Profil es in Faith

Blaise Pascal (1623–1662)

by Graham Tomlin

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One late summer’s day in 1647, René Descartes, one of the fathers of modern thought and author of the best-known sound-bite in the history of Western philosophy, “I think, therefore I am,” paid a visit to a young, rather sickly twenty-four year old, recently arrived in Paris with his sister. He, like Descartes, was a mathematician, a philosopher of sorts, and a genius. His name was Blaise Pascal. Although at this time they were on fairly good terms, within a few years they were set on opposite paths, Descartes confident that the future lay with human reason, and its ability to explain and understand everything that matters, Pascal convinced that human rationality was fatally flawed by the Fall, and that the truth lay in historic Christianity. Much of what they said that day remains unrecorded, but the meeting perhaps symbolizes the meeting of an older Christianity with a new enlightened modern age, confident in human abilities, thinking it had little need of those old ways.

Blaise Pascal never saw his 40th birthday. He was an anguished, illness-ridden, often lonely man, who was at the cutting edge of contemporary scientific experimentation and felt keenly the intellectual ferment of his day. One November night in 1654, he experienced a profound encounter with God, which turned a distant and arid faith into a gripping sense of mission and devotion. He died eight years later in voluntary poverty, leaving behind scattered papers which were probably intended as a grand Apology for Christianity, conceived very much with people like Descartes in mind. These were subsequently gathered together and published by his friends as the famous Pensées: “Thoughts on Religion and various other subjects.”

T.S. Eliot once wrote: “I can think of no Christian writer... more to be commended than Pascal to those who doubt, but have the mind to conceive, and the sensibility to feel, the disorder, the futility, the meaninglessness, the mystery of life and suffering, and who can only find peace through a satisfaction of

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"It is a serious thing to live in a society of possible gods and goddesses, to remember that the dullest and most uninteresting person you talk to may one day be a creature which, if you saw it now, you would be strongly tempted to worship, or else a horror and a corruption such as you now meet, if at all, only in a nightmare…. You have never talked to a mere mortal. Nations, cultures, arts, civilization—these are mortal, and their life is to ours as the life of a gnat. But it is immortals whom we joke with, work with, marry, snub, and exploit—immortal horrors or everlasting splendors. This does not mean that we are to be perpetually solemn. We must play. But our merriment must be of that kind (and it is, in fact, the merriest kind) which exists between people who have, from the outset, taken each other seriously—no flippancy, no superiority, no presumption. And our charity must be a real and costly love, with deep feeling for the sins in spite of which we love the sinner—no mere tolerance or indulgence which parodies love as flippancy parodies merriment. Next to the Blessed Sacrament itself, your neighbor is the holiest object presented to your senses. If he is your Christian neighbor he is holy in almost the same way, for in him also Christ vere latitat—the glorifier and the glorified, Glory Himself, is truly hidden.

(from The Weight of Glory)
What Is Character?
Character assumes that our actions are not isolated from each other. Character is a pattern of choices flowing out of a person—a pattern of virtues or vices. Character assumes a kind of consistency, integrity, and dependability in our actions. We do not at each moment invent ourselves anew. Stanley Hauerwas in his ground-breaking work, Character in the Christian Life, says:

For to stress the significance of the idea of character is to be normatively committed to the idea that it is better for men to shape rather than be shaped by their circumstances....

Our actions come out of ourselves—our past choices—and our actions shape ourselves. It is all right to look at each individual action and judge whether it is right or wrong—sin or not a sin. But the neglect of evangelicals, while focusing on the sinfulness of individual behaviors, is to consider how deeply entrenched vices are dealt with. Each individual action either reinforces a previous pattern or not, and each action shapes the self in an accustomed fashion or sets a new path. Perhaps that is why Jesus talks not just of individual actions but of a way of life. Over and over again in the Gospels, Jesus talks about the either/or. There are two ways and only two. Jesus says, “Enter by the narrow gate; for the way is broad that leads to destruction, and many are those who enter by it. For the gate is small, and the way is narrow that leads to life, and few are those who find it.” (Matthew 7:13-14) Thus there are two ways, the broad or the narrow, and you are either headed down one path or the other.

