perhaps this is because Dawkins and company know that the majority of their readers will most likely live in Christian cultures, or perhaps it is because Christianity presents the most formidable argument against their view. At any rate, Dawkins reserves his most venomous attacks for the God of the Bible. He states:

"The God of the Old Testament is arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction: jealous and proud of it; a petty, unjust, unforgiving control-freak; a vindictive, bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser; a misogynistic, homophobic, racist, infanticidal, genocidal, filicidal, pestilential, megalomaniacal, sadomasochistic, capriciously malevolent bully."<sup>7</sup>

And the God of the New Testament fares no better — perhaps worse. Even though the God of the New Testament seems a bit more admirable than that of the Old Testament, Dawkins suggests:

“...there are other teachings in the New Testament that no good person should support. I refer especially to the central doctrine of Christianity: that of ‘atone-ment’ for ‘original sin.’ This teaching, which lies at the heart of New Testament theology, is almost as morally obnoxious as the story of Abraham setting out to barbecue Isaac.”<sup>8</sup>

From the perspective of the New Atheists, the stories and teachings of the Bible reveal a God so odious as to be unbelievable.

*Belief in God is silly.* On a scale of one to seven, with one being 100% certainty in the existence of God and seven being 100% certainty that He does not exist, even Dawkins places himself at six, which technically makes him an agnostic rather than an atheist. However, before we say, “See! I told you so,” Dawkins explains himself, “I am agnostic only to the extent that I am agnostic about fairies at the bottom of the garden.”<sup>9</sup> This seems to be the style of the New Atheists.

Lacking a good case, they resort to berating and ridiculing theists. Not only is belief in God on the same level as belief in fairies, but Dawkins dismisses out of hand the evidence presented by Christians throughout the ages. He doesn’t even interact in any meaningful way with the thoughts presented by Aquinas and others, implying that such arguments are unworthy of discussion and not taken seriously by anyone today.<sup>10</sup>

Only the teleological argument — that design implies a designer — gets any attention at all and that cursory. Yet, a person hiking through the wilderness of Alaska who finds a fire ring will most certainly assume that someone had camped in that spot and arranged 20 or so stones in a circle, not that it evolved over millions of years. It is amazing that people who would see a designer behind a fire ring can so casually dismiss a designer behind the universe, but such is the mindset of the atheist.

Dawkins’ best retort to the teleological argument seems to be that, if God designed the universe, then who designed God? Unable to unravel this question to his satisfaction, Dawkins concludes that the teleological argument is lame.<sup>11</sup>

Recent and respected theists — those not subject to chasing fairies around the garden — are similarly dismissed. Of C.S. Lewis’ argument that Jesus must have either been a liar, lunatic, or Lord, Dawkins simply says, “[Lewis] should have known better.”<sup>12</sup> Dawkins suggests that Jesus could have been sincerely mistaken instead. However, it seems to me that such a “mistake” would have placed our Savior firmly in the lunatic category (as Lewis suggests), just as we would place any of our acquaintances making such a claim. No normal person mistakenly thinks he is God.

Dawkins furthers his argument by stating that theistic scientists are either deluded or senile or out of touch with the research. After all, of the scientists who are members of the National Academy of Sciences, only seven percent believe in a personal God.<sup>13</sup>

*Natural selection to the rescue.* Side-stepping for the moment the issue of who created God, both theists and atheists are left with the question of who or what created everything around us. Theists of any stripe would look to a deity powerful enough to form the universe out of nothing. The atheist, rejecting such a deity, must find something as powerful as God which nevertheless remains impersonal. That something is natural selection. Over and over in *The God Delusion*, Dawkins turns to natural selection as the savior of his system:

“Darwin and his successors have shown how living creatures, with their spectacular statistical improbability and appearance of design, have evolved by slow, gradual degrees from simple beginnings. We can now safely say that the illusion of design in living creatures is just that — an illusion.”<sup>14</sup>

Dawkins is very sensitive to the charge that natural selection is just a glorified version of luck and chance. Responding to the accusation that the probability of life originating on earth apart from God is as likely as a hurricane sweeping through a scrapyard and forming a Boeing 747, Dawkins retorts:

“This, in a nutshell, is the creationist’s favourite argument — an argument that could be made only by somebody who doesn’t understand the first thing about natural selection: somebody who thinks natural selection is a theory of chance whereas — in the relevant sense of chance — it is the opposite.”<sup>15</sup>

If natural selection is not a theory of chance, exactly what is it? For one thing, “Natural selection not only explains the whole of life; it also raises our consciousness to the power of science to explain how organized complexity can emerge from simple beginnings without any deliberate guidance.”<sup>16</sup> This sounds like random chance, although Dawkins is ready to explain:

“What is it that makes natural selection succeed as a solution to the problem of improbability, where chance and design both fail at the starting gate? The answer is that natural selection is a cumulative process, which breaks the problem of improbability up into small pieces. Each of the small pieces is slightly improbable, but not prohibitively so. When large numbers of these slightly improbable events are stacked up in series, the end product of the accumulation is very very improbable indeed, improbable enough to be far beyond the reach of chance. It is these end products that form the subjects of the creationist’s wearisomely recycled argument. The creationist completely misses the point, because he ... insists on treating the genesis of statistical improbability as a single, one-off event. He doesn’t understand the power of *accumulation*.”<sup>17</sup>

The argument then is that the end product — say a tree, or an animal, or a woman, or a Boeing 747 — would not be possible if it were a “single, one-off event.” A single random act of creation is beyond the possibility of chance, but if the end product is the result of a multitude of random acts of creation, each building on the last, then virtually anything is possible. The *magic*, if we could call it that, lies in the “power of accumulation.” Dawkins accuses the creationist of being someone who “doesn’t understand the first thing about natural selection: somebody who thinks natural selection is a theory of chance,” but it seems that the creationist understands all too well the theory behind natural selection.

