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Why Definitions Matter

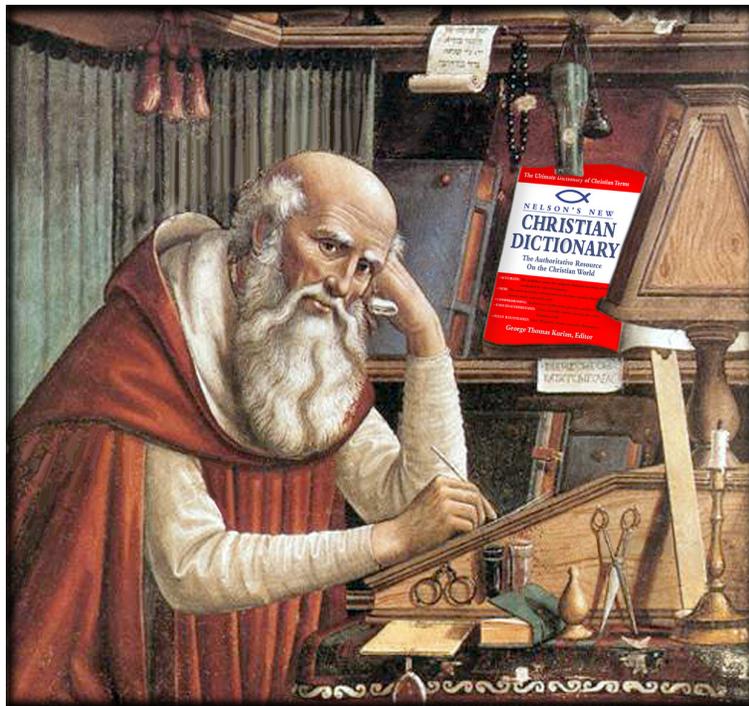
The Importance of Using Words That Communicate Biblical Truth

by Gary E. Gilley

Mark Twain said, “The difference between the right word and the almost right word is the difference between lightning and the lightning bug.” Used by Twain, the distinction between being a mediocre writer and great one was the choice of words. If this is important to a novelist, how much more important it is to the Christian trying to communicate timeless truths given to us by our Creator God.

Words and their meanings matter. Unfortunately, in our Christian lingo, we tend to use sloppily thrown-out words and terms that can mislead others and, in time, some of these terms take on lives of their own. When we do so, we unknowingly miscommunicate important truths that our Lord has revealed to us, and/or mislead ourselves and others as a result.

We need to give serious attention to our terminology in order to avoid



such things. In this article I want to identify a few words or terms bandied about in Christian circles which need some consideration.

BIBLE STUDIES

The Christian world is full of “Bible studies.” Churches and parachurch organizations offer numerous study groups and individual believers often organize their own small group Bible studies. But upon closer examination, the majority of these studies are not actually engaged in studying the Scriptures. As one author, Jen Wilkins, writes:

“Churches have gradually shifted away
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Editorials

WRONGLY DIVIDING THE WORD OF TRUTH

Back in 1938, H.A. Ironside wrote a booklet called *Wrongly Dividing the Word of Truth*. It was a play on words based on 2 Timothy 2:15, which says "rightly dividing the word of truth." The Ironside book was an exposé and biblical refuting of hyper-dispensationalism.

For centuries, long before Ironside, people with malice aforethought, or out of sheer ignorance, have been twisting, distorting, and misusing the Word of God.

The Apostle Peter warned us about Scripture twisting, in particular he wrote concerning Paul's letters, "as also in all his epistles, speaking in them of these things, in which are some things hard to understand, which untaught and unstable people twist to their own destruction, as they do also the rest of the Scriptures" (2 Peter 3:16).

One of the major paths to error while interpreting the Scripture is unfamiliarity with or ignorance of the context around the verses we are interpreting. The context is all the verses in a chapter before and after the verse or verses being presented. Employing the inductive method, we consider the whos, whats, whys, wheres, whens, and hows of the verse. Thus, we need to probe who is speaking, who is spoken to, and what is the major theme, among other things.

Context is the setting. It pertains to the author's intention. Knowing and understanding the context is absolutely essential to proper understanding of the Bible. It has been said that the three most important rules of Bible interpretation are *context, context, and context*.

The main rule of context is that context rules! Recurring words determine context. If I put a cherry on top of a large cake, the context is the cake. Context determines the interpretation. For instance, if I said the word "spring" by itself, you would have no idea of what I meant without a context. You would not know if it is a season of the year, something to do with a bed, an athletic event, or a flowing water source. Or if I said "pitch," you would not know if I was speaking of musical melodies, throwing a baseball, the spiel of a salesman, or one of two aspects of a roof. Only a context could determine its meaning. Context, we will see, quite often repeats itself; thereby making things a lot easier. For example, what was so special about the tribe of Issachar?

One illustration of ignoring the context is that verse found in 1 Chronicles 12:32 describing Issachar. It reads, "of the sons of Issachar who had understanding of the times, to know what Israel ought to do." Plucked from its context, those words can mean almost anything.

I have heard this part of the verse used to justify so-called "words of knowledge," a unique anointing,

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DC COMICS GOES FROM FICTION TO HERESY

One of the hallmarks of cults and aberrational groups is their heretical views of Jesus Christ. You can now add DC Comics into that mix. In March, DC Vertigo (the recently relaunched adult-oriented branch of DC Comics) released “Second Coming,” a fictional — and grossly unbiblical — narrative of Jesus coming to earth in our present day.

In an interview last year with the Internet news site Bleeding Cool, the comic book’s author, Mark Russell, detailed the storyline, “An all-powerful superhero, named Sun-Man, has to share a two-bedroom apartment with Jesus Christ. The conceit is that God was so upset with Jesus’s performance the first time he came to Earth, since he was arrested so soon and crucified shortly after, that he has kept him locked-up since then. God then sees this superhero on Earth a few thousand years later and says ‘that’s what I wanted for you!’ He sends Jesus down to learn from this superhero and they end up learning from each other.”

DC Entertainment said in its “relaunch and rebranding” of its Vertigo division that it will be giving its “writers and artists the creative freedom to tell their most imaginative stories.”

Cult watchers will see similarities between Russell’s “Jesus” and the heretical teachings of Sun Myung Moon, founder of the Unification Church. Moon taught that Jesus failed in His earthly mission because God did not send Jesus to die on the cross.

Prior to its publication, over 100,000 people had signed a petition to DC Comics requesting that the comic book be scrapped.

—MKG

JOYCE MEYER AMENDS HER FAITH TEACHING

Charismatic preacher Joyce Meyer, who in her television programs and books claims to provide answers for many of life’s challenges, recently took to Instagram saying, “How do you balance having problems and having enough faith? Watch Joyce explain above ... it could help set you free!” Her brief 56-second video post on the social media venue has some wondering if Meyer is beginning to disavow the faith teaching that has made her so popular.

On the video, which was posted in early January, Meyer states, “I’m glad for what I learned about prosperity, but it got out of balance. I’m glad for what I learned about faith, but it got out of balance. And so every time somebody had a problem in their life it was because they didn’t have enough faith. If you got sick, you didn’t have enough faith. If your child died, you didn’t have enough faith. Well, that’s not right.”

Less than 48 hours after being posted, the video had been viewed more than 100,000 times and those responding to the post applauded Meyer for her “confession” and “repentant and humble heart.” However, other comments Meyer made in the clip indicate that she may not be distancing herself entirely from Word-Faith teaching.

On the Instagram video Meyer is still teaching one of the most basic tenets of hyper-charismatic teaching. Meyer declared, “Faith is something God gives you that you need to use and release in your life. It’s a powerful force, but it’s not just an automatic.” Thus, Meyer still believes and teaches that faith is a force. According to Word-Faith proponents, faith is a force that a person uses to create and change reality. Through this force of faith, believers can speak — among other things — health and wealth into their lives.

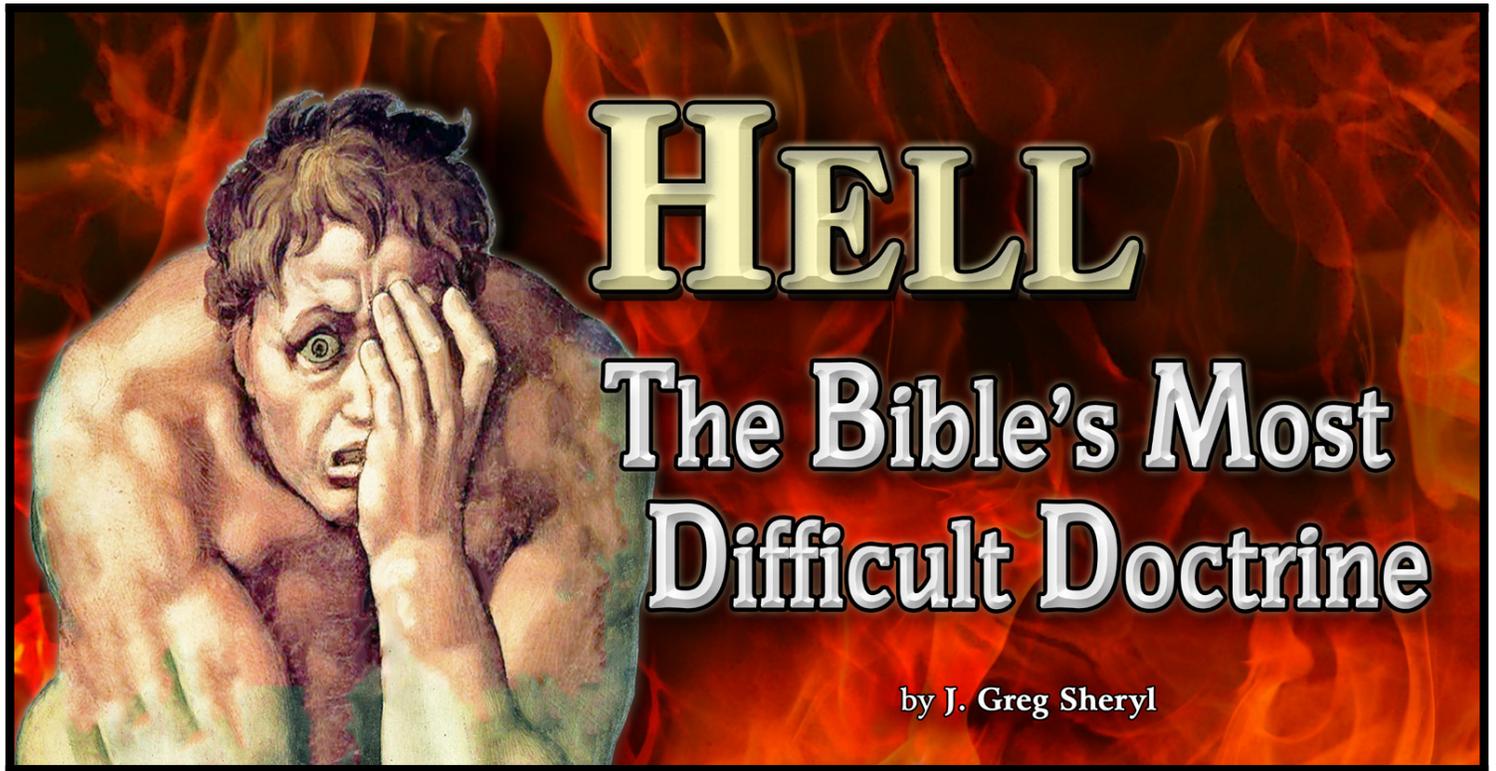
Meyer’s “confession” is also problematic for her in other ways. Meyer has earlier asserted, “I would suppose that every sermon that I get, I get it from a messenger angel.” With her assertion of divine revelation from the angelic hosts, it places her in an awkward position to have to now walk back on some of her former prosperity teachings and proclamations. It also raises the question of whether Meyer will alter her jet-set and exuberant lifestyle.

—MKG

JAMES MACDONALD TAKES INDEFINITE SABBATICAL

Pastor and author James MacDonald appears to be the latest casualty among megachurch pastors who have fallen victim to poor and abusive leadership skills. In mid-January, the body of elders of Harvest Bible Chapel released a statement saying that they “have tried a variety of different strategies to address external criticisms over the past several years. It has become apparent that these efforts have failed to fully identify and address

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HELL

The Bible's Most Difficult Doctrine

by J. Greg Sheryl

The Bible has many “hard” sayings. Jesus, in His Sermon on the Mount, brings out the deeper intentions of some Old Testament laws, regarding such things as murder (Matthew 5:21-22), adultery (vv. 27-32), making vows (vv. 33-37), retaliation and vengeance (vv. 38-42), and loving one’s enemies (vv. 43-48). Or consider the Lord’s teachings on forgiveness in Matthew 5:21-26 and 18:15-22; His commands to love the Lord with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength (Mark 12:30); the command to love one’s neighbor as oneself (Mark 12:31); and His command that Christians are to love one another as He has loved us (John 13:34-35).

People also struggle with doctrinal difficulties such as the Trinity, the incarnation of Jesus, His virgin birth or *conception*, the fully divine and fully human natures within the person of Christ, His substitutionary death, resurrection, and second coming.

However, the most difficult of all biblical doctrines is the teaching that all who do not accept Jesus Christ as Savior will spend eternity suffering torment in hell, excluded from the presence of the Lord. If it were not

that the Bible teaches it, likely few would believe it.