Similarly, there are only two kinds of characters illustrated by Jesus with two trees. He says you will know false prophets “by their fruits.” Why? Because “...every good tree bears good fruit; but the rotten tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot produce bad fruit, nor can a rotten tree produce good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. So then, you will know them by their fruits.” (Matthew 7:17-20) Jesus also indicates that the kind of fruit is determined by the kind of tree: “Grapes are not gathered from thorn bushes, nor figs from thistles, are they?” You do not get blueberries from an apple tree or peaches from an orange tree. The character of the tree determines the kind of fruit produced.

There are only two foundations that can be laid—one on the rock and one on the sand. Jesus says, “Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine, and acts upon them may be compared to a wise man, who built his house upon the rock. And the rains descended and the floods came, and the winds blew, and burst against that house; and yet it did not fall, for it had been founded on the rock. And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not act upon them, will be like a foolish man, who built his house upon the sand. And the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew and burst against that house; and it fell, and great was its fall.” Repeated obedient actions build the foundation of rock. Repeated acts of disobedience set a person’s life up to be blown away when the storms of life come.

Our actions come out of a kind of root that produces a certain fruit, and our actions also create the kind of foundation

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Our thoughts definitely influence our actions. Our actions tend to form entrenched patterns—our habits—virtue or vices. The sum total of these habits (virtue or vices) is our character. And our character certainly influences our destiny. The battle for character is determined in the little thoughts and actions we do. When thoughts and actions are omitted, it can have a devastating impact on our destiny. To borrow the form of an old saying:

For want of a thought, an act is lost.
For want of an act, a habit is lost.
For want of a habit, a character is lost.
For want of a character, a destiny is lost.

For a number of years I was an instructor for Prison Fellowship, traveling to numerous prisons throughout the country for two- to three-day in-prison seminars. At many of these prisons, I would be inside for about 12 hours at a time. Often I had time during breaks and during lunch and dinner to hear inmates’ stories. One inmate was a pharmacist. He started by selling a drug without a prescription to someone who wanted it. That led over time to numerous sales and a whole pattern of drug dealing. He told me that he never imagined when he sold that first drug illegally that he would end up where he was now—in prison.

At another prison, I met a pastor. His wife got involved in an adulterous affair. When he found out, he was so angry that he wanted revenge. So he went to see a prostitute. He saw her again and again. That led to relationships in the underworld—prostitution and drugs. He gradually began (perhaps at first being blackmailed) to get involved in pushing women and drugs. The rumor of his involvement spread on the streets. One day after preaching his sermon, a little nine-year-old girl walked up to him and said, “My mom says you are the best preacher in the whole world, but I don’t see how you can be the best preacher and do the things that you do.” That comment devastated him. He was appalled at how far down he had fallen. For about a week he scarcely got out of bed. He repented of his sin, but he had to go to prison for the crimes he had committed. This pastor’s destiny was profoundly altered by that little thought of revenge and consequently acting on it. He went down the road quite a ways before he turned back.

Sow a Thought, Reap an Act
Deciding what goes into our minds is the beginning of dealing with character. The Bible has a lot to say about the importance of our thoughts. Paul tells us in Romans 12:2 to “be not conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.” A first step in our transformation involves rejecting those thoughts from the cultural environment around us that are
opposed to Christ and, rather than being conformed to that pattern of thinking, to pursue the renewing of our minds. In Ephesians 2:3, Paul indicates that prior to coming to Christ, we can be enslaved, “indulging the desires of the flesh and of the mind.” Not only the flesh, but the mind is in captivity. In Matthew 12:34, Jesus says that “the mouth speaks out of that which fills the heart. The good man out of his good treasure brings forth what is good; and the evil man out of his evil treasure brings forth what is evil. And I say to you that every careless word that men shall speak, they shall render account for it in the Day of Judgment.” So good thoughts in the heart issue good words, and evil words flow out of evil in the heart. The treasure of good thoughts filling the heart spills over into good words and good actions. Matthew 15 says, “It is that which comes out of the heart that defiles.”