Whether creation is a “one-off” chance action, or an accumulation of millions of acts of chance (per created object), it is still chance. And by atheistic definition and necessity, natural selection must be unguided acts of chance because there is no God residing in the universe. Of course, the evolutionist believes that natural selection is not entirely random and will always, eventually, produce a better end product, but to hold to such a belief the atheist must ascribe to natural selection the very attributes that it denies for God: omniscience and omnipotence. To the atheist, natural selection, with its power of accumulation chance theory, becomes his god.

Next up is the sticky issue of how life began. For even the most devoted evolutionist, the origin of life is virtually inexplicable. Natural selection cannot deliver the atheist in regard to origins because there was nothing originally to naturally select. Dawkins skirts the issue of the origin of organic material by complaining that it is harder to explain the existence of God than the eternal existence of matter. But once this premise is accepted, there is still no scenario under which life would form.

In response, Dawkins propounds a theory he calls the “Goldilocks zone.” That is, earth just happened to be situated in the universe at just the

perfect place at the perfect time (the Goldilocks zone) in “ways that singled it out for the evolution of life.”<sup>18</sup>

If this sounds a bit like luck, Dawkins ironically agrees. As a matter of fact, there apparently is a lot of luck floating around in the evolutionary pond. “Nevertheless, it may be,” Dawkins admits, “that the origin of life is not the only major gap in the evolutionary story that is bridged by sheer luck,”<sup>19</sup> the origin of human type cells and consciousness are as well.

This element of luck does not diminish Dawkins’ faith in natural selection, for he is convinced “natural selection works because it is a cumulative one-way street to improvement. It needs some luck to get started, and the ‘billions of planets’ anthropic principle grants it that luck.”<sup>20</sup>

Dawkins incredibly sees the luck factor necessary for natural selection as vastly superior to intellectual design of an omniscient Creator. As a matter of fact, he attributes the “amazing blindness” of theists to “the fact that many people have not had their consciousness raised, as biologists have, by natural selection and its power to tame improbability.”<sup>21</sup> The arrogance in such a statement is self-evident, but such arrogance, in the final analysis, is all the atheists have.

*Atheists are good people too.* One of the strongest arguments by Christians against atheism is that atheism provides no foundation for decent and moral living. If God does not exist, then no final authority exists which can arbitrate between right and wrong. Additionally, there is no final judgment facing those who do evil. In light of these ideas, Christians often assume that atheists will ultimately and consistently live out the conclusions of their beliefs resulting in nihilism and anarchy.

Tim Wildmon, president of the American Family Association, states, “How do we define ‘good’ if we don’t believe in God? God in his word, the Bible, tells us what’s good and bad

and right and wrong. If we are each ourselves defining what’s good, it’s going to be a crazy world.”<sup>22</sup>

To this issue Dawkins devotes an entire chapter. His strongest rebuttal is that there does not exist any significant difference between the behavior of Christians and non-Christians.<sup>23</sup> Good behavior is ensured by our own selfish need to survive and the reciprocal altruism (“You scratch my back and I’ll scratch yours”<sup>24</sup>) that natural selection has hot wired it into the human creature.

Dawkins then concludes that, “we do not need God in order to be good — or evil.”<sup>25</sup> The New Atheists have concluded they really have no need of God.

## A DEFENSE OF THEISM

Fundamentally, the New Atheism is different from other forms of atheism, not in its beliefs, but in its joyful evangelistic zeal to smash all opposing views and establish Darwinian atheism as the one standing truth claim. It is an unapologetically modernistic approach in a supposed post-modern world, yet it is winning many adherents. For example, billboards were erected in November 2008 throughout Denver by an atheist group called Colorado Coalition of Reason. The billboards read, “Don’t believe in God? You are not alone.”<sup>26</sup>

The New Atheism is aggressive and out for converts. It has declared outright war on all forms of theism in general and Christianity in particular. Some will be taken in by all the rhetoric, logic, and efforts by Dawkins and company, but upon closer examination it is discovered that their arguments don’t hold water; they leak at several points: scientifically, philosophically, and spiritually.

*Scientifically.* While Dawkins is an eminent professor at Oxford University and considered one of the most distinguished scientists in the world today, his book is faulted scientifically even by his own peers — both Christian and non-Christian.

Perhaps the most helpful critique from a Christian perspective is that of

Alister McGrath, himself an Oxford professor of historical theology and a fellow scientist with a degree in molecular biophysics. While McGrath respects Dawkins as a scientist (and sadly accepts some form of theistic evolution), he believes that, in attempting to propagate his atheistic views, Dawkins left the evidence of science at the door and launched into a fundamentalist rant. According to McGrath in his own book, *The Dawkins Delusion?*, Dawkins misrepresents his sources, stretches the facts, makes up unpersuasive pseudoscientific ideas to bolster his position, and in general simply does not prove his case.

Science, as Dawkins knows, cannot prove or disprove God. It can, however, examine the evidence and make various hypotheses. Given the evidence, which hypothesis best makes sense of all we see and observe around us:

- The theory of evolution which teaches random chance, omniscient but impersonal natural selection, and a "Goldilocks zone" in which our planet, and life as we know it, formed?
- Or a Creator God who wisely brought all things into existence and placed in balance the highly complicated and integrated universe that we can study scientifically and enjoy physically, emotionally, and spiritually?

The New Atheists have placed their bets on natural selection and evolutionary theory, but they know these things cannot be verified. Dawkins even admits that Darwinism, as he understands it today, may radically change and may even be disproven in the future. He writes, "new facts may come to light which will force our successors ... to abandon Darwinism or modify it beyond recognition."<sup>27</sup> Yet Dawkins gamely clings tightly to his evolutionary theories and belittles anyone he considers foolish enough, or deluded enough, to believe in God.