For instance, former Christian pastor Rob Bell, in explaining the reason for writing his book *Love Wins*, which disputed the orthodox Christian teaching on hell, wrote:

‘I’ve written this book for all those, everywhere, who have heard some version of the Jesus story that caused their pulse rate to rise, their stomach to churn, and their heart to utter those resolute words, ‘I would never be a part of that.’ You are not alone. There are millions of us. ... A staggering number of people have been taught that a select few Christians will spend forever in a peaceful, joyous place called heaven, while the rest of humanity spends forever in torment and punishment in hell with no chance for anything better. It’s been clearly communicated to many that this belief is a central truth of the Christian faith and to reject it is, in essence, to reject Jesus. This is misguided and toxic and ultimately subverts the contagious spread of Jesus’s mes-

sage of love, peace, forgiveness, and joy that our world desperately needs to hear. And so this book.’¹

Erwin Lutzer, former senior pastor of Moody Memorial Church in Chicago, who adheres to the traditional view of hell, describes the difficulty that non-Christians and some Christians have with it:

‘This doctrine is often neglected because it is difficult to reconcile hell with the love of God. That millions of people will be in conscious torment forever is beyond the grasp of the human mind. ... The doctrine of hell has driven many people away from Christianity. ... One man said that he would not want to be in heaven with a God who sends people to hell. His preference was to be in hell so that he could live in defiance of such a God. ‘If such a God exists,’ he complained, ‘He is the devil.’ To put it simply, to us the punishment of hell does not fit the crime. Yes, all men do some evil and a few do great evils, but nothing that anyone has ever done can justify

eternal torment. And to think that millions of good people will be in hell simply because they have not heard of Christ (as Christianity affirms) strains credulity. It's like capital punishment for a traffic violation."²

Bible teacher and author Mike Fabarez wrote:

"By far the most familiar piece from the famous French sculptor Auguste Rodin is undoubtedly the work that came to be known as *The Thinker*. ... He's that contemplative guy on a rock (in desperate need of some clothing) looking down, with his chin resting on the back of his hand. ... Most frequently, however, this familiar figure is found on college and university brochures and web pages representing their departments of philosophy. ... But actually, when Rodin crafted this piece more than 100 years ago, he designed it to make us ponder theology, not philosophy. Rodin called his sculpture *The Poet*, not *The Thinker*. And the poet he was referring to was the fourteenth-century Italian poet Dante Alighieri, who authored the epic work entitled *Inferno* (the Italian word for *hell*). Rodin designed this figure as part of an ensemble, with the poet pensively and reflectively looking down at a set of gates that are called *The Gates of Hell*. Next time you see a detailed replica, look closely at *The Poet's* face — you'll notice he is not thinking happy thoughts. Knowing the context and meaning of this work will certainly enable you to recognize his pained and sober expression as he ponders the tragedy of lost people."³

HELL VS. PURGATORY

Nearly all Protestants disavow the non-biblical Roman Catholic doctrine of purgatory. The recent *Catechism of the Catholic Church* states:

"All who die in God's grace and friendship, but still imperfectly purified, are indeed assured of their eternal salvation; but after

death they undergo purification, so as to achieve the holiness necessary to enter the joy of heaven. The [Catholic] Church gives the name *Purgatory* to this final purification of the elect, which is entirely different from the punishment of the damned. The Church formulated her doctrine of faith on Purgatory especially at the Councils of Florence and Trent. The tradition of the Church, by reference to certain texts of Scripture, speaks of a cleansing fire."⁴

In Catholic teaching, purgatory is not for everyone. Although it is probably likely that most of those ultimately destined for heaven might spend some time there, any Catholic who dies in a state of "mortal" (very serious) sin goes to hell, not purgatory. Only those Catholics who die with "venial" (less serious) sins go to purgatory.

THREE PRIMARY VIEWS OF HELL

Within the history of the Christian Church, there are three primary views regarding what happens to the unsaved after death and/or the final judgment: the traditional — or orthodox — view, universalism, and annihilationism.

THE VOCABULARY OF HELL

Billy Graham noted that there are four words in the Bible that have been translated as "hell" — *Sheol*, *Hades*, *Tartarus*, and *Gehenna*.⁵ Graham notes, "The third word is *Tartarus*, used only once in 2 Peter 2:4, where it says that disobedient angels are cast into Tartarus. It indicates a place of judgment, such as a prison, or dungeon, where there is intense darkness."⁶ Tartarus will not be discussed further in this article.

Sheol is the Old Testament (Hebrew) word for the abode of the dead, both righteous and unrighteous. The King James Version sometimes misleadingly translated this word as hell. In the New Testament — at least until the resurrection of Jesus — *Hades* is the Greek equivalent of *Sheol*. However, since the resurrection of Jesus, it

appears that Hades contains only the unsaved dead, whereas those who are saved go to be with the Lord immediately at death (Philippians 1:21-23; 2 Corinthians 5:6-8).

Regarding *Gehenna*, theologian John Walvoord wrote, "All the references to *gehenna*, except James 3:6, are from the lips of Christ himself."⁷ Walvoord further explains:

"The term *gehenna* is derived from the Valley of Hinnom, traditionally considered by the Jews the place of the final punishment of the ungodly. Located just south of Jerusalem, ... In this place human sacrifices were offered to Molech. ... The valley was used as a burial place for criminals and for burning garbage. ... its usage in the New Testament is clearly a reference to the everlasting state of the wicked, and this seems to be the thought in every instance."⁸

In another of his works, Walvoord notes that although the word *Gehenna* never appears in the book of Revelation, "it is clearly equivalent to the lake of fire [in Revelation], or the eternal punishment of the wicked."⁹

THE TRADITIONAL VIEW OF HELL

Some, such as seminary professor Robert Peterson, hold to what is commonly called "the traditional view," yet dislike its being called by that name — perhaps because of negative connotations of the word "tradition" in some quarters of Protestantism and also because it may seem in this way to be opposed to being "biblical."¹⁰ However, it seems to be the most ancient of the three positions and has been the majority view of the Christian Church throughout its history. Thus, whatever unfortunate connotations the name may have for some of its adherents, this designation is accurate. Those who hold this view would say that it is also biblical. Some who hold to either universalism or annihilationism might likewise object to the traditional view being called the *orthodox* view because this would imply that all other views — including theirs — are *unorthodox*.

The traditional view teaches that those who do not go to heaven after the final judgment will spend eternity suffering in hell. Contemporary Christian theologian Millard Erickson, who subscribes to this view, states that it includes these two beliefs:

“Physical death brings to an end the opportunity to exercise saving faith and accept Jesus Christ. The decisions made in this life are irrevocably fixed at death.”

And:

“At the great final judgment, all humans will be separated on the basis of their relationship to Christ during this life. Those who have believed in him will spend eternity in heaven, in everlasting joy and reward in God’s presence. Those who have not accepted him will experience hell, a place of unending suffering, where they will be eternally separated from God.”¹¹

Although it is the most ancient of the three views and the majority view of the Christian Church throughout its history, these factors alone do not mean that it is correct. That can be discerned only through an appeal to the Scriptures. Some of the Scriptures that support the view of hell being a state of eternal suffering for the unsaved include: Isaiah 66:24; Daniel 12:2; Matthew 25:41-46; Mark 9:43-49; 2 Thessalonians 1:6-10; and Revelation 14:9-11; 19:20; 20:10-15; 21:8.¹² Luke 16:19-31, the story of the rich man and Lazarus, which *can* support this view, deserves special discussion which will be given later in this article.

UNIVERSALISM: A SECOND HISTORICAL VIEW

Of the three historic views regarding the eternal destiny of those who have not expressed faith in Jesus as their Savior, this one is by far the most optimistic. Universalism teaches that *all eventually end up in heaven*. This takes place either immediately after death or, in another variety of universalism, the unsaved may go to hell for a period until they are cleansed and purified. After that, they

will go to heaven along with everyone else.

Because it is so optimistic and requires *nothing* of a person to ensure an eternal destiny in heaven, it has been an attractive option. Nero and the Christians he had burned as torches to light his garden will share eternity together with Jesus. Hitler and Stalin will forever be with Billy Graham and the Christian martyrs of all ages.

The third-century Christian theologian Origen (185-254) is usually associated with this view.¹³ Theology professor Emilio Antonio Nunez notes:

“Origen taught that the condemned and even the demons would be brought into voluntary subjection to Christ after a period of severe punishment that would purify them to enter heaven. ... According to [Philip] Schaff, Origen taught this only as speculation, not as dogma, and in his later writings modified the theory to exclude Satan from repentance and salvation. Gregory of Nyssa, of the school of Origen, also taught salvation for all, including Satan. Other theologians from the East as well as the West were influenced by Origen. ... Universalism was condemned by the Synod of Constantinople in 543.”¹⁴

While biblical and theological studies professor Larry Dixon has appropriately dubbed Origen “The Father of Universalism,”¹⁵ Dixon shows that a predecessor of Origen’s, “Clement of Alexandria (ca. 155-ca. 220),” may have held to universalism before him.¹⁶

In his recent two-volume work on universalism, *The Devil’s Redemption*, Saint Louis University professor Michael J. McClymond wrote, “Until the middle of the twentieth century, universalist belief was generally confined to a minority of Christian theologians along with a few self-identified universalist groups.”¹⁷

In addition to Rob Bell, other modern-day exponents of universalism include *The Shack* author William Paul

Young,¹⁸ Bible commentator and author William Barclay,¹⁹ and Thomas Talbot. In his book, *The Other Side of the Good News*, Dixon lists several universalists, including the theological liberal and *Honest To God* author Bishop John A.T. Robinson, C.H. Dodd, renowned twentieth-century theologian Karl Barth,²⁰ and Nels F.S. Ferré.²¹ McClymond gives many additional names, including theologian Jürgen Moltmann,²² John Hick,²³ as well as “Hans Christian Anderson, P.T. Barnum, Clara Barton, Helen Keller, Madeleine L’Engle, Florence Nightingale, and ‘Peanuts’ cartoonist Charles Schultz (before reportedly becoming secular).”²⁴

Although Christian universalism may use certain Scripture passages for support (John 3:16-17; 12:32; Acts 3:21; Romans 5:18; 1 Corinthians 15:20-28; Ephesians 1:10; 1 Timothy 4:10), it would seem impossible to hold to universalism without disregarding those biblical passages that speak of eternal punishment. Scripture verses cited as biblical support for universalism are either taken out of context or misinterpreted.

Universalism doesn’t have a solid scriptural foundation,²⁵ but appears to be based on theological and/or philosophical reasoning and deduction and appeals to emotion. For instance, it is frequently pointed out that the Bible says that “God is love” (1 John 4:8, 16), which is true. However, from there the argument is made that “Because God is love, He wouldn’t cause anyone to spend eternity suffering for the sins of a few finite years” or, “No father would treat his child that way; therefore, God — being the perfect Father — wouldn’t cause anyone to suffer in hell forever.”

Another argument sometimes brought forth by universalists and annihilationists is that for God’s justice and Christ’s work on the Cross to be glorifying to God, there couldn’t be anyone left in hell, lest it somehow be a blot on God’s universe or diminish Jesus’ redemptive work. Appeals are also made to emotion, depicting a God Who would send anyone to hell forever as a “moral monster,” or “worse than Hitler.”

BIBLICAL PROBLEMS WITH UNIVERSALISM

Jesus said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me" (John 14:6). And the Apostle Peter declared concerning Jesus, "Nor is there salvation in any other, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12).

In line with these Scriptures, pastor and author Philip Ryken has written:

"To use an analogy, Jesus is like God's telephone number. The God of the universe can only be contacted through Jesus Christ. Philosophical pluralists insist on getting through to God no matter what number they dial. But that is not how the telephone system operates, and it is not how God operates either. Jesus is the only direct line to God."²⁶

And Jesus Himself said, "Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God" (John 3:3; cf. 3:5-7). And how is one born again? Scripture declares, "But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, to those who believe in His name: who were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God" (John 1:12-13).

POSTMORTEM SALVATION?

The universalist might suggest that, perhaps for those who do not receive Jesus in this life, there might be a chance for them to do so after death. However, the Scriptures do not teach that. Instead, Scripture declares, "it is appointed for men to die once, but after this the judgment" (Hebrews 9:27). This would seem to disallow any notion of postmortem salvation.

If one considers the account of the rich man and Lazarus in Luke 16:19-31 (whether one believes it to be historical or a parable), we notice there that no opportunity was given for the rich man to "switch sides" from Hades to Abraham's bosom. In that account, Abraham explicitly tells the rich man, "between us and you

there is a great gulf fixed, so that those who want to pass from here to you cannot, nor can those from there pass to us" (v. 26).

Some, who hope for postmortem salvation to be true, sometimes point to a couple of difficult-to-understand passages in 1 Peter (3:18-20; 4:6) to support this hope. It is beyond the scope of this article to examine these passages. However, one rule of biblical interpretation is to interpret unclear Scriptures by clear ones, and not vice versa. For this reason alone, we deny that either of these passages teaches what the two clearer passages from Hebrews and Luke mentioned above disallow.

MORE BIBLICAL PROBLEMS WITH UNIVERSALISM

Universalism would appear to have a problem with all the Scriptures cited above that support the traditional view, because universalism teaches that all will eventually end up in heaven. If this is the case, there was no need for the Father to send Jesus to die on the Cross for our sins. Yet, as shown above, the Scriptures state that salvation is only in Jesus, that no one comes to the Father but through Him, and that to see the kingdom of God one must be born again, which is the result of receiving Jesus and believing in His name.

Nor is this all. In Jesus' account of the sheep and the goats in Matthew 25:31-46, we notice that the sheep receive eternal life, and the goats enter eternal punishment. The same Greek word *aiōnios* is used to describe the "eternal" (or "everlasting") life that the righteous enter, the "everlasting" punishment of the wicked (both mentioned in v. 46), and the "everlasting" fire in verse 41 that the goats are sent into. This passage is fatal to universalism, in that it teaches that some will suffer "everlasting" punishment.

However, universalism suffers even further damage in the Sermon on the Mount, where the Lord taught, "Enter by the narrow gate; for wide is the gate and broad is the way that leads to destruction, and there are many who go in by it. Because narrow is the

gate and difficult is the way which leads to life, and there are few who find it" (Matthew 7:13-14; cf. Luke 13:23-30).