Another classic verse, Philippians 4:8, contains Paul’s charge: “…whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is of good repute, if there is any excellence and if anything worthy of praise, let your mind dwell on these things.” Thus, we need to guard our hearts and minds because out of these come our words and actions. There are many more such passages.

**Sow an Act, Reap a Habit**

When we do act rightly and continue in that pattern, virtues are formed. We can look at certain people and know that they are reliable. On the other hand, when we act wrongly and continue in that pattern, it becomes a vice. Bad habits can easily be stopped in their beginnings. However, the more they are practiced, the stronger they become. In the beginning, bad habits are like cobwebs, sticky and unpleasant, but easily broken. However, if not resisted, bad habits become chains that bind us. The word used commonly in the culture is the word “addiction.” (Usually it has a negative sense. But William Glasser argued in his book, *Positive Addiction*, that some practices, though habit forming, can be good—maybe just another word for virtues.)

We see rehabilitation centers for addiction to alcohol and drugs. We also hear of sexual addiction. Often addiction begins by providing great initial pleasure, but there is always a law of diminishing returns. A psychiatrist friend, Dr. David Allen, was one of the first to work on treatment of crack cocaine addicts. He said that crack cocaine is the one drug that must never be tried, because it is almost 100% addictive. This is because it delivers on the first try the highest high you could imagine. Addicts have described it as like having a thousand orgasms or having Christmas every day. But because of the depletion of a chemical in the brain, you never get the same high again. The second high is always less than the first, and the third less high than the second and so on. Addicts have said that they could see the first high from the second, but not get there. After a while, the addict gets very little positive pleasure from the cocaine but has to treat the cocaine depression—the withdrawal that happens if they do not continue.

In many ways, this phenomenon—the law of diminishing returns—is a parable about what happens with all sinful habits. Initially, the act is filled with pleasure, but not too far down the road comes the tyranny of the addiction and increasing loss of pleasure.

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Is the Content of the Biblical Manuscripts Reliable?
by Amy Orr-Ewing
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Reprinted by permission from her book, Enjoying Intimacy with God

Amy Orr-Ewing is Training Director of RZIM Zacharias Trust. She earned a first class degree in Theology at Christ Church, Oxford University, and a Masters degree in Theology at King’s College, London. She oversees the Trust’s apologetics training program and speaks at many universities, churches, and conferences. She has co-authored (with her husband) Holy Warriors: A Fresh Look at the Face of Extreme Islam and has contributed to the book God and the Generations. Her new book (Is the Bible Intolerant?) was shortlisted for the 2006 UK Christian Book Awards. Amy has travelled widely, including visits to Afghanistan, China, and South Africa. She is married to Frog (Francis), who is a vicar in the Church of England, and they live in London with their twin boys.

It may well come as a shock to some that the manuscript tradition of the Old and New Testaments stands up to rigorous scrutiny. There is a widespread belief that much of the Bible was written centuries after the events it records and that it has been changed and tampered with on the whim of different scribes or interested parties. The breadth and age of the existing ancient manuscripts tell a very different story. However, the next question is invariably: “Just because the manuscripts are reliable, that doesn’t make the content of them true.”

Indeed, it is true that no one argues for the historicity of Homer’s mythology, for example. The manuscripts of his writings may be reasonably intact, but that does not make what he was writing about reliable or accurate historical material. Aren’t the Gospels on the same kind of level—are they just mythological, with true moral value but very little historical reality? Surely accounts involving people walking on water and water turning into wine weren’t meant to be taken as historically true—it’s all mythology, isn’t it? These questions are all very important, and it is true that the Christian must not assume that an unbeliever will accept the content of the biblical text as true simply because the manuscripts themselves have proved to be so trustworthy.

There are a number of questions tied up here. The first issue has to do with our approach to the supernatural world. It is probably true to say that our postmodern society is much more open to the possibility of a supernatural realm than was the Enlightenment modernist worldview of previous generations. However, skepticism about these things does still exist in some portions of the population, and it is important for us to deal with the underlying reasons for this.