Atheists are placing their faith in a theory that they can reasonably be certain will not be the same a hun-

dred years from now, while Christians place their faith in a God who claims to be the same, yesterday, today, and forever (Hebrews 13:8). Ultimately, the New Atheists' rejection of God is not scientific, it is philosophical and spiritual.

*Philosophically.* Alister McGrath further claims that, "*The God Delusion* is a work of theater rather than scholarship — a fierce, rhetorical assault on religion and passionate plea for it to be banished to the lunatic fringes of society, where it can do no harm."<sup>28</sup> He is not alone; even Marxist scholar Terry Eagleton attacks Dawkins for his naïve view that Christians live by blind faith void of evidence. He writes:

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*Atheists are placing their faith in a theory that they can reasonably be certain will not be the same a hundred years from now, while Christians place their faith in a God who claims to be the same, yesterday, today, and forever (Hebrews 13:8).*

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"Imagine someone holding forth on biology whose only knowledge of the subject is the *Book of British Birds*, and you have a rough idea of what it feels like to read Richard Dawkins on theology. ... For mainstream Christianity, reason, argument and honest doubt have always played an integral role in belief."<sup>29</sup>

Christian philosopher Alvin Plantinga challenges Dawkins' basic understanding of philosophical and theological issues involving theism. In rather demeaning words, Plantinga states, "Why, you might say that some of his forays into philosophy are at best sophomoric, but that would be unfair to sophomores."<sup>30</sup>

The New Atheist has accepted by faith — blind or otherwise — that God does not exist, that the universe has no design or purpose, and that natural selection reigns supreme. This leads to spiritual implications that will be discussed later, but for now we need to think carefully about the evidence. Neither the atheist nor the theist can prove scientifically that God exists — both must express faith to a certain degree. Nevertheless, both must come to their conclusions based upon an examination of the evidence that they have before them.

The atheist attempts to take the high ground here, claiming that science is on his side for, after all, according to Dawkins, as stated earlier, only about

seven per cent of scientists in the National Academy of Sciences believe in a personal God.<sup>31</sup>

But another well-known survey of scientists in 1997 found that 40 percent believed in God, 40 percent did not, and 20 percent were uncertain.<sup>32</sup> The difference, as with many surveys, seems to be in how the questions were presented. Nevertheless, the point is well made: Even scientists, handling the same physical evidence, come to different conclusions about the existence of God. It cannot simply be assumed that some scientists are stupid and others are smart.

Apparently, the evidence is not a slam-dunk for Darwinism even among scientists, as the New Atheists

would have us believe. Nor is the evidence of God as weak as Dawkins and company would conjecture. While Dawkins dismisses out of hand the time-honored evidence for the existence of God, Alvin Plantinga, perhaps the most influential Christian apologist and philosopher alive today, believes there are two or three dozen good arguments for the existence of God.<sup>33</sup>

These include the fact that something exists rather than nothing, the probability of the universe being so perfectly fine-tuned that humans can exist, the regularity of nature, that purpose exists in the heart of mankind, and so forth. Some of these arguments are closely aligned to the historical arguments that Dawkins debunks without engagement, but that have been rethought and updated by some of Christianity's best thinkers.

Apologist William Lane Craig has written a book on this subject (*Reasonable Faith*) and summarizes some of his arguments in a recent article.<sup>34</sup> For example, the cosmological argument is based on the observation that everything that exists has a cause or explanation for its existence and the most plausible cause is God.

The moral argument asserts that the very existence and recognition of moral values (which even most atheists accept) are powerful clues that one exists who has ordained moral values. And the teleological argument — that a design requires a designer — is still a powerful piece of evidence for those who approach the clues with an open mind. The modern debate surrounding this argument focuses on the fine-tuning of the universe that allows life as we know it — what Dawkins calls the “Goldilocks zone.” The updated teleological argument has three premises:

- 1) The fine-tuning of the universe is due either to physical necessity, chance, or design.
- 2) It is not due to physical necessity or chance.
- 3) Therefore, it is due to design.

The first premise is just a list of the options. Premise number two is where most of the debate rages. Physical necessity seems impossible to accept and chance seems ridiculous in light of the complexity of the universe. If physical necessity and chance are dismissed as incredible that leaves design. But who is the designer? The most obvious conclusion is God.

Of course, this does not convince the New Atheists. Dawkins, it seems, would agree with all three premises, but concludes that the designer is natural selection. He examines the same evidence as the theists and concludes that natural selection — which he says is not blind chance — is the omniscient designer of the Cosmos. While he cannot prove this, Dawkins' standard response is that his faith in natural selection is more plausible than belief in God. But Dawkins' position runs counter to every observation in life. Nothing is created without a creator. Chance occurrences rarely produce anything of value and, when they do the outcome is simple, random, and non-recurring.

It is inconceivable to believe that the complexity found in virtually everything from cells to planets is the product of little more than billions of accidents over billions of years. Does faith placed in chance — and the bottom line is that natural selection is nothing more than chance — seem superior to belief in the existence of God? Both the atheist and the theist interact with the same information, yet they draw different conclusions because they begin with different presuppositions. This leads us directly into the spiritual issues involved.

Before we move to the spiritual dimension, and the most powerful argument for the existence of God, let's say a word about postmodernism. Because we are constantly being told that we live in a postmodern world, which does not reason from logic and is not interested in proofs and evidence, but rather focuses on the metaphysical, Christians are being told we should just share our story

and hold a conversation, as per the Emergent church. We are told that rational arguments simply won't work and are out of place. Our culture is postmodern only when it comes to religion and philosophy. When the rubber really meets the road, we are still highly modern people. William Lane Craig writes:

“In fact, a postmodern culture is an impossibility; it would be utterly unlivable. People are not relativistic when it comes to matters of science, engineering, and technology; rather, they are relativistic and pluralistic in matters of *religion* and *ethics*. But, of course, that's not postmodernism; that's modernism! That's just old-line verificationism, which held that anything you can't prove with your five senses is a matter of personal taste. We live in a culture that remains deeply modernist.”<sup>35</sup>

It is interesting that the undeniably modernistic New Atheism has caught such a wave in our supposed postmodern culture. Perhaps the architects of postmodern Christianity (i.e., the emerging/emergent leaders) should take note.