While Jesus doesn't give a specific number of the saved or lost in the passage above, He does contrast the wide gate that leads to destruction with *many* travelers on it and the narrow gate that leads to life, with *few* who find it. Even granting that the terms "many" and "few" are relative, Jesus clearly declares here that not only will there be *some* who don't receive eternal life, but that those who don't obtain eternal life will be *many* in comparison with the relatively *few* who do obtain it.

Author and teacher Terry L. Miethe summarizes universalism and its problems:

"Universalists argue that an all-loving, all-powerful God would not allow any to [everlastingly] go to hell. Universalism flatly contradicts Scripture at several points. First, it denies biblical teaching concerning hell as the eternal abode of those who refuse to accept Christ as Savior (Matt. 25:41-46). Second, although God indeed wills for all to be saved, the Bible recognizes that some will accept salvation and some will not. Third, universalism removes all moral responsibility. If everyone goes to heaven, sin has no eternal consequence. Finally, witnessing becomes irrelevant. Why would Christ have commanded Christians to share the Gospel when everyone is already destined for heaven?"²⁷

While many of us would wish for universalism to be true, it doesn't bear up under scriptural scrutiny and is nothing more than wishful thinking.

ANNIHILATIONISM: A THIRD HISTORICAL VIEW

Annihilationism teaches that the unsaved cease to exist, either immediately at death or after a period of punishment in hell following the final judgment.

The earliest known exponent of this view appears to have been Arnobius of Sicca who died around A.D. 330.²⁸ Christopher Morgan, pastor and theology professor, writes:

“The most popular version of annihilationism in evangelical thought today is conditionalism (often called ‘conditional immortality’). Conditionalism is the belief that God has created all human beings only potentially immortal. Upon being united to Christ, believers participate in the divine nature and receive immortality. Unbelievers never receive this capacity to live forever and ultimately cease to exist. Partly because annihilationism has historical connections to Socinianism, materialism, and the teachings of the Jehovah’s Witnesses, most annihilationists in contemporary evangelicalism prefer to be known as conditionalists.”²⁹

“Socinianism,” mentioned above, is a forerunner of Unitarianism; and, like it, denies the deity of Jesus and the Trinity.

Morgan notes that annihilationism was “Condemned by the Second Council of Constantinople (553).”³⁰ In line with what Morgan stated above, Millard Erickson states regarding conditional immortality (conditionalism) that it is “A variety of annihilationism according to which immortality is a special gift to believers; unbelievers simply pass out of existence at death.”³¹

SOUL SLEEP?

Sometimes, as in Seventh-day Adventism, annihilationism is coupled with the erroneous doctrine of “soul-sleep,” which teaches that people are unconscious between the time of their physical death and their resurrection from the dead. Pastor and Bible teacher Mark Hitchcock notes:

“Soul sleep is based on two key thoughts. First, human existence [according to exponents of soul sleep] demands unity of body and soul. And second, the idea of sleep, which is used of the dead

in the Bible, indicates loss of consciousness.”³²

He also says:

“The main biblical support for the doctrine of soul sleep is found in several Old Testament verses. ... The main verse used by advocates of soul sleep is Ecclesiastes 9:5: ‘For the living know they will die; but the dead do not know anything, nor have they any longer a reward, for their memory is forgotten.’”³³

And Hitchcock further writes:

“Two major problems arise when you try to use this verse to prove soul sleep. First, the book of Ecclesiastes frequently states things that only *appear* to be true from the human perspective — from the limited vantage point of ‘life under the sun.’ Second, interpreting Ecclesiastes 9:5 in this way can’t be harmonized with other statements made in the same book. Solomon clearly believed that the soul continues on in conscious existence after death. He writes, for instance, ‘Then the dust will return to the earth as it was, and the spirit will return to God who gave it’ (Ecclesiastes 12:7).”³⁴

There are other verses used by advocates of soul sleep. For instance, Hitchcock also cites Ecclesiastes 3:20 and Daniel 12:2.³⁵ Sometimes the Bible uses words such as “rested,” “sleep,” “slept,” “fell asleep,” (or to be asleep) as metaphors describing death (e.g., 1 Kings 2:10; 14:20; Mark 5:35, 39; John 11:11-14; Acts 7:60; 1 Corinthians 15:20, 51; 1 Thessalonians 4:13). Commenting on Daniel 12:2, Hitchcock observes:

“Again, the sleep spoken of in this passage refers not to the soul but to the body. It is true that the body falls asleep at the moment of physical death. It’s the body that will be resurrected or ‘awakened’ in the end times.”³⁶

Hitchcock states, “Eleven explicit passages in Scripture refute the false teaching of soul sleep.”³⁷ He reviews those 11 passages over several pages,

which includes: Genesis 35:18; Matthew 17:1-3; Luke 16:19-31; 23:39-43; Acts 7:56, 59-60; 2 Corinthians 5:8; and Revelation 6:9-10.³⁸

While some advocates of annihilationism believe in soul sleep, it is possible to believe in annihilationism but not soul sleep.

CONTEMPORARY ADHERENTS OF ANNIHILATIONISM

While there have been various advocates of annihilationism in the course of Church history, some of its exponents have been groups, such as Jehovah’s Witnesses and Seventh-day Adventists, which are cults, or those who were within the ranks of Socinianism. Under assignment of the Seventh-day Adventists, LeRoy Froom, who taught historical theology at a Seventh-day Adventist university, produced a two-volume work on conditionalism in the 1960s.³⁹ However, over the last 50 years there have been some within the ranks of conservative or evangelical Christianity who have espoused annihilationism. In 1974, New Testament scholar John Wenham’s book, *The Goodness of God*, contained a chapter on hell, in which he advocated conditionalism.⁴⁰ Wenham’s final book was called *Facing Hell*, in which he expressed his hope that he could help eradicate the traditional Christian view of hell as unending torment.⁴¹ Christian theologian and author Michael Green also espouses annihilationism.⁴²

In 1982, the first edition of Edward William Fudge’s book, *The Fire That Consumes*⁴³ argued for annihilationism. The fact that the book’s Foreword was written by scholar and theologian F.F. Bruce⁴⁴ led some to consider Fudge’s work who might not otherwise have done so. Bruce commends Fudge’s work to the reader but confesses that he himself did not hold to Fudge’s conditionalism. The third and final edition⁴⁵ of *The Fire That Consumes* contains the Forewords to all three editions of this book: written by F.F. Bruce,⁴⁶ John Wenham (who states his agreement with Fudge’s conditionalism)⁴⁷ and Richard Bauckham.⁴⁸ (In his Foreword, Bauckham commends and praises Fudge’s book,

but does not state whether he agrees with conditionalism.)

In 1988, evangelical author John R.W. Stott caused a stir when he espoused annihilationism as his own tentatively held view of the eternal destiny of the unsaved.⁴⁹ The late theologian Clark Pinnock also came to embrace annihilationism, as did Philip (Edgcombe) Hughes.⁵⁰ In a tribute to Edward Fudge, after Fudge's death, David R. Reagan, of Lamb & Lion Ministries, lauded Fudge as "A dear friend and spiritual mentor."⁵¹ Reagan credits Fudge's influence on him with his own eventual acceptance of annihilationism.

For most Christians, Stott's advocacy of annihilationism may have made the biggest splash of the recent adherents of the view, but Fudge may have done more to actively promote and advocate for annihilationism than most, if not all, of its other recent adherents. Both men — as well as some of the others — have brought about a greater evangelical acceptance of annihilationism as being an alternative biblical view of the eternal destiny of unbelievers; and, doubtless, Stott's and Fudge's advocacy of annihilationism have persuaded other Evangelicals to adopt this view as their own.

Annihilationism is more biblically defensible than universalism. Some who would find themselves in the evangelical camp, such as Stott and Fudge, are noteworthy. Fudge mounts a strong case for conditionalism. He uses the Bible to argue for his view and he subscribes to a very high view of Scripture. For instance:

"I am a theist, a Christian and an evangelical, persuaded that Scripture is the very Word of God written. For that reason I believe it is without error in anything that it teaches, and that it is the only unquestionable, binding source of doctrine on this or any subject. This is a negative statement since it eliminates anything else as an unquestionable or binding source of doctrine. It is also a positive statement since it requires me to

use Scripture as a final authority and not simply to *praise* it for that purpose. ... We must open Scripture prayerfully and handle it with care. We must then listen to it without objection or argument. It is the Word of the living God."⁵²

Virtually these identical words appear in the book's first edition.⁵³ One can only applaud Fudge's professed high view of Scripture, his reverence toward the Lord, and his gentlemanly demeanor, which is evidenced in his writing on the subject and in interacting with his critics. Although his *magnum opus* on the subject is *The Fire That Consumes*, his conditionalist views are also presented in shorter and more easily accessible versions elsewhere.⁵⁴

THE CASE FOR ANNIHILATIONISM

Perhaps the favorite Scripture for annihilationists and conditionalists⁵⁵ is Matthew 10:28, where Jesus says, "And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. But rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell" (Matthew 10:28). Annihilationists point to this verse and declare that God will *destroy* both soul and body in hell. Case closed! But not so fast. For one thing, as the late Robert A. Morey points out, the parallel verse in Luke's Gospel says, "But I will show you whom you should fear: Fear Him who, after He has killed, has power to cast into hell; yes, I say to you, fear Him!" (Luke 12:5).⁵⁶ Thus, the phrase from Matthew's Gospel, "destroy in ... hell" is parallel with "cast into hell" in Luke's Gospel.⁵⁷

Elsewhere, Morey explains:

"That the word 'destroyed' (*apollumi*) does not mean 'to annihilate' or 'to pass into nonexistence' is clear from the rabbinic meaning of the word, the lexicographical significance of the word, and the way the word is used in the New Testament. ... There is no lexicographical evidence for the annihilationist's position that *apollumi* means 'to

annihilate' or 'to pass into nonexistence.' That this word cannot mean 'nonexistence' is clear from the way it is consistently used in the New Testament (Matt. 9:17; Luke 15:4, 6, 8, 9; John 6:12, 27; 2 Cor. 4:9; etc.). Do people pass into nonexistence when they are killed by a sword (Matt. 26:52) or a snake? (1 Cor. 10:9). Do people become nonexistent when they are hungry? (Luke 15:17). Do wineskins pass into nonexistence when they are destroyed by bursting? (Matt. 9:17). Is food annihilated when it spoils? (John 6:27). In every instance where the word *apollumi* is found in the New Testament, something other than annihilation is being described. Indeed, there isn't a single instance in the New Testament where *apollumi* means annihilation in the strict meaning of the word."⁵⁸

There are other Scriptures that annihilationists and conditionalists use, such as Psalm 2:9; 34:16; 37:10, 20; Isaiah 11:4b; 66:24; Matthew 3:12; and 2 Thessalonians 1:9. In general, annihilationists like to cite Scriptures that speak of the destruction of the wicked or speak of the wicked "being no more."

Fudge sees the flood of Noah's day and the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah as being used throughout Scripture as pictures of the judgment of the wicked. He writes:

"The flood story is so important for biblical authors [that] they use it as a metaphor both for historical judgments and for the final judgment to come."⁵⁹

And concerning the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, Fudge states:

"Genesis 19 relates the destruction of the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. Throughout the Bible this divine judgment ranks alongside the flood as an unmistakable prototype of divine judgment."⁶⁰

Fudge lists 10 Scriptures to support this assertion,⁶¹ but the Scriptures he lists primarily have to do with the fire

and brimstone that destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah as also being the same *agents* of God's judgment in other situations. Only one of the 10 Scriptures listed (Deuteronomy 29:23) refers to Sodom and Gomorrah.

Before responding to the annihilationist/conditionalist view, a few observations are necessary.

First, at most, only one of these three views can be true because they contradict one another. Second, we do not get to vote on which of the three views is true, because God has already decreed which is correct. And third, we are to determine which view the Bible teaches and accept that, regardless of whether or not we like or understand the view. God has said, "My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways My ways, says the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways, and My thoughts than your thoughts" (Isaiah 55:8-9). While we could wish that universalism or conditionalism were true, the Bible teaches the traditional view.

ANSWERING ANNIHILATIONISM

In Luke 16:19-31, the narration of the rich man and Lazarus appears to picture the intermediate state, rather than the final destiny, of the unsaved. The Greek word used for the place of the rich man's suffering is *Hades*, rather than *Gehenna*, the standard Greek word for hell in the New Testament. Revelation 20:13-15 shows that death, Hades, and those whose names were not found written in the Book of Life were all cast into the lake of fire (which seems to correspond to *Gehenna*, although not specifically called *Gehenna* in Revelation). Thus, it is possible that the punishment described in Luke 16 — which began in Hades — continues eternally in the lake of fire in Revelation 20, after the final judgment of the unsaved.

Charles Halff illuminates the subject with an apt analogy:

"Let me illustrate the difference between Hades (the present hell) and Gehenna (the final hell). If a man commits a crime, he is kept

in jail until his trial comes up. Then after he has been tried and sentenced, he is put in the penitentiary. God works on this same basis. The unsaved dead are now in Hades (God's jail) and are in a state of anguish and woe awaiting the Great White Throne Judgment [see Revelation 20:11-15]. After this great judgment, the unsaved will be cast into Gehenna (God's penitentiary)."⁶²

However, there is a question, even among those who hold to the traditional view of hell, as to whether Luke 16:19-31 is a historical account or a parable and, if the latter, we must determine what the parable is intended to teach.

If this story is a parable, it is the *only* parable of Jesus in which any names are given. Others, who believe it is a parable, point to stories in ancient literature that also name characters. The fact that Lazarus is named and that the rich man is unnamed is persuasive, because there is no point in Jesus naming one of the main characters in the parable when He never did in any of His other parables.