Skepticism About the Supernatural World
One possible reason for disbelieving the content of the Gospels and the rest of the Bible is its recording of powerful miraculous events. What is the cause of this disbelief? Is the person assuming a framework in which miracles are a logical impossibility? Has this individual closed their mind to the possibility of miracles and supernatural occurrences? Do they believe only in the natural world and things which are scientifically provable?

This skepticism is based on the ideas of the philosopher David Hume (1711-1776). He argued that all objects of human inquiry are either “relations of ideas” (i.e., mathematical statements and definitions) or “matters of fact” (i.e., everything which can be known and tested empirically). Hume wrote:

When we run over libraries, persuaded of these principles, what havoc must we make? If we take in our hand any volume—of divinity or school metaphysics, for instance—let us ask, does it contain any abstract reasoning concerning quantity or number? No. Does it contain any experimental reasoning concerning matter of fact and existence? No. Commit it then to the flames, for it can contain nothing but sophistry and illusion.

However, there are serious problems with this position. The main one is that Hume’s philosophy fails its own test, because his own statement fits into neither

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of his categories. As Norman Geisler comments:

The statement that “only analytic or empirical propositions are meaningful” is not itself an analytic (true by definition) or empirical statement. Hence, by its own criteria it is meaningless.

C. S. Lewis deals with this kind of materialist approach in his usual lucid manner, showing that a dogmatic commitment to this philosophy makes thinking itself problematic:

It follows that no account of the universe can be true unless that account leaves it possible for our thinking to be a real insight. A theory which explained everything else in the whole universe but which made it impossible to believe that our thinking was valid would be utterly out of court. For that theory would itself have been reached by thinking,... Thus a strict materialism refutes itself for the reasons given long ago by Professor Haldane: “If my mental processes are determined wholly by the motions of atoms in my brain, I have no reason to suppose that my beliefs are true...and hence I have no reason for supposing my brain to be composed of atoms.”

This kind of passionate commitment to a purely material world and the nonpossibility of miraculous interventions from outside is problematic. For the materialist, thinking itself becomes a process which falls outside the remit of that which has capacity for meaning.

The motivation for denying the possible existence of a supernatural realm often seems to be strong, even to the point of demonstrating prejudice. One writer who comes from a materialist viewpoint considers this phenomenon:

It is not that the methods and institutions of science somehow compel us to accept a material explanation of the phenomenal world but on the contrary, that we are forced by our a priori adherence to material causes to create an apparatus of investigation and a set of concepts that produce material explanations, no matter how counter-intuitive, no matter how mystifying to the uninitiated. Moreover, that materialism is an absolute, for we cannot allow a divine foot in the door.

A commitment to the modernist worldview, in which there is nothing other than the empirically testable world around us, means that everything else is seen through a materialist lens (although this lens, of course, is not acknowledged and does not even pass its own test). This kind of a priori commitment to the falseness of the Gospels and the nonpossibility of any miraculous occurrence is a form of closed-mindedness. The basis on which these views are held—that is, philosophical materialism—is not itself logically consistent and deserves to be challenged. Materialists need to be encouraged to at least be open to the possibility of the supernatural, even if they remain extremely skeptical. To be closed to this possibility is to claim absolute knowledge of the universe—an astounding “godlike” claim.

New Testament miracles. It may be interesting for a skeptic to look at the context of the New Testament miracles. Many of the men and women involved were fishermen or tax collectors, certainly “down-to-earth” types. We read that when Jesus walked on water they were frightened. This is an ordinary reaction to a supernatural event; it is a response that rings true. The reader is being told about these events with the acknowledgment that they are unusual. We are expected to be surprised that these things happened. We read that when Joseph discovered that Mary was pregnant, he wanted to send her away. Again, this is a normal human reaction—he assumes a natural reason for the pregnancy, and is himself convinced otherwise only by a supernatural

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Intimacy Is Nourished by Worship
by J. Oswald Sanders
Reprinted by permission from his book, Enjoying Intimacy with God