*Spiritually.* Having said all of that, when we return to Scripture we see that the Lord always frames the rejection of God, either in total or in practice, as a spiritual matter. More than that, it is a rebellion against the clear evidence that God has placed in the world around us, as well as in our hearts.

Early atheism seemed to recognize that if you move God out of the equation, you leave a huge vacuum — actually more than one. Scientifically, the universe is left without a first cause — a Creator — and thus a new theory had to fill the gap, which evolution has attempted to do. But more primary, without God we are left with a spiritual and moral vacuum. If God does not exist, then why do right instead of wrong; why, for example, should we care for the weak and the poor instead of

exterminating them and thus freeing our society of the burden they produce?

This is actually a bit of a problem for Darwinism and its “survival of the fittest” axiom. If the strong bolster the gene pool and the weak diminish it then, according to the evolutionary theory, pouring resources into the survival of the weak is counterproductive to the existence of the human race. And if there is not a moral absolute in the form of God to regulate the conduct of human nature, then no one can say that race genocide or starvation of the poor or murder of the disabled is wrong. Ultimately a society devoid of God will come to such conclusions, as has been seen in communistic countries such as China and the former Soviet Union.

One of the things that distinguishes older forms of atheism from New Atheism is that early atheism recognized these facts and lamented, while New Atheism rejects them and rejoices. For example, Jean Paul Sartre, in his existential novel *Nausea*, tells the tale of a man who finally comes to grips with the idea that nothing we do really matters for the very reason that *we* do not really matter. Sartre’s summary of life is, “Every existing thing is born without reason, prolongs itself out of weakness and dies by chance.”<sup>36</sup>

It is the goal of the novel to prove this thesis, therefore Sartre, through the fictional character Antoine Roquentin, systematically examines everything from religion to education to work to love and pronounces them all meaningless. When Roquentin looks inside himself, he finds nothing. From this comes his despair; everything is absurd. He is an accident, a product of chance, and therefore nothing matters.

Similarly, Albert Camus in his novel *The Fall* writes about a man who watched a woman drown and did nothing to save her. In his atheistic philosophy, he could see no advantage for this woman to either live or die and, because attempting to save

her could endanger his own life, he simply ignored her and went home. But something deep inside would not leave him alone. The guilt began to eat away at his conscience. Intellectually he could discern no reason for this awful remorse, but his heart simply would not give him peace. Still, the experience did not change him or bring him to God. Instead he was able to frame the whole incident as inconsequential because of his philosophy of life informed him that nothing really matters.<sup>37</sup>

Because the older atheists “suppress[ed] the truth in unrighteousness” (Romans 1:18) by ignoring the outer witness of natural revelation (Romans 1:18-20) and the inner witness of conscience (Romans 2:14-15), God seemingly “gave them over” (Romans 1:24, 26, 28) to despair, or at least a grave sense of loss.

When the New Atheists do the same thing, God is seemingly giving them over to a sense of euphoria and intellectual blindness. In an interview with a friend, Richard Dawkins talks to him about people not having any purpose if God does not exist. His friend retorts, “Well I don’t think we’re *for* anything. We’re just products of evolution. You can say, “Gee, your life must be pretty bleak if you don’t think there’s a purpose.” But I’m anticipating having a good lunch.”<sup>38</sup>

And Dawkins happily confirms that they did have a good lunch. Where the older atheists were driven closer to despair over lack of purpose, the New Atheists are content with a good lunch — and would recommend you have one too. The issues haven’t changed much, but the mood has.

Dawkins may joyfully accept that man has no real purpose, yet he accepts and seems compelled to explain why people have a disposition toward religion and moral behavior without the existence of a personal God. Believing, as he does, that Darwinian evolution targets and eliminates waste, and that “Knowing that we are products of Darwinian evolution, we should ask what pressure or pressures exerted by natural selection

originally favoured the impulse to religion. ... Religion is so wasteful, so extravagant; and Darwinian selection habitually targets and eliminates waste.”<sup>39</sup> Religion just does not make sense to an evolutionist.

Dawkins concludes that, “Some religious ideas, like some genes, might survive because of absolute merit”<sup>40</sup> — that is, they somehow help our species to survive. “There are circumstances — not particularly rare — in which genes ensure their own selfish survival by influencing organisms to behave altruistically.”<sup>41</sup> That is, moral notions and behavior, sometimes stemming from religious ideas, are nothing more than the outworking of our selfish genes which natural selection has provided for us so that we will survive as a species.

This places the New Atheists on the horns of a dilemma. On the one hand, we are accidents of nature; on the other, we are creatures with morals and values. The late atheistic thinker Stephen Jay Gould wrote:

“We are here because one odd group of fishes had a peculiar fin anatomy that could transform into legs for terrestrial creatures; because comets struck the earth and wiped out dinosaurs, thereby giving mammals a chance not otherwise available. ... We may yearn for a ‘higher’ answer — but none exists. This explanation, though superficially troubling, if not terrifying, is ultimately liberating and exhilarating. We cannot read the meaning of life passively in the facts of nature. We must construct answers for ourselves.”<sup>42</sup>

Because there is no higher answer to why we are here, and because our very existence is accidental, then why do we have this sense of right and wrong and why do we often act out this moral obligation? The atheist must invent a theory in which unselfish and altruistic people survived in greater numbers and so perpetuated their unselfish genes. Yet even the atheists get lost in their own arguments. Dawkins, as we have seen,

believes we survive due to our “selfish genes.”