Moreover, when Jesus taught in parables, He always used real and tangible objects in those parables — sheep, seed, a pearl, a king, servants, a lost coin, a prodigal son, and so forth. He never used imaginary things such as a centaur, a cyclops, Zeus' lightning bolt, a unicorn, a leprechaun, or a mermaid. This then raises the question if the narrative of Lazarus and the rich man is a parable, why would Jesus here employ imaginary or fictional symbols? The simple answer is: He wouldn't. Luke 16:19-31 is literal truth describing real people in a historical setting.

However, even if one considers it a parable, Jesus means for His narrative to teach us something.

For example, in the parable of the prodigal son, Jesus teaches us about the waywardness of sinful man and the Father's love for sinners, as well as the contempt of the religious leaders of Jesus' day — personified by the older brother — for sinners. So even if

we allow the story of the rich man and Lazarus to be a parable, it does, at the very least, teach us four important truths: 1) a person's lot in this life does not necessarily indicate his lot in the hereafter; 2) immediately after death, the unsaved are in a place of torment and the righteous are in a place of bliss; 3) those in the place of torment cannot go to the place of bliss and vice versa (see Luke 16:26); and 4) the Scriptures are a sufficient revelation to warn men of future torment and how to avoid it.

Even though this passage is about the intermediate state of the dead and prior to the final judgment, after the final judgment the unsaved, who were in Hades prior to the final judgment, will enter the lake of fire (Revelation 20:15) where they will endure "everlasting punishment" (Matthew 25:46). Thus, the story of the rich man and Lazarus, when coupled with Revelation 20:11-15 and Matthew 25:41-46, argues against both universalism and annihilationism. One author, who believes this story in Luke 16 is a parable, states:

"I grant that the parable may be describing most immediately the intermediate state, but there is nothing in the parable which suggests that the intermediate state's 'torment' will cease for the lost after their resurrection and judgment."⁶³

IMMORTALITY OF THE SOUL

Conditionalists commonly charge that those who teach eternal punishment for the unsaved have adopted the Platonic doctrine of the immortality of the soul. They believe that due to this influence of Platonic teaching on the immortality of the soul, those who hold the traditional view of hell have erred. This is because, rather than believing that the lake of fire *destroys* its inhabitants after a time, traditionalists believe that the unsaved continue to exist forever in the lake of fire. Fudge states, "The pagan philosopher Plato taught that souls are immortal and cannot be destroyed. Many Christians have reasoned about hell from that same point of error."⁶⁴

However, Peterson counters:

“Plato held to the soul’s natural or inherent immortality. By contrast, evangelical Christians hold that God alone is inherently immortal (1 Tim 6:16) and that he confers immortality to all human beings. Fudge commits another logical fallacy, that of imputing guilt by association. Even if he could prove that the fathers borrowed their idea of immortality from Plato, that wouldn’t prove them wrong. Plato’s ideas are a mixture of error and truth. He believed in the existence of God, for example. So to simply trace an idea to Plato does not prove it to be false. Finally, Fudge also errs when he asserts that belief in the immortality of the soul drives the traditional view of hell. Actually, he has it backward. I do not accept traditionalism because I believe in the immortality of the soul. Rather, I believe in the immortality of human beings (united in body and soul after the resurrection of the dead) because the Bible teaches that there will be ‘eternal punishment’ for the lost and ‘eternal life’ for the saved (Mt 25:46).”⁶⁵

THE BIBLE, DEATH, AND DESTRUCTION

A second argument used by conditionalists and annihilationists is that the Old and New Testaments use the language of death and destruction to describe the fate of the lost. This sometimes is the case. Regarding such language used in the Old Testament, Peterson states:

“Fudge marshals many Old Testament passages that use what is commonly called ‘the vocabulary of destruction.’ That the language of destruction is used in the Old Testament with great variety of vocabulary is not debatable. This does not mean, however, that these Old Testament passages teach annihilationism. It is crucial to the debate to consider what aspect of God’s punishment is in view. The great majority of the Old Testament passages that

Fudge cites in support of conditionalism do not speak of the final fate of the wicked at all. Instead, they speak of God visiting the wicked with premature death. At first glance Fudge’s list of ‘destruction’ passages from the Old Testament seems impressive. On closer inspection, however, few of the passages he cites are relevant to the debate.”⁶⁶

As examples of Old Testament passages that use the language of destruction, but seem to refer to God’s judgment of the wicked in this life, Peterson cites Psalm 34:16, 21 and Psalm 37:1-2, 9-11, 20, 22, 28, 34, 38.⁶⁷ He does admit that at least two of the Old Testament passages Fudge cites (Isaiah 66:24 and Daniel 12:2) relate to the final destinies of the lost; however, Peterson denies that they teach annihilation.⁶⁸

Regarding the New Testament, Peterson states:

“I agree that New Testament writers commonly use the vocabulary of destruction to refer to the final fate of the wicked. But I do not agree with Fudge that these passages teach annihilationism.”⁶⁹

As one example, Peterson says, “Consider 2 Thessalonians 1:9. Paul says the wicked ‘will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the majesty of his power.’”⁷⁰ He asks, “Doesn’t unbelievers’ being shut out from the presence of the Lord imply their existence?”⁷¹ Peterson also points out that if Paul had intended to teach annihilationism in this passage, what need is there for the qualifying adjective “everlasting,” added to the word “destruction”? Why would he not have simply said “destruction”?⁷²

Elsewhere Peterson states:

“The New Testament vocabulary of destruction does not teach annihilationism. As further evidence of that fact, I point out that the word *destruction* cannot bear Fudge’s meaning in Revelation 17:8, 11. There ‘destruction’ is

prophesied for ‘the beast.’ We read two chapters later that the beast and false prophet are ‘thrown alive into the fiery lake of burning sulfur’ (Rev 19:20). ... Furthermore, John teaches that the beast, the false prophet and Satan ‘will be tormented day and night forever and ever’ (Rev 20:10). The beast’s ‘destruction,’ therefore, is not annihilation but eternal punishment!”⁷³

Peterson concludes:

“The Bible ... does not teach annihilationism at all. It does use the vocabulary of destruction, and it would be *possible* to read annihilationism into many passages that simply mention ‘death,’ ‘being destroyed’ and the like. Nonetheless, we ought not do so, because other passages — even other passages using the vocabulary of destruction — are incompatible with annihilationism.”⁷⁴

In the Bible, death does not refer to *annihilation*, but to *separation*. For instance, in the Garden of Eden, God told Adam regarding the forbidden fruit, “of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die” (Genesis 2:17). Adam did not cease to exist on the day that he and Eve ate the forbidden fruit; he didn’t die physically until hundreds of years later (Genesis 5:3-5). But on the day they ate the fruit they became *separated* from God and His life — they became spiritually dead.

Likewise, in the story of the prodigal son in Luke 15:11-32, the younger son left home and wasted his money. When he returned, his father told the older brother, “your brother was dead and is alive again, and was lost and is found.” The “death” of the younger son was his separation from his father, not his ceasing to exist. Likewise, Ephesians 2:1 describes the saved person thus: “And you He made alive, who were dead in trespasses and sins.” Verse 5 says that because God loved us, “even when we were dead in trespasses, [He] made us alive together with Christ” (Ephesians 2:5).

Thus, spiritual death is *separation* from God and His life.

Moreover, physical death is the separation of the person's spirit (or soul) from the body. For instance, the Bible says, "the body without the spirit is dead" (James 2:26). And concerning the death of Jesus, Scripture says, "He said, 'It is finished!' And bowing His head, He gave up His spirit" (John 19:30; see also Acts 7:59-60; Genesis 35:18). The "second death" spoken of in Revelation (2:11; 20:6, 14; 21:8) involves a permanent separation of the person from God and His life (Matthew 25:41, 46), not annihilation.

QUESTIONS AND DIFFICULTIES

One difficulty with the Bible's teaching on hell is that there is no summary sentence that says, "Everyone who is mentally and emotionally capable of putting their faith in Jesus as Savior but who refuses to do so will spend eternity tormented in hell." Scripture's teaching on hell must be gleaned from various passages. And there are things that are unclear. For example, does God give those in hell indestructible bodies? Thus, we must simply do our best under God to piece together what the Bible reveals about hell, realizing that God hasn't given us answers to all the questions about hell that we might wish He had.

However, the Bible does seem to teach that all those who are mentally and emotionally capable of putting their faith in Jesus as Savior, yet refuse to do so, will spend eternity in hell. For instance, Jesus said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me" (John 14:6). And Scripture also says, "Nor is there salvation in any other, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12). Likewise, 1 Timothy 2:5 says, "For there is one God and one Mediator between God and men, the Man Christ Jesus."

From John's Gospel comes another critical passage. It states:

"For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life. For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved. He who believes in Him is not condemned; but he who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God" (John 3:16-18).

And we also read, "He who believes in the Son has everlasting life; and he who does not believe the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him" (John 3:36). Another Scripture states, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved" (Acts 16:31, NASB). The content of the Gospel message — that which we are to believe — is found in 1 Corinthians 15:1-4.

From the Scriptures we have viewed thus far, we see that Jesus is the only Savior; and that one must believe (in Greek, "trust") in Him to be saved.

Those who trust in Jesus as their substitute and sin-bearer receive eternal life. However, Scripture teaches that the wrath of God abides on those who do not trust in Jesus and that they are condemned. As to what happens to those thus condemned, we read in Matthew 25:41-46 that they share the same fate as the devil and his angels. That fate is described in verse 41 as "eternal fire" (NASB). Concerning this eternal abode, the Scriptures elsewhere tell us, "The devil ... was cast into the lake of fire and brimstone where the beast and the false prophet are. And they will be tormented day and night forever and ever" (Revelation 20:10). The Bible further states, "And anyone not found written in the Book of Life was cast into the lake of fire" (v. 15).

Along this line, Peterson argues:

"Fudge urges in defense of annihilationism the argument that Revelation 20:14-15 never says that human beings are tormented

for ever and ever. Technically, this is correct, but it is a case of straining out the gnat and swallowing the camel. The devil's banishment into the lake of fire involves eternal punishment (Rev 20:10). When four verses later human beings are cast into the same lake of fire, does it mean annihilation for them? If so, then why hasn't John informed his readers of the change in meaning? Because there is no change in meaning; the lake of fire means everlasting torment for them too."⁷⁵

Christopher Morgan likewise observes, "Thus, the fate of the wicked parallels the fate of the three enemies of God mentioned earlier in [Revelation] 20:10."⁷⁶

The late Robert P. Lightner, gives a fitting summary statement regarding the traditional view of hell, when he stated:

"A normal interpretation of Scripture requires belief in eternal punishment of those capable of responding who are outside of Christ. Any appeal to God's universal love for man and Christ's death for all as a basis for denying eternal punishment is unjustified. Scripture also requires the sinner to respond in faith before he can realize the saving merit of God's love and the Savior's death in his place. God's love and Christ's death save no one apart from the responsible individual's response in faith and trust in the Savior and His substitutionary death. The Cross does not apply its own benefits."⁷⁷

DEGREES OF SUFFERING

In addition to those who haven't put their faith in Jesus being tormented eternally, Scripture also teaches that not all will have the same experience in hell. Referencing Matthew 11:21-24, Morey states:

"In this passage, Christ reveals that there will be degrees of punishment in hell. While all sinners in hell will be perfectly

miserable, they will not be equally miserable. In determining the degree of punishment in hell, our Lord takes into account the words (Matt. 12:26, 37) and works (Matt. 16:27; Rev. 20:11-15; 22:12) of sinners."⁷⁸

In addition to citing the Matthew 11 passage as teaching individual degrees of suffering in hell, Morey also cites Luke 12:47-48; Matthew 10:15; Hebrews 10:29; John 15:22; and Romans 2:3-6 as either teaching or implying this.⁷⁹ He states:

"According to Christ, some sinners will receive greater torment than others. Since there will be degrees of punishment, God's justice will be revealed."⁸⁰

And, although the experience of hell will be awful for everyone who is there, some have suggested that the torments will not be intolerable. For instance, basing his comments on a portion of the story of the rich man and Lazarus in Luke 16:26-31, Christian apologist Clay Jones comments:

"Notice that Jesus didn't depict the rich man as screaming hysterically in anguish and so pained by the flames that he was incoherent. Jesus could have done that, but He didn't. Instead, we read of a man who, rather than screaming hysterically, is able to make requests, carry on a conversation, lodge arguments, and form rebuttals. His thinking, however mistaken, is still intact. His calling Abraham 'father' could even be considered polite (albeit self-serving)."⁸¹

Now, as Jones himself admits, "we should be cautious not to draw too much from the rich man's experience."⁸² After all, again, some view this passage of Scripture as a parable rather than a historical account. As noted earlier, this story describes the intermediate state and, thus, may or may not also indicate conditions in the lake of fire after the final judgment. However, if the lake of fire is simply or mainly a continuation of conditions of the wicked in Hades, then Clay's analysis is correct.

Another who rejects the view that hell's torments will be intolerable is Bob Wilkin:

"A more accurate view is that the torment in the lake of fire will be physical, mental, and spiritual torment, but that all of it will be tolerable. None of it will be unbearable. See Matt 11:22, 24. The Lord taught both degrees of joy in the kingdom and degrees of suffering in the lake of fire. God is not going to give unbelievers an eternal experience that is unbearable. He could. He could set it up so people had level 10 suffering 24/7/365, with no breaks and no escape. But He will not do that. Such suffering could not be described as *tolerable* or *more tolerable*. Which unbelievers get the more tolerable torment may surprise us. Those of Sodom and Gomorrah and Tyre and Sidon were notorious sinners. Yet their torment will be more tolerable than law abiding, legalistic, self-righteous Jews of the first century who rejected the Messiah when they saw and heard Him directly (Matt 11:22, 24). Degree of torment will be based in great part on how much revelation from God a person rejected."⁸³

So, while it is not certain that the torments of hell will be tolerable, it is possible.