What is worship? Worship is to feel in your heart and express in some appropriate manner a humbling but delightful sense of admiring awe and astonished wonder and overpowering love in the presence of that most ancient Mystery, that Majesty which philosophers call the First Cause, but which we call Our Father Which Art in Heaven. \(^1\)

A. W. Tozer

In the act of worship, God communicates His presence to His people. That is borne out by the experience of Dr. R.A. Torrey, who girdled the globe with his revival-kindling evangelistic missions. He testified that a transformation came into his experience when he learned not only to give thanks and make petition, but also to worship—asking nothing from God, occupied and satisfied with Him alone. In that

The LORD descended in the cloud and stood there with him as he called upon the name of the LORD. Then the LORD passed by in front of him and proclaimed, “The LORD, the LORD God, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in loving-kindness and truth; who keeps loving-kindness for thousands, who forgives iniquity, transgression and sin; yet He will by no means leave the guilty unpunished, visiting the iniquity of fathers on the children and on the grandchildren to the third and fourth generations.” Moses made haste to bow low toward the earth and worship....

It came about when Moses was coming down from Mount Sinai (and the two tablets of the testimony were in Moses’ hand as he was coming down from the mountain), that Moses did not know that the skin of his face shone because of his speaking with Him. So when Aaron and all the sons of Israel saw Moses, behold, the skin of his face shone, and they were afraid to come near him.

Exodus 34:5-8, 29-30
new experience, he realized a new intimacy with God.

As His disciples heard the Master pray, they could not help but discern the depth of intimacy that existed between Him and His Father. Aspiration after a similar experience was kindled in their hearts, and they asked Him, “Lord, teach us to pray just as John also taught his disciples” (Luke 11:1). He gladly responded, for was not this the very road along which He had been leading them?

In replying to their request, Jesus said, “When you pray, say: ‘Father’” (Luke 11:2, italics added). A sense of the true fatherhood of God in all the richness of that relationship cannot but kindle worship—the loving ascription of praise to God for all that He is, both in His person and providence.

Jesus thus impressed upon His students the important principle that in prayer God must occupy the supreme place, not we ourselves, or even our urgent needs. What a wealth of meaning was compressed into that single word, “Father,” as it fell from the lips of Jesus. If God is not accorded the chief place in our prayer life, our prayers will be tepid and pallid. It is significant that in the pattern prayer, it is half completed before Jesus instructed them to mention their own personal needs. When God is given His rightful place, faith will be stimulated.

The idea of worship is endemic in the human race, for man is essentially a worshiping being. But the term as commonly used seldom conveys its true scriptural content. Its old English form, “worthship,” provides an interesting sidelight on its meaning. It implies worthiness on the part of the one who receives it.

The ascription of praise to the Lamb in the midst of the throne in Revelation 5:12-14 is an example of the purest worship:

Worthy is the Lamb that was slain to receive power and riches and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing. To Him who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb, be blessing and honor and glory and dominion forever and ever. And the elders fell down and worshiped.

The word “worship” derives from a word meaning “to prostrate oneself, to bow down.” It is used of a dog fawning before its master. As we use it, it is “the act of paying reverence and honor to God.” When we pray, “Hallowed be Thy name,” we are worshiping Him. It conjures up in our minds all that that name connotes.

When God revealed Himself to Moses on Mount Sinai, it was through His name: “And the LORD descended in the cloud and stood there with him…. Then the LORD… proclaimed, ‘The LORD, the LORD God, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in loving-kindness and truth; who keeps loving-kindness for thousands, who forgives iniquity, transgression and sin; yet He will by no means leave the guilty unpunished” (Exod. 34:5-7).

But it is in the area of worship that many evangelicals are most deficient, as John R. W. Stott writes.

We evangelicals do not know much about worship. Evangelism is our specialty, not worship. We have little sense of the greatness of Almighty God. We tend to be cocky, flippant, and proud. And our worship services are often ill-prepared, slovenly, mechanical, perfunctory and dull. . . Much of our public worship is ritual without reality, form without power, religion without God.2

Endless material for worship is enshrined in divine revelation, for worship is simply the adoring contemplation of God as He has been pleased to reveal Himself in His Son and in the Scriptures, especially in the Psalms, the inspired book of prayer.