According to this view, selfish genes somehow created unselfish behavior which has allowed morally skewed people to multiply. Even more problematic is that no one can explain where and how these genes (whether selfish or unselfish) originated in the first humans. When the evolutionist looks at nature, he cannot help but recognize that it is a ruthless, violent place. The strong prey on the weak; life is unfair; pain and fear often rule. But the same evolutionist, at least of the New Atheists’ variety, recognizes that it is wrong for humans to behave in the same way as all other creatures in nature behave.

They concoct strange and convoluted theories to get around the obvious. How much better does the biblical account explain what we obviously observe around us and in us. The Apostle Paul provides a reminder of what we already know, “because what may be known of God is manifest in them, for God has shown it to them. For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead, so that they are without excuse” (Romans 1:19-20).

The New Atheists, many of whom are scientists and have looked deeply into our created universe, have chosen to reject what they have clearly seen and observed in nature and in their own hearts (“professing to be wise”), and in the process “they became fools” (Romans 1:22). Whenever mankind chooses not to honor God or give thanks, they suffer the fate of futile speculations and a foolish and darkened heart (Romans 1:21). Nowhere is this more evident than with the New Atheists, who have refused to bow the knee before the Almighty Creator and have suffered the fate of being given over by Him to their idols (Romans 1:24-28).

Ultimately the issues surrounding the New Atheism are not scientific and they are not even philosophical; they are spiritual. In rejecting the “clearly seen” evidence of God, they

have reaped the consequences of foolish and darkened hearts predisposed to believe the lie.

## CONCLUSION

One of the mystifying things about the New Atheism is that its cheerleaders are eager to make converts. We have to wonder why. It is one thing to believe that we, and the whole universe, are products of billions of little accidents governed by the apparently omniscient but impersonal power of natural selection, but why be so enthusiastic to destroy theism and spread your own ideas devoid of God? Could it be fear?

Atheists from Nietzsche to Marx have assured future generations that theism would die a natural death in due time. But now here we are decades later and religion is stronger than ever. It has not gone away and with the collapse of Communism and the renewed interest in Christianity in Africa and Latin America, atheism has been losing, not gaining, ground.

It is for this reason that Alister McGrath suggests that Dawkins’ *The God Delusion*, the most influential book in the New Atheists’ arsenal, “seems more designed to reassure atheists whose faith is faltering than to engage fairly or rigorously with religious believers and others seeking for truth. ... It is this deep, unsettling anxiety about the future of atheism that explains the ‘high degree of dogmatism’ and ‘aggressive rhetorical style’ of this new secular fundamentalism. Fundamentalism arises when a worldview feels it is in danger, lashing out at its enemies when it fears its own future is threatened.”<sup>43</sup>

## Endnotes:

1. R. Albert Mohler Jr., *Atheism Remix, a Christian Confronts the New Atheists*. Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2008, pg. 19.
2. *Ibid.*, pg. 39.
3. Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*. Boston • New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2008, pg. 28.
4. “Why Believe in a God?” Ad Campaign Launches on D.C. Buses,” Associated Press report posted on FOXNews.com, Nov. 12, 2008. Document available at: [www.foxnews.com/story/0,2933,450445,00.html](http://www.foxnews.com/story/0,2933,450445,00.html).
5. *Ibid.*

6. *Ibid.*
7. *The God Delusion*, op. cit., pg. 51.
8. *Ibid.*, pg. 284.
9. *Ibid.*, pg. 74.
10. *Ibid.*, pp. 100-103.
11. *Ibid.*, pp. 184-186.
12. *Ibid.*, pg. 117.
13. *Ibid.*, pg. 126.
14. *Ibid.*, pg. 188.
15. *Ibid.*, pg. 138.
16. *Ibid.*, pg. 141.
17. *Ibid.*, pg. 147, italic in original.
18. *Ibid.*, pg. 163.
19. *Ibid.*, pg. 168.
20. *Ibid.*, pg. 169.
21. *Ibid.*, pg. 172.
22. “Why Believe in a God?” Ad Campaign Launches on D.C. Buses,” op. cit.
23. *The God Delusion*, op. cit., pg. 258.
24. *Ibid.*, pg. 247.
25. *Ibid.*, pg. 258.
26. Russell Haythorn, “Atheist Billboards to Debut During Holidays,” article posted on ABC 7 News Denver, Nov. 13, 2008. Document available at: [www.thedenverchannel.com/news/17977308/detail.html](http://www.thedenverchannel.com/news/17977308/detail.html).
27. Richard Dawkins, *A Devil’s Chaplain*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2003, pg. 81.
28. Alister McGrath and Joanna Collicutt McGrath, *The Dawkins Delusion? Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2007, pp. 96-97.*
29. Terry Eagleton, “Lunging, Flailing, Mispunching,” *London Review of Books*, Vol. 28, No. 20, Oct. 19, 2006.
30. *Atheism Remix, a Christian Confronts the New Atheists*, op. cit., pg. 79.
31. *The God Delusion*, op. cit., pg. 126.
32. Timothy Keller, *The Reason for God*. New York: Dutton, 2008, pg. 89.
33. Lecture Notes by Alvin Plantinga, “Two Dozen (Or So) Theistic Arguments,” no date. Document available at: [www.calvin.edu/academic/philosophy/virtual\\_library/articles/plantinga\\_alvin/two\\_dozen\\_or\\_so\\_theistic\\_arguments.pdf](http://www.calvin.edu/academic/philosophy/virtual_library/articles/plantinga_alvin/two_dozen_or_so_theistic_arguments.pdf).
34. William Lane Craig, “God is Not Dead Yet,” *Christianity Today*, July 2008, pp. 22-27.
35. *Ibid.*, pg. 26, italics in original.
36. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Nausea*. New York: New Directions Publishing, 1964, pg. 133.
37. Albert Camus, *The Fall*. New York: Vintage International, 1997, pp. 6-7.
38. *The God Delusion*, op. cit., pg. 126, italic in original.
39. *Ibid.*, pg. 190.
40. *Ibid.*, pg. 231.
41. *Ibid.*, pg. 247.
42. As quoted in *The Reason for God*, op. cit., pg. 36, ellipsis in original, quotation rendered in italics in source.
43. *The Dawkins Delusion?*, op. cit., pg. 96.

instance, she still condones homosexuality and gay marriage" ("Vampire Author's Fictionalized Jesus Promoted by James Dobson," *Christian News*, Nov. 17, 2008, pg. 3).