IS THERE A LITERAL LAKE OF FIRE?

Scripture pictures hell as a lake of fire, tormenting the unsaved. However, Scripture also pictures the wicked as being cast into "outer darkness," associated with "weeping and gnashing of teeth" (Matthew 8:12; 22:13; 25:30). Because of this apparent discrepancy between fire and "outer darkness," some have concluded that these are not literal descriptions, but metaphorical pictures. Yet, even though we associate fire with light, it is possible that the fires in hell would have no light. Likewise, the annihilationist may be tempted to conclude that because fire consumes what is put into it, those who are cast into the

lake of fire will be totally consumed. However, God is well able to make a fire that does not consume. Consider the burning bush that Moses saw, which burned but wasn't consumed (Exodus 3:2-3). Regardless of which view one adopts, "you don't want to be on the investigating committee!"⁸⁴

WHAT ABOUT ... ?

There also are questions about those who have never heard the Gospel, infants or children too young to believe, those mentally unable to believe due to mental disability or incapacity, or about Christians who commit suicide.

The merciful heart wants to say that all of these will be saved. However, these situations are not the same. Concerning those who have never heard, we must ultimately trust the Lord. It appears from Romans 1-3, that those who have never heard of Jesus will be in hell. Nevertheless, here and in all things, we must trust in God's sovereignty and goodness.

Concerning those mentally incapable of belief, Lightner provides scriptural and theological reasons for believing that such will be saved.⁸⁵

The question of Christians who commit suicide is difficult and beyond the scope of this article, although one could argue in favor of salvation based on the keeping power of Jesus (John 6:39; 10:27-30; Romans 8:29-39).

One of the most difficult aspects of the biblical doctrine of hell is how to reconcile it with the love of God. Perhaps a parallel would be the difficulty of reconciling God's predestination with human free will. Some have suggested that all who end up in hell either freely choose to be there or else would freely choose it, if given the choice. In this scenario, God simply gives those in hell what they want. The suggestion is that the doors of hell are locked from the inside. While not everyone finds this solution persuasive, C.S. Lewis⁸⁶ and others have expressed this belief.

Lightner once said that the main difficulty with the doctrine of hell is

that the punishment and torment of hell is everlasting.⁸⁷ Explanations for this tend to either magnify how people underestimate sin's heinousness to God and the fact that sin is against an infinite Being. And so, due to one or both factors, infinite punishment is just. We also must consider the awful price that God had to pay to save us from hell. It cost Him His Beloved Son, watching Him live on earth and be wretchedly treated by wicked and sinful men, and finally subjecting His own Son to the shameful and despicable death on a Cross. Therefore, for a person to refuse this most costly remedy that God provided to save man would seem to provide some justification (in man's eyes) for God to eternally punish people.

The traditional view of hell is a hard pill to swallow. In discussing God's choice of the elect Gentiles and His rejection of the unbelieving Jews, Paul states something that applies both to the subject of hell and who goes there: "consider the goodness and severity of God" (Romans 11:22a). God has shown His goodness and His love in sending His Son, so that whoever trusts in Him as Savior will have everlasting life. However, He has also decreed that those who do not put their faith in Jesus will spend eternity in hell. So here we see both the goodness of God and His severity.

THE GOOD NEWS ABOUT HELL

The good news about hell is that those who put their faith in Jesus as their Savior don't have to go there! God has made provision for the sinner who will trust in Jesus for salvation. Furthermore, Scripture declares that, "The Lord is ... not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance" (2 Peter 3:9). And it states, "God our Savior ... desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth" (1 Timothy 2:3-4). He invites you to come!

Do not delay. Few of us know with any certainty when or how we will die. The Apostle Paul wrote:

"And working together with Him, we also urge you not to receive the grace of God in vain — for He says, 'At the acceptable time I listened to you, and on the day of salvation I helped you.' Behold, now is 'the acceptable time,' behold, now is 'the day of salvation'" (2 Corinthians 6:1-2, NASB).

Come to Jesus today, and escape from hell forever!

Author's Note: *This article is lovingly dedicated to three great defenders of the Faith who recently went home to be with the Lord; my two beloved theological mentors Dr. Robert P. Lightner (August 2018) and Dr. R.C. Sproul (December 2017), and Dr. Robert A. Morey (January 2019) whose works have appreciably aided my own research and writing. These men believed, as I do, in the traditional view of hell.*

Endnotes:

1. Rob Bell, *Love Wins: A Book About Heaven, Hell, and the Fate of Every Person Who Ever Lived*. New York: HarperOne, 2011, pg. viii. For a critique of *Love Wins*, see J. Greg Sheryl, "Bell's Hell: The Universalist Gospel of Rob Bell," *The Quarterly Journal*, October-December 2011, pp. 1, 12-21.
2. Erwin W. Lutzer, *One Minute After You Die: A Preview of Your Final Destination*. Chicago: Moody Press, 1997, pp. 98-99.
3. Mike Fabarez, *10 Mistakes People Make About Heaven, Hell and the Afterlife*. Eugene, Ore.: Harvest House Publishers, 2018, pp. 117-118, italics in original. For a book review, see M. Kurt Goedelman, "10 Mistakes People Make About Heaven, Hell and the Afterlife," *The Quarterly Journal*, October-December 2018, pg. 24.
4. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. New York: Doubleday, 1994, excerpts from Sections 1030 and 1031, pg. 291, italic in original. Footnote #605 on the same page of the *Catechism*, says, "Cf. 1 Cor. 3:15; 1 Peter 1:7," regarding scriptural support for the fires of purgatory. Looking at these two supporting verses makes evident that they are *not* speaking of the fires of purgatory. Thus no further comment is necessary.
5. Billy Graham, *Peace With God*. Nashville: Word Publishing, 1984, pg. 94, italics in original.
6. *Ibid.*, italic in original.
7. John F. Walvoord in William Crockett, editor, *Four Views on Hell*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Publishing House, 1992, pg. 20, italic in original. On the previous page, Walvoord gives the 12 New Testament verses that use the word *gehenna*: "Matt. 5:22, 29, 30; 10:28; 18:9; 23:15, 33; Mark 9:43, 45, 47; Luke 12:5; James 3:6"

(*ibid.*, pg. 19).

8. *Ibid.*, pg. 20, italic in original.

9. John F. Walvoord, *Major Bible Prophecies: 37 Crucial Prophecies That Affect You Today*. New York: Harper Paperbacks, 1994, pg. 488.

10. Edward William Fudge and Robert A. Peterson, *Two Views of Hell: A Biblical and Theological Dialogue*. Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2000, pg. 102.

11. Millard J. Erickson in William V. Crockett and James G. Sigountos, editors, *Through No Fault of Their Own? The Fate of Those Who Have Never Heard*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1993, pg. 24.

12. See *Two Views of Hell*, op. cit., pp. 129-169. Here Peterson gives 10 scriptural "foundations" for the doctrine of everlasting punishment. I am indebted to Peterson for some of the Scriptures in my listing and our lists are very similar, though not identical.

13. Donald K. Campbell, editor, *Walvoord: A Tribute*. Chicago: Moody Press, 1982, pg. 170.

14. Emilio Antonio Nunez in *ibid.* Concerning Philip Schaff, Nunez cites Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*. New York: Scribner's, 1910, Vol. 2, pg. 611.

15. Larry Dixon, *The Other Side of the Good News*. Wheaton, Ill.: BridgePoint, 1992, pg. 27.

16. *Ibid.*, pp. 26-27.

17. Michael J. McClymond, *The Devil's Redemption: A New History and Interpretation of Christian Universalism*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2018, Vol. 1, pg. 28.

18. While Young hints at universalism in *The Shack*, he explicitly asserts it in his recent non-fiction book, Wm. Paul Young, *Lies We Believe About God*. New York: Atria Books, 2017, pp. 117-119. For critiques of Young and his books, see Gary E. Gilley, "Putting God in a Shack: The Unshackled Heresy of Wm. Paul Young," *The Quarterly Journal*, April-June 2009, pp. 4, 12-13; J. Greg Sheryl, "Lies Wm. Paul Young Believes About God: More Unshackled Heresy from the Best-Selling Author," *The Quarterly Journal*, July-September 2017, pp. 1, 10-18; and "Falsifying the Truth: Is Wm. Paul Young's Latest Book a Shack of Lies?," *The Quarterly Journal*, January-March 2018, pp. 4-11.

19. William Barclay, *William Barclay: A Spiritual Autobiography*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1977, pp. 65-68.

20. Barth gave mixed signals as to whether or not he held to universalism. However, it certainly appears that he did.

21. *The Other Side of the Good News*, op. cit., pp. 47-58.

22. *The Devil's Redemption*, op. cit., Vol. 2, pg. 1127.

23. *Ibid.*

24. *Ibid.*, pg. 1129, note 4.
25. See *Two Views of Hell*, op. cit., pg. 14. Here, Fudge, an annihilationist, and Peterson, a traditionalist, together agree, "And the Bible will not allow universalism" and "There is no need to quote multiple [Bible] passages; universalism is incompatible with clear biblical teaching."
26. Philip Graham Ryken, *Is Jesus the Only Way?* Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2012, pp. 44-45.
27. Terry L. Miethe, *The Compact Dictionary of Doctrinal Words*. Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 1988, s.v., "Universalism," pp. 213-214.
28. Christopher W. Morgan and Robert A. Peterson, general editors, *Hell Under Fire*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2004, pg. 197.
29. *Ibid.*, pg. 196.
30. *Ibid.*, pg. 197.
31. Millard J. Erickson, *The Concise Dictionary of Christian Theology*. Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 2001, s.v., "Conditional Immortality," pg. 39.
32. Mark Hitchcock, *55 Answers to Questions About Life After Death*. Sisters, Ore.: Multnomah Publishers, Inc., 2005, pg. 47.
33. *Ibid.*, pp. 47-48.
34. *Ibid.*, pg. 48, italic in original.
35. *Ibid.*
36. *Ibid.*
37. *Ibid.*
38. *Ibid.*, pp. 48-52.
39. LeRoy Edwin Froom, *The Conditionalist Faith of Our Fathers: The Conflict of the Ages Over the Nature and Destiny of Man*. Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald, Vol. 1 (1966), Vol. 2 (1965).
40. John W. Wenham, *The Goodness of God*. Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1974, pp. 27-41.
41. John Wenham, *Facing Hell: The Story of a Nobody: An Autobiography 1913-1996*. Carlisle, Cumbria: Paternoster Press, 1998, pg. 256.
42. See Michael Green, *Evangelism Through the Local Church*. London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1990, pp. 69-70.
43. Edward William Fudge, *The Fire That Consumes: A Biblical and Historical Study of the Doctrine of Final Punishment*. New York: Open Road Distribution, 2001. The title page notes that it was "Originally published [in 1982] by Verdict Publications."
44. *Ibid.*, pp. vii-viii.
45. This was the final edition, because Fudge died in 2017.
46. Edward William Fudge, *The Fire That Consumes: A Biblical and Historical Study of the Doctrine of Final Punishment*, (third edition, updated, revised, and expanded). Eugene, Ore.: Cascade Books, 2011, pp. xi-xii.
47. *Ibid.*, pg. xiii.
48. *Ibid.*, pp. ix-x.
49. David L. Edwards and John Stott, *Evangelical Essentials: A Liberal-Evangelical Dialogue*. Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1988, pg. 320.
50. *Hell Under Fire*, op. cit., pp. 198-199.
51. David R. Reagan, "In Memoriam Edward Fudge" *The Lamplighter*, March-April 2018, pg. 18. Document accessed at: www.lamblion.com/xfiles/publications/magazines/Lamplighter_MarApr18_Jerusalem.pdf.
52. *The Fire That Consumes* (third edition, 2011), op. cit., pp. 4-5, italics in original.
53. *The Fire That Consumes* (first edition, 1982), op. cit., pp. 22, 23.
54. To see a video of a presentation by Fudge on his views, go to the video section of the The Lanier Theological Library web page, and scroll down to "Lecture by Edward Fudge — September 24, 2011." Video accessed at: www.laniertheologicallibrary.org/videos/. For a brief written presentation of his views, see his article, Edward Fudge, "The Final End of the Wicked," Edward Fudge Ministries website. Document accessed at: http://edwardfudge.com/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/JETS_final_end_wicked.pdf. For a popular-level presentation of his views, see Edward William Fudge, *Hell: A Final Word: The Surprising Truths I Found In the Bible*. Abilene, Tex.: Leafwood Publishers, 2012. A companion film, based on his views, is *Hell and Mr. Fudge*. Rock Rapids, Iowa: Flame Out Productions, 2012. While both the book and the movie can be obtained from Amazon.com, these items are carried by the Seventh-day Adventist online book site. Document accessed at: www.adventistbookcenter.com/hell-a-final-word.html for the book and www.adventistbookcenter.com/hell-and-mr-fudge-dvd.html for the movie. Fudge was not a Seventh-day Adventist; he was "a lifelong member of the Churches of Christ" (see *Two Views of Hell*, op. cit., pg. 13). However, because he promoted annihilationism, which SDA teaches, the sect carries these items, which teach annihilationism.
55. Although, as noted earlier, conditionalism (or conditional immortality) technically refers to a particular variety of annihilationism, the two terms are often used synonymously and we have also used them synonymously in this article.
56. Robert A. Morey, *Death and the Afterlife*. Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 1984, pp. 152-153.
57. *Ibid.*, pg. 153.
58. *Ibid.*, pg. 90, italics in original.
59. *Two Views of Hell*, op. cit., pg. 26.
60. *Ibid.*, pg. 27.
61. *Ibid.*, pg. 210, endnote 2, where the Scriptures he lists are: "Deuteronomy 29:23; Job 18:15; Psalm 11:6; Isaiah 30:33; 34:9; Ezekiel 38:22; and Revelation 14:10; 19:20; 20:10; 21:8."
62. Charles Halff, *After Death ... What Then?* San Antonio, Tex.: The Christian Jew Foundation, 1970, pg. 19.
63. Robert L. Reymond, "Dr. John Stott on Hell," *Presbyterion*, Spring 1990, pg. 50, quoted in *The Other Side of the Good News*, op. cit., pg. 77.
64. *Two Views of Hell*, op. cit., pp. 43-44.
65. *Ibid.*, pp. 88-89.
66. *Ibid.*, pp. 90-91.
67. *Ibid.*, pg. 91.
68. *Ibid.*, pp. 92-93.
69. *Ibid.*, pg. 94.
70. *Ibid.*
71. *Ibid.*
72. *Ibid.*, pg. 150.
73. *Ibid.*, pg. 95, italic in original.
74. *Ibid.*, italic in original.
75. *Ibid.*, pg. 168.
76. Morgan in *Hell Under Fire*, op. cit., pg. 218.
77. Robert P. Lightner, *Sin, the Savior, and Salvation: The Theology of Everlasting Life*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Kregel Publications, 1991, pg. 175.
78. *Death and the Afterlife*, op. cit., pp. 153; cf. pg. 250.
79. *Ibid.*, pp. 153-154.
80. *Ibid.*, pg. 154.
81. Clay Jones, *Why Does God Allow Evil?* Eugene, Ore.: Harvest House Publishers, 2017, pg. 97.
82. *Ibid.*
83. Bob Wilkin, "Clearing Up Confusion about Heaven and Hell: Revelation 20:11-21:4," *Grace In Focus*, March/April 2017, pg. 10, italics in original. While not recommending all of Wilkin's teachings, I think what he said here seems reasonable.
84. Pastor Paul Sheppard, on his radio program, *Destined for Victory*.
85. *Sin, the Savior, and Salvation*, op. cit., pp. 178-199. Also, Robert P. Lightner, *Safe in the Arms of Jesus: God's Provision for the Death of Those Who Cannot Believe*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Kregel Publications, 2000.
86. In his chapter on "Hell" in *The Problem of Pain*, Lewis wrote, "I willingly believe that the damned are, in one sense, successful, rebels to the end; that the doors of hell are locked on the inside." C.S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*. New York: Harper San Francisco, 1996, pg. 130, italic in original. Lewis expressed a similar view through a character in one of his fictional works, "There are only two kinds of people in the end: those who say to God, 'Thy will be done,' and those to whom God says, in the end, 'Thy will be done.' All that are in Hell, choose it. Without that self-choice there could be no Hell." C.S. Lewis, *The Great Divorce*. New York: Touchstone, 1974, pg. 72, italic in original.
87. One of the last books that Dr. Lightner wrote prior to his death was Robert P. Lightner, *Heaven and Hell: A Biblical Guide*. Taos, New Mexico: Dispensational Publishing House, Inc., 2017.