Few have mastered the art of worship as did F.W. Faber. To read some of his

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Worship flows from love. Where love is meager, worship will be scant. Where love is deep, worship will overflow.

Intimacy Is Nourished by Worship
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hymns and poems is a rare experience of worship.

How wonderful, how beautiful
The sight of Thee must be,
Thine endless wisdom, boundless power
And awful purity.
O how I fear Thee, living God,
With deepest, tenderest fears,
And worship Thee with trembling hope
And penitential tears.

Hear him again as he is lost in adoration:

Only to sit and think of God,
Oh, what joy it is!
To think the thought, to breathe the Name,
Earth has no higher bliss!

Father of Jesus, love's Reward,
What rapture will it be,
Prostrate before Thy throne to lie
And gaze, and gaze on Thee.

Worship flows from love. Where love is meager, worship will be scant. Where love is deep, worship will overflow. As Paul wrote his letters, his contemplation of the love and glory of God would spontaneously cause his heart to overflow in worship and doxology.

But there can be an element of selfishness even in love. True, we should worship God for the great things He has done for us, but our worship reaches a much higher level when we worship Him simply and solely for what He is, for the excellences and perfections of His being.

Thomas Goodwin, the Puritan, said, “I have known men who came to God for nothing else but just to come to Him, they scorned to soil Him and themselves with any other errand than just purely to be alone with Him in His presence.” We might say with some justification that that is a little extreme, but it betokens an intimacy with God and desire for fellowship with Him that we might well covet.

Worship is the loving ascription of praise to God, for what He is in Himself and in His providential dealings. It is the bowing of our innermost spirit before Him in deepest humility and reverence.

The essence of worship is illustrated in the return of Scipio Africanus from the conquest of his enemies. As he went, he scattered the largess of the victor to the crowds that lined the way. Some were stirred to gratitude by his liberality; some because he had rolled away from their homes the fear of the invading army; still others, forgetful of their personal benefits, praised the qualities of the victor—his courage, resourcefulness, liberality. It was in that last group that the highest element of worship was present.

Worship Can Be Wordless

David adjured his soul: “My soul, wait in silence for God only” (Psalm 62:5). The deepest feelings often cannot find adequate expression in words. Between intimate friends there can be comfortable silences. There are times when words are unnecessary, or even an intrusion. So in our communication with God. Sometimes we are awed into silence in the presence of the Eternal.

A Single Word Can Enshrine a Wealth of Worship
When the disconsolate Mary was weeping outside the empty tomb, she turned and saw Jesus but did not recognize Him until “Jesus said to her, ‘Mary!’ She turned and said to Him in Hebrew, ‘Rabboni!’” (John 20:16) In that single word was compressed all the passionate love and reverent worship of a devoted friend and follower.
How Worship May Be Stimulated

Intimacy with God will inevitably fan the flame of desire to know Him better, so that we may worship Him more worthily. How can we stimulate and gratify that desire?

God has granted a glorious, although only partial, revelation of Himself in the wonders of His creation. “The heavens are telling of the glory of God,” wrote David. “And their expanse is declaring the work of His hands” (Psalm 19:1). From His inconceivably vast universe, we can learn something of His majesty, infinite power and wisdom, beauty and orderliness.

The heavens declare Thy glory, Lord, 
In every star Thy wisdom shines; 
But when our eyes behold Thy Word, 
We read Thy name in fairer lines. 
Isaac Watts

But the heavens do not declare the mercy and love of God. Only in the face of Jesus Christ do we see the full blaze of the divine glory, for “it was the Father’s good pleasure for all the fulness to dwell in Him” (Col. 1:19). No worship that ignores Christ is acceptable to God, for it is only through Him that we can know and have access to the Father.