More recently, the novel *The Shack* presented a Jesus who is a middle-aged, presumably Jewish, carpenter. God the Father takes on physical form as a woman, even though God is Spirit, according to John 4:24. It is fanciful and wrong. Some say, "Oh, it's only a novel." And while that may be true, it is a novel that can teach untaught people *something* — and that something is misleading and wrong. It is also another example of wittingly or unwittingly adding to the Scriptures.

All of this fiction suggests strongly that the eyewitnesses in the Gospels had nothing substantial to offer us and that the picture of Jesus presented by people who walked with Him and talked with Him is not all that urgent, compelling, or important. So current authors go ahead and make things up about Jesus.

Distorted presentations of Jesus have been around since the days of the early Church. The Gnostics did it in the third and fourth centuries A.D. The *Protoevangelium of James*, which began being distributed around A.D. 200, contains in its 12 pages bizarre legends about the infancy of Jesus. Its publication date rules out authorship by James, the brother of Christ. Furthermore, it was rejected by Jerome, an early Church leader, and a number of popes. It is sometimes referred to as part of the *Pseudepigrapha*, or false writings. However, over time, the Roman Catholic Church began to give it faint recognition and its legends were taught in some Catholic schools.

In this brief novel, the parents of Mary are identified as Joachim and Anna. These names have become enshrined as fact in the Crusader Church at the Bethesda pool in the Old City of Jerusalem. In the story, Mary, at age 16, becomes pregnant with Jesus. Mary then gives birth *outside* of Bethlehem in a desert cave. Whoever wrote it was unaware of the geography of Bethlehem and depicted the outskirts of Bethlehem as desert. Bethlehem's environs are lush grazing fields and rich olive groves. The legend also asserts that Joseph had not been there for the birth of Jesus, but was somewhere in the area looking for a midwife. The midwife, Salome, expresses doubt that a virgin could conceive and is stricken with a skin condition on one of her hands. An angel tells Salome that if she touches the child, she will be healed and when she does touch the infant Jesus, she is.

There is also *The Infancy Gospel of Thomas*, a sixth-century work that purports to be an account of miracles performed throughout Jesus' boyhood. (See *The Other Gospels, Non Canonical Texts* by Ron Cameron.) *The Infancy Gospel* is written in Syriac, which is akin to Aramaic.

We know that no miracles took place during the infancy or boyhood of Jesus. The first miracle took place at the wedding feast at Cana, as recorded in John chapter 2, when He was about 30 years old. John wrote that after the water was turned into wine, "This *beginning* of signs Jesus did in Cana of Galilee, and manifested His glory" (John 2:11, emphasis added).

If Jesus had been doing miracles prior to Cana, John would not have written that He started to do them in Cana. His boyhood in Nazareth was uneventful, according to Luke 2:51-52. Luke wrote that Jesus and His family went to Nazareth and that Jesus was subject to His parents as He "increased in wisdom and stature and in favor with God and man." This indicates a normal Jewish childhood and upbringing.

As well, in support of John 2, Luke 4:16-20, where Jesus mentions the dawning of the Messianic age, strongly implies that Jesus' Messianic miracles had their inauguration at the start of His public ministry and not before. The people of Nazareth did not know Him as a miracle worker, but only as "Joseph's son" (Luke 4:22). The simple son of a carpenter could not be taken seriously. They had known Him as an ordinary child and were so offended at His claims of Messiahship that they sought to throw Him from a cliff.

So we see that people in Nazareth never saw anything different about Jesus and simply knew Him as "Joseph's son." If there was anything different or sensational or miraculous about Him, they would have said so. To them He was just a carpenter's offspring.

No doubt more books will be published that purport to portray Jesus in a new or different light. Perhaps one could apply Matthew 24:23 to this troubling trend: "Then if anyone says to you, 'Look, here is the Christ!' or 'There!' do not believe it."

There is nothing new under the sun and when one turns from the truth, all that is left is fiction, fables, and myths. We have one dependable, unchanging source for all we need to know about Jesus. It is rich, full, and inexhaustible. It has sustained believers through 20 centuries of heresy and confusion. No one can improve on the New Testament's eyewitness accounts. We stake our lives and our eternity on them.

—GRF

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## NEWS UPDATES

(continued from page 3)

once enjoyed has devolved into infamy, tragedy, and financial straits.

In August 2007, the Whites announced that their 18-year marriage was ending. And then just a few months later, they were one of six religious ministries targeted by the Senate Finance Committee headed by

Sen. Charles Grassley, R-Iowa. These two factors prompted the departure of a substantial number of church members. While *Charisma* magazine reported that the church's 2008 membership decline was 30 percent, according to an article in the *St. Petersburg Times*, "Some 50 percent of the 22,000-member congregation left in the aftermath, dragging collections down by half." Paula left Tampa and Randy settled in as sole pastor. The church's two morning services were combined into one.

Less than a half year later, Kristen Hernandez-White, 30, Randy's daughter from a previous marriage, died April 30, 2008, of cancer. She had been diagnosed with a brain tumor in December 2006.

Last November, Evangelical Christian Credit Union, which holds the mortgage for White's church, filed foreclosure proceedings against Without Walls. The bank claimed in court documents that the church had defaulted on its loan, which was due in August. According to reports, the credit union demanded repayment of both a \$1 million loan that was due in August and a \$12 million loan, made in December 2003, for expansion of its church property in Tampa. Then the California-based lending institution initiated a foreclosure proceeding involving a \$12.5 million loan on the church's satellite campus in Lakeland.