from offering basic Bible study in favor of studies that are topical or devotional, adopting formats that more closely resemble a book club discussion than a class that teaches Scripture."¹

Most of us would agree that our experience validates this conclusion. Ask almost any Bible study leader about the material being examined and most likely they will name a book or a series which may be more or less tied to Scripture, but is not a direct investigation of Scripture itself. Adding to the problem is that most books being used in such groups are likely to be lightweight devotionals, experience-oriented testimonials, novels, or worse.

If a recent bestselling Christian book listing compiled by the Evangelical Christian Publishers Association is any indication of what believers are reading, it is disturbing at best. On that list, the bestselling book was *The Magnolia Story* by the HGTV stars Chip and Joanna Gaines, various printings of Sarah Young's *Jesus Calling* books locked down the number two, three, 15, 31, 37, 41, and 44 spots, Gary Chapman's *The 5 Love Languages* came in at number four, number seven was Tim Tebow's *Shaken*, and Joel Osteen occupied numbers 19 and 28. Other volumes in the top 50 included joke books, coloring books for children as well as adults, books on finances, novels such as *The Shack*, and other works that claimed to unravel long-hidden biblical mysteries.

It was not until number 71, with *Know Your Bible* by George Knight, that a book dealing with any type of actual study of Scripture made the list.

Although the majority of these bestselling Christian books are obviously not conducive for Bible studies, many of them are being used exactly for this purpose. This does not mean that books developing specific topics such as marriage, parenting, or general Christian living have no place, for

often they do, but an important qualifier must be stressed.

While books on specific subjects can be beneficial, they cannot and must not supplant direct study of the Scriptures in our spiritual diet. In an age in which biblical illiteracy is epidemic and growing, we must not neglect the solid, foundational study of the Word.

While book studies can be useful, we are wise to focus most of our attention on Scripture itself, and the theology found in it, and to make clear distinctions between such studies and topical options. Along this line, Wilkin remarks:

"Churches must distinguish clearly between what is Bible study and what is something else because the average churchgoer may not be able to on her own. Knowing they should study the Bible, earnest Christians sign up for what we have labeled a Bible study, assuming that it is. Yet, biblical illiteracy pervades our churches, unintentionally aided by our labeling."²

WORD OF GOD

In the Bible we find the phrase "Word of God" used in a variety of ways. According to context, it can refer to God speaking as when He created the universe (Hebrews 11:3), as a reference to the proclamation of the Gospel (Acts 13:46), as the Old Testament (Matthew 15:6), as being the "sword of the Spirit" (Ephesians 6:17), or as Scripture in general (Colossians 1:25; 1 Peter 1:23; and 1 Timothy 4:5).

One of the best-known texts on the subject is Hebrews 4:12, "For the word of God is living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart."

Historically most conservative Christians use the term the "Word of God" in this latter sense as identical to the Bible itself. However, we should be aware that not everyone in

Christendom accepts this definition. An increasing number, while not denying that the Bible is the Word of God, have added modern messages, supposedly from God, to this definition.

Most prominent in this regard would be those involved with the Word-Faith movement. Their leaders distinguish between two Greek words translated "word" — *logos* and *rhema*. In the New Testament, while these two words often have overlapping and similar meanings, the terms can have diverse nuances depending on context.

New Testament Greek scholar William D. Mounce notes:

"Whereas *logos* often designates the Christian proclamation as a whole, *rhema* usually relates to individual words and utterances."³

Greek scholars would see the *logos tos Theos* as referencing the whole of the Scriptures and the *rhema tos Theos* as individual words or sayings found in the Bible. Word-Faith adherents, however, see *rhema* as the words of God spoken outside the pages of Scripture, that is, modern-day messages from God.

The wise Christian will be careful to take note that when the Word-Faith movement leaders are talking about the Word of God they are normally speaking of *rhema* as they have defined it, not Scripture. This becomes more problematic because many within evangelical circles have borrowed the Word-Faith's understanding of *rhema* and are now quite regularly claiming that God is speaking to them, even calling these supposed messages the Word of God, or similar terminology.

For example, popular women's conference speaker and author Priscilla Shirer wrote a book in 2006, *He Speaks to Me, Preparing to Hear from God* (with the Foreword by Beth Moore) and then several years later wrote *Discerning the Voice of God, How to Recognize When God is Speaking*.⁴ These books — both published by Moody Publishers — claim the Lord

speaks to a believer personally, apart from Scripture.

Shirer was also part of *Be Still*, a DVD which was described as “an extraordinary film that demonstrates how contemplative, or ‘listening,’ prayer can be a vital way to find peace in the midst of a frenzied, fast-paced, modern world.”⁵ Contemplative prayer is the unbiblical practice of calling a person to silence by emptying their mind and then waiting and listening for God to “speak.” The techniques parallel those found in Transcendental Meditation and yoga, as well as being at the heart of Hinduism and Buddhism.

Dallas Willard, mentor to Richard Foster, founder of the Spiritual Formation Movement, wrote *Hearing God, Developing a Conversational Relationship with God* in which he attempts to help his readers discern when God is speaking to them.

Nearly three decades ago, Henry Blackaby burst onto the Christian literary scene and was labeled as one who was “shaking Southern Baptist tradition.” *Charisma* reported on Southern Baptist leaders who were disavowing their traditional roots and the magazine had this to say of Blackaby:

“Perhaps the most significant trend began in 1990 when a Bible study workbook by Southern Baptist prayer leader Henry Blackaby began to circulate in SBC circles. Called *Experiencing God*, it urges individuals and congregations to break free from religious traditions in order to follow the Holy Spirit’s guidance.”⁶

A few years later, Blackaby teamed up with his son, Richard, to write a similar book entitled *Hearing God’s Voice*.⁷

And, of course, Sarah Young’s numerous renditions of *Jesus Calling*, the best-selling books in Christian publishing, claim to be direct revelations from Jesus.⁸ Her publisher describes her book this way:

“After many years of writing *her own words* in her prayer journal,

missionary Sarah Young decided to be more attentive to the Savior’s voice and begin listening for what He was saying. So with pen in hand, she embarked on a journey that forever changed her — and many others around the world.”⁹

Of course, all of the above mentioned books represent just the tip of the mystical iceberg. So many are claiming to be hearing directly from God these days that one has to wonder why the Holy Spirit even bothered to inspire the sacred writings to begin with. With all of these claims of additional revelation, we need to make it clear that when we talk about the Word of God we are speaking of the inspired, authoritative Scriptures, not modern-day assertions referenced by so many.

CHURCH

Many are understandably confused about the church today. Popular leading pastors have published their “secret sauce” for building a great church, often without much regard to divine revelation concerning the Lord’s design for His Church.

The built-in mindset of Americans, that if something is successful it must be good, has been transferred to the church virtually unaltered. Big churches, therefore, must be good churches. If it works, then it must be of God.

More people attend church in America, on a percentage basis, than almost any other country in the world, but the churches they attend are often not based on the New Testament paradigm.

People are confused: Is the church an evangelistic center, a place where the unbeliever is made to feel comfortable? Do we create local churches that please the consumer or please God? Entertainment, sports programs, fun, and games will draw the crowds. So should we not take advantage of these? Just what does a biblically sound church look like?

In an age of many voices claiming many things about the church, we

would do well to teach often God’s paradigm for His Church as found in the New Testament, especially from the epistles of Paul, and in particular his pastoral epistles. We must not take for granted that people understand what the church is or how it is to function.

While we are at it, we should sharpen our language when it comes to the word “church” itself. When people use the word “church” they are often speaking of a building, such as “our church is on Second Street across from the park.” But the church is not a building and the early church did not gather in dedicated buildings until the fourth century.

Others speak of the church as a meeting: “I went to church last Sunday.” Although the church meets, the church is not a meeting. The church is the people of God. *Ekklesia* is the Greek word from which we derive our English word “church.” It means “to call out” and therefore the church is the called-out people of God who assemble to worship Christ, pray, study the Word, participate in the ordinances, and fellowship (Acts 2:41-42). Mounce says it well:

“[The church is] a dedicated group of disciples of Jesus Christ (cf. Phlm. 2; also Col. 4:15), whom he has purchased with his blood (cf. Rev. 5:9). The apostle sees the church as a new race, which he lists it alongside Jews and Greeks in 1 Cor. 10:32; it is sufficiently equipped with leadership and gifts to fulfill God’s purposes on earth (12:28); and it is the avenue through which the wisdom of God is made known (Eph. 1:22).”¹⁰

We do well to emphasize regularly that the church is not a building or a meeting, but is a local community of God’s people who are committed to Christ, His Word, and to one another under the leadership of the Lord and godly elders (1 Peter 5:1-4).

MISSIONS

For generations missionary endeavors followed a similar pattern as found in the New Testament.

“Apostle” means “sent one,” and beginning with Acts 13 the church would send men to various parts of the Roman Empire to intentionally preach the Gospel, plant churches, and make and baptize disciples.

These missionaries (“sent ones”) would move from place to place, staying from a few weeks to three years (in the New Testament records) until the Gospel was either rejected (Athens) or a church was established (Ephesus). Paul and his associates would revisit these church plants in the proper time, appointing elders to give them leadership (e.g., Acts 14:23). They would then return to their sending church and give a report of what the Lord had done (Acts 14:26-27).

Since New Testament times many have followed in the first missionaries’ footsteps, going to various parts of the world to evangelize, baptize, disciple, and establish churches. Many of these pioneers spent years — sometimes a lifetime — at a given location. Social betterment of the communities in which the Gospel permeated would often take place as lives were changed and the values of the faith embraced, but the primary focus of missionary efforts was evangelism, discipleship, and church planting, which was accomplished through many years of stable, dedicated ministry.

In the 1700s and 1800s the focus of the church in general changed in many circles and this shift spilled over into missionary endeavors as well. As theological liberalism in Europe, especially Germany, gained traction, the biblical Gospel was gradually replaced by the Social Gospel.¹¹ People did not need to be saved from sin, they needed to be rescued from injustice, poverty, and other social ills. The mission of the church was altered from spiritual to social liberation and what was taught at home was soon adopted in missions.

In time liberalism ran out of steam, leaving that branch of Protestantism with little more to offer than relatively weak and scattered social programs. Beginning in the early 1900s, Evangelicals fled these bankrupt denomi-

nations and institutions and returned to their biblical roots. Social programs were scaled back and minimized while evangelism and discipleship once again became central. In the 1950s and 1960s, many Evangelicals began to think that they had overreacted to the social agenda and, under the umbrella of “engaging the culture,” began to reemphasize social dimensions in their ministries.