White immediately went on the defensive. The Sunday following the foreclosures, he delivered a 90-minute sermon. He spent 30 minutes addressing the foreclosures, and then devoted the remainder of his sermon to disputing various charges contained in articles from the *Tampa Tribune*.

White vowed to fight the move by the lender and said he would try to continue to negotiate. But if the talks fail, it was announced that the church will consider other options, including refinancing, selling the church, or filing for Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection. The *St. Petersburg Times* reported White as saying, "I'll be damned if I'm leaving. I promise you this: I will handcuff myself to that column right there because right is right and wrong is wrong. We are a great church, and the devil has tried to take us out every single way that he can."

The church and the credit union for months had been negotiating terms of the loans. When White refused to sign a modified version of the loan agreement, the credit union began foreclosure proceedings. According to Jac La Tour, spokesman for the credit union, "We worked with them for a number of months to reach an agreement. When that process was unsuccessful, we had to file foreclosure. It wasn't a quick decision." White explained to his church members, "I could've signed the modification agreement, everything would've gone away, but if we hiccup they would've owned it all."

According to *Charisma*, "White said the credit union initiated the action because of its own financial struggles.

He claims the ECCU decided to confiscate the Tampa property after learning the church had a waiting buyer who was paying \$33 million." La Tour denied White's allegation. Both the Tampa and Lakeland church properties have been on the market since March of last year.

The church has also made plans to repay the \$1 million loan which was due in August with money it received from the sale of a \$1.4 million piece of property at the Lakeland campus.

Then, in December, the church faced fines for several fire code violations. In February 2008, Tampa fire department officials inspected church buildings and discovered numerous safety-related issues, including emergency lighting, exit signs, and fire extinguishers. The church was also to have its alarms and sprinklers checked out to ensure that they were in proper working order. Last December, the *Tampa Tribune* reported that a Tampa Fire Rescue spokesman said, "the church hasn't made any of the repairs or hired an inspector to check out the sprinklers and alarms."

Despite all the tribulation, White vows to stay the course. WTSP-TV, the CBS-affiliated station in Tampa and St. Petersburg, reported, "The pastor does not plan on resigning right now."

—MKG

## EVANGELICALS AND CATHOLICS TOGETHER CO-FOUNDER DIES

The Rev. Richard John Neuhaus, who co-founded the group Evangelicals and Catholics Together, died Jan. 8, at age 72, of cancer. Neuhaus was hailed as "an eminent Catholic intellectual" and in 2005 was named by *Time* magazine as one of America's 25 most influential evangelicals.

Neuhaus, the son of a Lutheran pastor and a Lutheran clergyman himself, converted to Roman Catholicism in 1990 and was ordained a priest the following year. He wrote, "I was 30 years a Lutheran pastor, and after 30 years of asking myself why I was not a Roman Catholic, I finally ran out of answers that were convincing either to me or to others."

Shortly after his conversion to Catholicism, he began inviting Catholic and evangelical leaders to discuss their differences. These meetings led to his alliance with former Nixon White House counsel and Watergate figure, Charles Colson. Together they edited *Evangelicals and Catholics Together: Toward a Common Mission* and founded the ECT group. Colson, in eulogizing Neuhaus, explained that in spite of the "initial uproar among many evangelicals and Catholics," he and Neuhaus progressed

forward and eventually gained the support of “leading evangelicals,” including Bill Bright and James I. Packer.

Yet the movement was not without its critics who said that the ECT document was “a colossal compromise with Rome.” Dallas Theological Seminary would not endorse the document and evangelicals such as John MacArthur, R.C. Sproul, John Ankerberg, and others were actively outspoken about its call for ecumenism. At issue was ECT’s statement, “That we are justified by grace, through faith because of Christ,” which was said to contradict the teaching of Scripture that man is justified through faith *alone* — apart from any human contribution.

—MKG

## POLL SHOWS EVOLUTION ECLIPSES CREATIONISM

A recent Harris Poll shows that Eastern philosophy, naturalism, and paranormal belief continue to maintain a significant acceptance among Westerners. According to the poll, “substantial minorities believe in ghosts, UFOs, witches, astrology, and the belief that they themselves were once other people.”

While 80 percent of adult Americans say they believe in God — a figure which has remained unchanged since the question was last asked by the polling organization in 2005 — more people responded that they believe in

Darwin’s theory of evolution rather than in creationism. The poll indicated that 47 percent of those interviewed accepted evolution, whereas only 40 percent held to creationism. More detailed statistics revealed that, “Catholics are more likely than Protestants to believe in Darwin’s theory of evolution (by 52% to 32%)” and “Protestants are slightly more likely than Catholics to believe in creationism (by 54% to 46%).”

A significant number expressed belief in miracles (75%), heaven (73%), and angels (71%). The poll also disclosed “Sizeable minorities believe in ghosts (44%), UFOs (36%), witches (31%), astrology (31%), and reincarnation (24%).”

When asked about religious writings, only slightly more than a third of those interviewed believe that the Old Testament (37%) and the New Testament (36%) is entirely the Word of God. Interestingly, only 14 percent indicated that the Torah is completely the Word of God. In accenting the inconsistency, the report mentioned that the Torah “is the same as the first five books of the Old Testament” and concluded that, “Presumably many people do not know this.” *The Koran* and *The Book of Mormon* received far less favorable figures in regard to inerrancy, with only 5 percent of American adults regarding either as wholly being the Word of God.

The poll was conducted online during the week of Nov. 10, and included 2,126 U.S. adults aged 18 and over. Results were tabulated and the poll released Dec. 10.

—MKG

### PERSONAL FREEDOM OUTREACH — STATEMENT OF BELIEF

- I. THE BIBLE AS THE DIVINELY INSPIRED, INERRANT WORD OF GOD: IT IS IN ITS ENTIRETY THE SOLE AUTHORITY FOR ALL MATTERS OF CHRISTIAN BELIEF AND PRACTICE.
- II. THE ONE TRUE GOD. IN THE ONE TRUE GOD THERE EXIST THREE PERSONS, BEING: THE FATHER, THE SON JESUS CHRIST, AND THE HOLY SPIRIT.
- III. JESUS CHRIST: HIS DEITY, HUMANITY, VIRGIN BIRTH, SINLESSNESS, DEATH AND BODILY RESURRECTION; WHO WILL PERSONALLY AND VISIBLY RETURN AGAIN TO EARTH.
- IV. THE PERSONALITY AND DEITY OF THE HOLY SPIRIT.
- V. THE EXISTENCE AND PERSONALITY OF SATAN, HIS TOTAL OPPOSITION TO GOD, AND HIS POWER OVER THE UNREGENERATE.
- VI. THE COMPLETE AND TOTAL DEPRAVITY OF ALL MEN WHICH MAKES THEM HOPELESSLY LOST WITHOUT THE NEW BIRTH OBTAINABLE THROUGH FAITH IN JESUS CHRIST.
- VII. THE FINAL ESTATE OF MAN: FOR THE SAVED, EVERLASTING LIFE IN THE PRESENCE OF GOD AND FOR THE UNSAVED, EVERLASTING PUNISHMENT BECAUSE OF THEIR UNBELIEF.
- VIII. THE GOSPEL BY WHICH WE ARE SAVED BEING SUMMED IN THE DEATH, BURIAL AND RESURRECTION OF OUR LORD JESUS CHRIST.
- IX. THE CHURCH BEING THE BODY OF CHRIST, UNITED IN THE HOLY SPIRIT, CONSISTING OF THOSE WHO HAVE RECEIVED JESUS CHRIST AS SAVIOR. A LOCAL CHURCH IS AN ORGANIZED ASSEMBLY OF BELIEVERS UNITED FOR THE PURPOSE OF CARRYING OUT THE GREAT COMMISSION OF CHRIST.
- X. THE GREAT COMMISSION OF CHRIST BEING TO PREACH THE GOSPEL TO ALL MEN, BAPTIZING AND DISCIPLING THOSE WHO HAVE BELIEVED.



# Books in Review

## THE COMPLETE GUIDE TO BIBLE TRANSLATIONS

by Ron Rhodes

Harvest House Publishers, 272 pages, \$13.99

Choosing a Bible from among the variety of English-language translations available today can be a daunting task. Apologist and scholar Ron Rhodes' latest work can be a useful guide in making that choice. The publisher defines his book as "an indispensable guide to help readers through the maze of choosing a translation." *The Complete Guide to Bible Translations* is that and more.

Rhodes prefaces the book by discussing "Why Choosing the Right Bible Translation is Important," and provides an excellent overview of the history of Bible translations — all the way from the Septuagint (LXX) to the King James Version. Along the way, the reader is introduced to Jerome, Wycliffe, and Tyndale. He then spends the next nearly 50 pages discussing and critiquing the difficulties and theories of translating the Bible, and assesses the debate over gender-inclusive language. He explains idioms, figures of speech, euphemisms, and more. Also studied are the *pros* and *cons* of both translation philosophies that have emerged among scholars: formal equivalence (word-for-word) and dynamic equivalence (thought-for-thought). If all this sounds beyond a layman's comprehension, it's not. Rhodes has a knack for taking what could be difficult subject matter and presenting it in an easy-to-read and understandable fashion.

Rhodes delves into 20 of the most popular translations, including the King James Version, the New King James Version, the New International Version, the New American Standard Bible, the English Standard Version, and the New Living Translation. In each review he presents a historical overview, the motives behind the translation, the philosophy and procedure, samples of Bible passages from the version (the same verses are used throughout for contrast and comparison), and finally the benefits and drawbacks of the translation. Woven throughout are descriptions of nuances — such as grade-reading levels — of the version surveyed. While not the first such publication to explore a history and evaluation of English Bible translations, it is a summary of facts and details

unparalleled in any single volume currently available. The endnotes and bibliography provide more resources for study of Bible translations and the transmission of Scripture.

Beyond the scope of what many see as reliable and trustworthy translations for serious Bible study and reading, Rhodes includes overviews of translations which some have regarded as questionable. Eugene Peterson's *The Message*, is one example. After considering its history and procedure and giving a benefit or two, Rhodes discusses several of the version's concerns, including, "Some reviewers have commented that some of Peterson's renderings seem awkward. For example, in John 1:1 we read: 'The Word was first, the Word present to God, God present to the Word'" (pg. 186). Two Catholic translations (the New Jerusalem Bible and the New American Bible) are also critiqued.

A final chapter is devoted to helping the reader choose the best translation and the best Bible. Given the broad range of factors involved — such as by whom, and for what the translation is used — Rhodes notes that there is no single correct answer. He does, however, provide plenty of suggestions — both spiritual and mundane — to assist his readers in making a wise choice. Of course, Rhodes instructs the most important aspect is: "Once you find a Bible you really like, based on the considerations above, *read it daily!*" (pg. 225).

The book includes five appendices, which briefly examine the textual basis of modern translations, that is, primary New and Old Testament sources including the Textus Receptus, Nestle-Aland Novum Testamentum Graece (which is the standard Greek version for most modern translations), the Septuagint, Dead Sea Scrolls, and more; the rendering of the Divine Name (YHWH); why the Apocrypha is not found in non-Catholic translations; an analysis of the "King James Only" controversy; and a warning about cultic translations (specifically Joseph Smith's *Inspired Version* and the Jehovah's Witnesses' *New World Translation*). While not exhaustive, these latter studies provide a quick and helpful overview of those subjects.

Setting aside the obviously flawed cultic translations or the narrow mindset of the "King James Only" school, choosing a Bible translation could be likened to selecting an automobile. *The Complete Guide to Bible Translations* is a bit like picking up a copy of *Consumer Reports* before heading to the auto dealership.

—MKG

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