In recent years, in almost identical fashion to the original Social Gospel movement, social and benevolent programs have increasingly gained steam and now play a major part in the ministries of most local churches. And what happens on the home front soon bleeds over into missions. The newer emphasis on social issues within evangelical churches has led to coining the word “missional.” This word has taken on many connotations because it became popular and it is not always easy to nail down its meaning, but in essence missional is ministry, outreach, and programming geared toward the betterment of mankind. Some use the word as a trendier term for missionary work, others see it as a combination of spiritual and social ministry, and still others use it exclusively for helping people with their physical and social needs.

Missional should be added to the words that could use a good definition. All of this is to say that the face of missions has radically changed in recent years. A missionary in the not so distant past was a believer who moved to another location to spread the Gospel and made and discipled believers, often in the context of the establishment of a local church. Other ministries might be attached to these, such as medical clinics, orphanages, or feeding the hungry, but these ministries were sidelights, not the central thrust of the missionary endeavor.

With the increase of this new wave of the Social Gospel, often under the missional banner, much of that has changed. A great deal of what is called missionary work today has little or nothing to do with the presentation of the Gospel or direct discipling of Christians. Rather, the focus

within missions is increasingly social in nature. And the popularity of short-term “mission” trips evidences this very well.

SHORT-TERM MISSIONS

Short-term missions (STM), defined as non-career individuals involved in some sort of short-term (usually from one week to three months) outreach or ministry in a location different from one’s home base, has grown incredibly popular in recent years. Statistics are difficult to nail down but some researchers estimate that approximately 2 million people per year are now participating in short-term trips of this nature¹² and, while financial contributions for long-term traditional missionary work are stagnant, the amount of money spent on short-term trips is booming.

Debate on the benefit and value of short-term missions is escalating and studies on this modern phenomenon have only just begun, but there is little disagreement among the experts that it has brought about a considerable shift in the normal definition and understanding of missions. Brian Howell, professor of anthropology at Wheaton College, a participant in numerous short-term trips, has written an insightful, well-researched, and predominately supportive book titled, *Short-Term Mission*. In this volume, he writes:

“...the emergence of STM as a practice was accompanied by a shift in the very definition of *missions*. That is, since the earliest years of the Christian movement, there have been those who travel to other places for brief periods to engage in missionary work, but the contemporary short-term mission phenomenon with its focus on sending average lay-people, and particularly young people, abroad for the length of time generally reserved for a vacation is a contemporary movement indeed. The archival data reveal a fascinating emergence of the language that today contributes to the expectations and interpretations of short-term missionaries.”¹³

Howell documents that the majority of STM has little to do with traditional missionary activities, focusing rather on construction, water projects, medical assistance, relief of poverty, and other benevolent services. Howell believes STM has benefit, mainly for the participants, and that social aid is valuable in and of itself, but that most STM projects are not missions as defined traditionally or biblically. Some recognizing this have stopped calling STM “missions,” but instead are labeling them “short-term learning opportunities.”¹⁴

That re-labeling is a wise step if, in fact, the definition of words matters. If there is no evangelism or discipleship, that is, no direct effort in spiritual ministry, then such trips are not missions. They are benevolent trips and/or learning experiences. Social aid and education have their place, and many will benefit from such involvement, but they are not mission trips, and it would be best if we make clear the difference. When offering short-term opportunities in our churches, which have nothing to do with the Gospel, we should call them what they are, but not mission trips.

THE GOSPEL

The Gospel is precious to every child of God. Unfortunately, the word has been stretched, deformed, and redefined beyond all recognition. The Gospel is the good news of Jesus Christ’s death, burial, and resurrection in order that we might be saved, forgiven of our sins, and reconciled to God (1 Corinthians 15:1-4). Sinners appropriate the Gospel to their lives by believing the Gospel message and accepting the grace of God by faith alone in Christ alone (Ephesians 2:8-9). But in recent times two distortions of the Gospel have become fashionable. One involves miscommunication, the other substance.

Of lesser import is the use of the word “Gospel” in ways never intended by the New Testament authors. Throwing about the term Gospel has become so common among some evangelical leaders that we are never really sure what is being said. We are told to live the Gospel,

pray the Gospel, rehearse the Gospel, and the like. The Gospel this, the Gospel that, is everywhere and definitions are lacking. John Piper went so far as entitling one of his books, *God Is the Gospel*.

We know that Piper and others who misuse the word Gospel mean well and are not attempting to change the message of Christ necessary for our redemption, but such use of the word Gospel is at best perplexing. If God is the Gospel, then, if my high school math is remembered correctly, the Gospel is God and that can’t be. God is much more than the Gospel. He describes Himself as love and holy, among other things, but not as the Gospel. We would do well to return to, and camp out on, the biblical definition of the Gospel as outlined above, which is the Cross-work of Christ necessary for our salvation.

Of more significance is how the Gospel message itself has broadened and enlarged to consist much more than salvation, including that of a social aspect. Evangelical and charismatic leaders and commissions from every direction are telling us that the Gospel of salvation, as clearly found in the New Testament, is only half of the good news message.

At a time when John Wimber and the Vineyard Ministries were gaining popularity in the Signs and Wonders movement and beyond, a key figure within its ministry team offered a disturbing lack of understanding of the Gospel. Jack Deere was Wimber’s assistant at the Anaheim Vineyard. However, before defecting over to the Signs and Wonders movement, Deere served for 12 years as a faculty member at Dallas Theological Seminary. One would certainly think that Deere was theologically qualified to address doctrinal concerns.

In 1990, following one of his teaching sessions at a spiritual warfare conference in Sydney, Australia, Deere was questioned by Anglican clergyman Graham Banister as to a simple definition of the Gospel. Banister writes:

“Such a question seems almost too simple. Who would think of

asking other ‘Evangelical’ leaders about basic gospel content? Anyone who claims to be Evangelical is automatically credited with such basic knowledge — aren’t they? Well, silly as it sounds, it is that precise question that I addressed to Dr Jack Deere in a private interview I had with him on the Friday, 9 April, just after his main talk.”¹⁵

Banister’s dialogue with Deere was the result of an earlier encounter at a workshop session led by Deere where, in a question and answer segment, Banister stated the Gospel was “about Jesus Christ who died for our sins and was buried and raised on the third day” to which Deere responded, “that was not the gospel.”¹⁶

In his subsequent interview, Banister asked Deere why he felt his explanation of the Gospel was defective. Deere replied that, “I’m not really very prepared to talk about that.” When pressed as to a definition of the Gospel, Deere said, “I’m not prepared to make a formal statement about that.” Deere went on to say that he was “not sure” of what the Gospel was, and then maintained that it comprised more than justification by faith. It, Deere conveyed, included “deliverance,” “exorcising of demons,” and “healing.”¹⁷

Along this line, another view expresses that added to “spiritual” salvation must be “secular” salvation, that is, the Social Gospel. Retired Anglican bishop and New Testament scholar N.T. Wright claims that feeding the hungry is part of the Gospel. He writes, “Jesus fed hungry people. This was part of the good news, an enacted symbol of the coming kingdom in which everyone would be given what they needed.”¹⁸

Richard Stearns, the president of World Vision, wrote *The Hole in Our Gospel*, which intermingles the central message of the Gospel with solving the social issues of humanity. And Ron Sider, in his book devoted exclusively to the Social Gospel, assures us that, “The mission of the Incarnate One included freeing the oppressed

and healing the blind.”¹⁹ But then he graciously admits, “It was also to preach the gospel, which is *equally* important.”²⁰ Like many others, Sider places the Social Gospel on equal footing with the biblical Gospel.

At the time this section of the article was being written, an article appeared in *Christianity Today* called, “Evangelism Is Alive in Portland.” It was a typical report of how the Gospel has been mutilated by Evangelicals. Melissa Binder, in an interview with four cutting-edge pastors and Christian leaders, questioned these men concerning their strategy for reaching “nones”²¹ with the Gospel. James Gleason, pastor of Sunrise Church in Portland, responded:

“We’ve constructed a culture around Christianity that isn’t the gospel. It’s not the gospel that’s the problem. The gospel is amazing. It’s what we’ve done to the gospel. We have to deconstruct the wrapper of culture that we’ve put on. We want people worshipping God for eternity — that’s no question — but we also want people fed, people healed, and people to find homes. Words and works bind together in a way. When we do both I think we have an open door for people who are more skeptical of the institutional church.”²²

In other words, if we will but repackage the Gospel by including a social dimension, we will discover that people will be receptive to its message. Never mind that nothing of the sort is taught in the New Testament as part of the Gospel, nor as a carrot to win people to the Gospel. Josh Chen, who directs Cru’s city ministry in Portland adds:

“I’m over-simplifying this, but older generations were asking: ‘How do I get to heaven?’ and ‘What do I do with my guilt?’ Millennials are asking, ‘What does it mean to thrive?’ If we approach millennials with a pitch for Christianity that was designed to resonate with their parents, it isn’t going to sound like good news to them.”²³

Chen further suggests that we have to customize the Gospel to this new generation and take out words from our vocabulary like sin, faith, repentance, and salvation. In other words, if we will change the Gospel message to fit the desire of the “nones” they will respond, but if we insist on proclaiming the biblical Gospel, with biblical words, we will never find an audience. Yet, “customization” can only be taken so far.

The Gospel has nothing to do with offering people a means by which they can “thrive.” The Gospel, the unchangeable Gospel, is still about solving the problem of our guilt before a holy and offended God because of our sin. To change the biblical message may draw an audience, it many even register “converts,” but it will not lead them to salvation.

WHY BOTHER?

Many years ago, PFO director Steve Cannon asked “Why Bother?” in an editorial in this *Journal*. He said, in response:

“We bother because we believe that words mean something. We bother because we know that people attach meaning to words, just as God attaches meaning to words (James 1:26). Because of modern technological communications — including social media — the words we utter can travel the world instantaneously and can be preserved for centuries. And people will ascribe meaning to statements. If an evangelist makes a pronouncement and empowers it with a ‘thus saith the Lord,’ or ‘God told me,’ or ‘this came as revelation knowledge,’ then that pronouncement can and will affect the lives of his (or her) followers. Decisions for good or ill may be based on it. An apology for the incorrectness of the pronouncement may come too late. This is why we bother.”²⁴

In the Wilkin article mentioned earlier, she reminds her readers of a scene in the comedy *The Princess Bride* in which the swordsman Inigo Mon-

toya has finally grown tired of hearing the Sicilian boss Vizzini describe one thing after another as “inconceivable.” Once, after Vizzini cuts the rope that the Dread Pirate Roberts is climbing up, he exclaims that it was “inconceivable” that the pirate did not fall. To this, Montoya replies: “You keep using that word. I do not think it means what you think it means.” We might give Montoya’s comment some serious consideration. Are we using words and terms in the way that communicates biblical truth, or are we using them in ways that confuse the people of God?

Endnotes:

1. Jen Wilkin, “Let Bible Studies Be Bible Studies,” *Christianity Today*, March 2017, pg. 26.
2. *Ibid.*
3. William D. Mounce, *Mounce’s Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2006, pg. 803.
4. An article evaluating the mysticism of Priscilla Shirer has been published by PFO. See M. Kurt Goedelman, “Do You Hear What I Hear? — Priscilla Shirer Tells Us to Seek and Expect the Voice of God,” *The Quarterly Journal*, July-September 2016, pp. 1, 10-21.
5. *Be Still*. Beverly Hills, Calif.: Twentieth Century Fox Home Entertainment, 2006, back side of DVD case cover insert.
6. Ken Walker, “Shaking Southern Baptist Tradition,” *Charisma*, March 1999, pg. 76.
7. An article evaluating the mysticism of Henry and Richard Blackaby has been published by PFO. See G. Richard Fisher with M. Kurt Goedelman, “Experiencing Mysticism — Critiquing the Teaching of Henry Blackaby,” *The Quarterly Journal*, July-September 2003, pp. 4-16.
8. Two articles evaluating the mysticism of Sarah Young have been published by PFO. See J. Greg Sheryl, “Is That Really Jesus Calling? — How the Subjectivity of Sarah Young Draws People from Scripture,” *The Quarterly Journal*, October-December 2013, pp. 1, 13-21 and “Is Jesus Still Calling Sarah Young? — The Continued Saga of Her Devotional Writings,” *The Quarterly Journal*, October-December 2017, pp. 4-12.
9. Product detail sales page for *Jesus Calling* on Thomas Nelson’s website, emphasis added. Document accessed at: www.thomasnelson.com/9781591451884/jesus-calling/.
10. *Mounce’s Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words*, op. cit., pg. 110.
11. An article examining the Social Gospel

has been published by PFO. See Gary E. Gilley, "The Social Gospel — Imposing a Cultural Mandate into the Great Commission," *The Quarterly Journal*, July-September 2012, pp. 1, 11-20.
12. Brian M. Howell, *Short-Term Mission, An Ethnography of Christian Travel Narrative and Experience*. Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2012, pg. 27.
13. *Ibid.*, pg. 41, italic in original.
14. *Ibid.*, pg. 212.
15. Graham Banister, "Spiritual Warfare:

The Signs & Wonders Gospel," *The Briefing*, April 24, 1990, pg. 14.
16. *Ibid.*
17. *Ibid.*
18. N.T. Wright, *Simply Good News, Why the Gospel Is News and What Makes It Good*. New York: HarperOne, 2015, pg. 159.
19. Ronald J. Sider, *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger, Moving from Affluence to Generosity*. Nashville: W Publishing Group, 2015, pg. 51.
20. *Ibid.*, emphasis added.

21. The "nones" are people who self-identify themselves as atheists or agnostics, as well as those who say their religion is "nothing in particular."
22. Melissa Binder, "Evangelism Is Alive in Portland," *Christianity Today*, April 2017, pg. 38.
23. *Ibid.*
24. This quotation is adapted from Stephen F. Cannon, "Why Bother?," *The Quarterly Journal*, July-September 1993, pp. 2, 15.



EDITORIALS

(continued from page 2)

special spiritual insight, or some kind of special spiritual intuitiveness or prophetic gift. It has been tagged "The Issachar Anointing." This insight into secret and hidden information always seems to lead to spiritual elitism. But what does "understanding of the times" really mean in context?

A speaker can use this verse in such a way as to strongly imply special insight or a form of divination regarding the spiritual realm. This can be done by ignoring the context. Sometimes the verse in Chronicles is used to suggest that the hearers can be modern-day Sons of Issachar with special insights and understanding beyond the normal. The verse is manipulated to say, "I am a cut above all others." These are hyped-up claims that totally ignore the context of 1 Chronicles 12:32. One orator of such assertions is Robert Stearns and his YouTube video post, "The Issachar Anointing."

It is clear that 1 Chronicles 12:32 has nothing to do with the claims that are being made above. The entire context (the chapter) starts with "mighty men, helpers in the war." The verses in context have to do with warfare, Israel's battles, and weaponry, and as noted begins with "the mighty men, helpers in the war" (v. 1). This is clearly about fighting enemies and pitched battles.

First Chronicles 12 goes on: "armed with bows, using both the right hand and the left in hurling stones and shooting arrows with the bow. They were of Benjamin, Saul's brethren" (v. 2). The narration continues: "Some Gadites joined David at the stronghold in the wilderness, mighty men of valor, men trained for battle, who could handle shield and spear" (v. 8); adding that the tribe of Gad who were the "captains of the army" (v. 14).

First Chronicles 12 further tells of the military might of Benjamin, Judah, and the other tribes: "So David received them, and made them captains of the troop" (v. 18); "it was a great army, like the army of God" (v. 22); "Now these were the numbers of the divisions that were equipped for war" (v. 23); "of the sons of Simeon, mighty men of valor fit for war" (v. 25); that the tribe of Zebulon also went out to battle and the tribe Asher went out to

war (vv. 33, 36); that the eastern tribes were "armed for battle with every kind of weapon of war" (v. 37).

Finally, Chronicles again mentions, "All these men of war, who could keep ranks, came to Hebron with a loyal heart, to make David king over all Israel" (v. 38).

There is absolutely no question about the setting and context of 1 Chronicles 12. It is war, warfare, weapons of war, fighting men, leaders in battle, and tribes being trained in warfare. War, war, and more war. This chapter is filled with military terms. It is not about the prophetic or special spiritual insights. And the sons of the tribe of Issachar are right in the middle of it all.

Israeli's Chaim Herzog and Mordechai Gichon have written a book on the military history of ancient Israel called *Battles of the Bible*. They offer this on 1 Chronicles 12 and Issachar:

"The Zebulunites, however, were 'expert in war, with all instruments of war ... which could keep rank' (v. 33). Similarly dextrous and equipped were the tribes to the east of the Jordan. The tribe of Issachar seem to have specialized in intelligence missions, since the military proclivity is explained as 'understanding of the times, to know what Israel ought to do' (v. 32). In short, David could draw upon the tribal contingents to furnish bowmen and slingers, light and heavy lancers — the former good at fighting in individual combat in difficult terrain, the latter (the children of Judah) forming the closely arrayed heavy phalanx. These were assisted by spearmen, who would hurl their spears before charging the foe with drawn swords. Other tribes were less specialized as far as weaponry was concerned, but were trained to fight in rank and file, while the Issacharians had developed a special flare for scouting and the like" (pg. 110).

So the men of Issachar were scouts doing reconnaissance. Likewise, Will Varner says of Issachar, "It appears that they were a laborious, hearty, valiant tribe, patient in labor, and invincible in war" (*Jacobs Dozen*, pg. 54). And Adam Clarke concurs with the larger context and says that 1 Chronicles 12 treats "military affairs" (*Clarke's Commentary*, Vol. 2, pg. 602).

It is interesting to note that the warriors Deborah and Barak were from the tribe of Issachar.

To rightly divide, that is, properly interpret God's Word (2 Timothy 2:15), we must always be familiar with the context or we will develop a pretext. First Chronicles 12 used today as some special spiritual insight or esoteric anointing is one example of that misuse.

—GRF

NEWS UPDATES

(continued from page 3)

our personal failures, sins, and errors in leadership, thus perpetuating a continuation of the criticism." As a result of these failings, "Pastor James is taking an indefinite sabbatical from all preaching and leadership at our church in Chicago," the statement further disclosed.

The announcement also contained comments from MacDonald in which he said, "For a long time I have felt unequal to all but the preaching task at Harvest. I have battled cycles of injustice, hurt, anger, and fear which have wounded others without cause. I have carried great shame about this pattern in certain relationships that can only be called sin."

Yet, it appears that MacDonald's "indefinite sabbatical" may not be exactly that. The elders' statement noted that MacDonald "may continue preaching at Harvest Naples through some of the winter months." According to an online article by *Relevant* magazine, "That last part evidently didn't sit well with the Florida location's pastor, John Secrest." The news report said that Secrest "wrote to the elders asking them to reverse that part of their decision" and that "Harvest not only refused Secrest's request. They also fired him."

The Naples, Florida-based church "was originally planted in 2016 as an independent church but partnered with Harvest Chicago in February of 2018, becoming its eighth location," according to *The Christian Post*.

The current state of affairs at Harvest has apparently been a catastrophe waiting to happen. Last year, *World* magazine published an investigative report about the excommunication of several elders in 2013. And *Relevant* magazine also reported, "In recent weeks, things have gotten extremely messy, with Harvest filing a defamation suit against blogger and reporter Julie Roys, who spoke with dozens of former staff and elders who made allegations of misconduct — including mismanaging funds, a lack of transparency and intimidating potential whistle blowers."

That lawsuit, which was filed in October of last year, in addition to Roys also named Ryan and Melinda Mahoney and Scott and Sarah Bryant as defendants. But in early January, the suit was dropped by Harvest. One

news report stated that "after the court denied their request to keep certain documents confidential, the megachurch decided to drop the case."

However, the church offered a bit different outlook for its dropping the lawsuit. In a statement from the church's elders, dated Jan. 7, 2019, the document acknowledged that because "the court ruled against our motions in both instances" the elders viewed "these outcomes as God's direction and have instructed our legal counsel to drop the suit entirely."

MacDonald has come under fire from his critics for such things as accumulating enormous church debt, an excessive lifestyle with requests for exorbitant pay raises, an admission of gambling in homes, church offices, and casinos, and for giving a platform to (and failing to adequately address) heretical teachers such as T.D. Jakes.

In recent years, other megachurch pastors such as Mark Driscoll (Mars Hill Church) and Bill Hybels (Willow Creek Community Church) have found their ministries and leadership roles taken away due to inappropriate administrative actions.

—MKG

MORMON CONVERSION THERAPIST SAYS HE'S GAY

David Matheson is a well-known Mormon gay conversion therapist who authored the book *Becoming a Whole Man* and has developed "several experimental programs which seek to 'address incongruous same-sex attractions.'" However, in light of several recent Facebook posts, Matheson will need to find a new line of work.

According to the *Daily Mail Online*, in January, Matheson wrote on the social media site that "he realized that he 'had to make substantial changes' in his life. 'I realized I couldn't stay in my marriage any longer. And I realized that it was time for me to affirm myself as gay. Toward the end of this decline, I also realized that being in an intimate relationship with a man was no longer something I wanted to avoid. It had become a non-negotiable need.'"

Newsweek magazine, citing a *New York Times* article from 2007, reported, "Matheson, who received a Masters of Science degree in Counseling and Guidance from Brigham Young University in 1996, began a full-time gay conversion practice in New Jersey in 2004 for which he charged \$240 for a 90-minute session."

Matheson was married to his wife, Peggy, for 34 years and is now divorced. The *Daily Mail* article also stated "that living a single, celibate life 'just isn't feasible' for him, so he's seeking a male partner. He has gone from bisexuality to exclusively gay."

An American LGBT-interest magazine, *The Advocate*, reported that despite his adopting a gay lifestyle, Matheson “won’t condemn conversion therapy,” that he “still has love for ‘conversion therapy,’” and that “he also elected not to renounce his past, and stressed his strong Mormon faith.”

—MKG

HILLSONG CHURCH PARTS WITH AOG AFFILIATION

The Australian-based, worldwide megachurch known as Hillsong has said that it is severing ties with the Australian Christian Churches (ACC), the Australian branch of the Assemblies of God denomination.

In a statement made last fall, Brian Houston, the church’s Global Senior Pastor, wrote, “As Hillsong Church has continued to grow, we no longer see ourselves as an Australian Church with a global footprint, but rather a Global church with an Australian base — our global office now resides in the USA. Two thirds of the people attending Hillsong Church each weekend live in countries beyond Australia.”

Hillsong claims that more than 130,000 people attend its services at its 123 locations in 24 countries. Hillsong also is a powerful influence in today’s Christian worship music, with its songs written by its various worship leaders being sung in churches of all denominations.

The move, Houston said, would allow Hillsong to now “be able to credential our own pastors and restructure our church in a way that enables us to give due diligence to governance, risk, church health, safe church, and many other policies that are crucial to the future progress of Hillsong, globally.”

According to *Christianity Today*, “Founded in Sydney in 1983 by Houston and his wife Bobbie, Hillsong exploded into one of the most recognizable brands in contemporary Christianity.”

Because of its former AOG association, some see Hillsong Church within the Pentecostal or charismatic camps. However, Hillsong is more closely aligned with the New Apostolic Reformation, a movement of self-proclaimed apostles and prophets.

Houston is also receiving attention from the press for other reasons. News reports indicate he is being investigated by New South Wales authorities for not telling police when he found out his father had committed sex crimes. The *Religious New Service* reported, “In 2000, Brian Houston’s father Frank Houston, also a minister, confessed to sexually abusing an underage male at his New Zealand congregation 30 years before. In response, Brian Houston, who was then president of the Assemblies of God in Australia, fired his father, took control of the church and merged it with Hillsong.” A Royal Commission report says that the elder Houston was allowed “to publicly resign, without damage to his reputation or the reputation of Hillsong Church.”

—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 END TIMES SURVIVAL GUIDE

Ten Biblical Strategies for Faith and Hope in These Uncertain Days

by Mark Hitchcock

Tyndale Momentum, 213 pages, \$15.99

It is certainly clear that we are living in perilous times. Enter *The End Times Survival Guide*, in which pastor, Bible expositor, and Bible prophecy expert Mark Hitchcock offers sane and practical help in navigating the troubled waters that surround and threaten to overwhelm Christians today.

Hitchcock earned his doctorate at Dallas Theological Seminary (where he is currently associate professor of Bible exposition) and serves as senior pastor of Faith Bible Church in Edmond, Okla. He is known for his many books on Bible prophecy. This book does not neglect Bible prophecy, however, in this work Hitchcock assumes a pastoral role in bringing biblical teaching, comfort, and hope to believers whose hearts are troubled and confused by the uncertain, turbulent days in which we live.

Hitchcock states the book's purpose thus:

"In the pages that follow, you will discover ten spiritual tools the Bible relates directly to our spiritual preparation for the Lord's coming — ten biblical survival strategies to live out these last days so you and your family can prosper in an increasingly decaying, darkening world. These strategies won't guarantee your physical or financial well-being, but they are guaranteed to bring life and vitality to your spiritual health and welfare as you cling to the immovable rock of God's Word" (pg. xv).

Each of the book's ten chapters deals with a particular topic, including: handling worry (chapter 1); spiritual warfare (chapter 4); prayer (chapter 5); what we should be doing while waiting for Christ's return (chapter 6); being filled with the Spirit (chapter 8); viewing world events from God's perspective (chapter 9); and Christ's return (chapter 10). The book's Introduction and each chapter is headed up with one or two topically relevant quotations.

With the possible exception of chapter 3, which deals with church attendance, each chapter is built around a single passage of Scripture concerning that chapter's topic, though Hitchcock brings additional appropriate Scripture passages into the discussion of each topic. The book is peppered with appropriate quotations, illustrations, and humorous stories which illustrate his points. Hitchcock's teaching gift is evident throughout, as is his pastor's heart.

One place where PFO would differ with Hitchcock is in his short discussion of believers forgiving others (pp. 94-95), based on the phrase in the Lord's Prayer, "And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors" (see Matthew 6:12, 14-15). There, Hitchcock seems to advocate unconditional forgiveness, based on this passage; whereas, PFO believes that a consideration of additional Scripture passages on forgiveness (such as Luke 17:3 and Matthew 18:15-17) indicate that, while believers must certainly release anger, bitterness, etc., toward those who have wronged them — which some confuse with actual forgiveness — forgiveness is a *transaction* that can only occur when the offender seeks forgiveness from the one sinned against. Only at that point, can — and must — the one sinned against complete the transaction by granting forgiveness.

Hitchcock gives at least two brief invitations to the unsaved in this book: one on pages 36-37, which deals with running the race of the Christian life, and the other on pages 199-201.

Hitchcock's attitude of watchfulness for Jesus' return is evident in his final chapter. Chapter 10, titled "Wake Up," is an exhortation to eagerly anticipate the soon return of Our Savior, based upon the Olivet Discourse of Our Lord, particularly as it is found in Mark 13. Although not every reader will share Hitchcock's conviction regarding a pre-Tribulation rapture of the Church, all believers should identify with his eagerness for the Lord's return, which is reminiscent of the penultimate verse in the Bible, "He who testifies to these things says, 'Surely I am coming quickly.' Amen. Even so, come, Lord Jesus!" (Revelation 22:20).

The believer will be nourished, encouraged, and challenged at times by Hitchcock's exposition of Scripture, and by his salutary teaching on subjects of practical importance and great relevance to believers in their Christian walk, in these difficult days.

—JGS

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