In Thee most perfectly expressed, 
The Father’s glories shine, 
Of the full deity possessed, 
Eternally divine. 
Worthy, O Lamb of God art Thou, 
That every knee to Thee should bow. 
Josiah Conder

The question then arises: How can I get to know better and more intimately the Christ who reveals the Father? Primarily through the Scriptures as they are illuminated by the inspiring Holy Spirit. They are rich with material to feed and stimulate worship and adoration. The Scriptures are the only tangible way of knowing Him, as Jesus Himself indicated: “You search the Scriptures, because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is these that bear witness of Me” (John 5:39).

In the Bible, we have the full and adequate revelation of the vast scope of the divine nature. Great tracts of truth await our exploration. Great themes—God’s sovereignty, truth, holiness, wisdom, love, faithfulness, patience, mercy—illumined and made relevant to us by the Holy Spirit, will feed the flame of our worship.

The devotional use of a good hymn book, especially the sections that deal with the Person and work of the members of the Trinity, will prove a great aid to a deeper, more intimate knowledge of God. Not all of us find it easy to express our deepest feelings or to utter our love to God. When we are in the place of prayer, we are painfully conscious of the poverty of our thoughts of God and the paucity of words in which to express them. God has given the church gifted hymn writers to help His less gifted children pour out their worship and praise, and we can take their words and make them our own. Many of the church’s great hymns are the nearest thing to divine inspiration.

We should, however, beware of conceiving of worship as being confined solely to the realm of thought, for in Scripture it is linked with service. “You shall worship the Lord your God, and serve Him only,” were our Lord’s words to Satan (Matt. 4:10). We should not separate what God has joined. Worship is no substitute for service, nor is service a substitute for worship. But true worship must always be expressed in loving service.

Notes

Every summer in the first week of July, about one hundred Christians gather at Keble College, Oxford University, for a life-changing educational and spiritual experience. The RZIM Zacharias Trust Team, a group of extraordinarily talented and eloquent Christians, brings depth and profound meaning to Scripture and contrasts it with current attitudes and postmodern world-views. I was fortunate to attend RZIM’s conference this summer.

Many of the students arrived in England a day or two before the first day of summer school to do a little pre-conference sightseeing, but Keble College started to buzz with activity Sunday afternoon as the attendees arrived for the conference. Everyone congregated in the welcoming center for a cup of tea or coffee, and we each received a notebook outlining the week’s events. Measuring close to two inches thick, the notebook forecasted a week that would not be light in subject matter and a schedule without much free time. Despite this demanding curriculum, the yoke of the schedule was easy, and its content was deep and meaningful. As the attendees continued to congregate on the eve of the summer school, new friends were made as handshakes and names were exchanged, and hugs greeted friends made the previous year. The excitement was palpable both for new and returning attendees.

It was light fare for the orientation as Michael Ramsden and Amy Orr-Ewing welcomed us in our first assembly and, with a lot of humor, provided an overview of the week’s schedule. After dinner, we all walked over to the Oxford Museum of Natural History for Michael Ramsden’s impeccably delivered and heart-impacting lecture on “Sacrifice,” from the “With All Your Heart” series. The spiritual food following dinner was rich and thoughtful, and just a taste of what the next five days held in store.

The next morning, like all mornings, began with community breakfast in the Dining Hall, followed by worship and readings from the Psalms.
led by Phil Lawson Johnston and his daughter in the Keble Chapel across the Liddon Quad. Inside this Anglo-Catholic chapel is an incredible display of stained glass and mosaics depicting biblical stories and scenes from the life of Christ. A small side chapel just under the organ pipes houses Holman Hunt’s famous painting, “The Light of the World,” which depicts Jesus’ offer in Revelation 3:20. The worship included both familiar songs and hymns and new songs, some penned by Phil Lawson Johnston.

A short walk down Parks Road after morning worship brought us to the Rhodes House, where Dr. John Lennox jump-started each day with an in-depth exploration of a specific book of the Bible. This year, Dr. Lennox expounded on Revelation. Not only did Dr. Lennox lead us deeper into Revelation than we’d ever dared, but he also taught us how to continue these studies once we returned home.

After our time with Dr. Lennox, we broke for coffee and tea in the lawn behind the Rhodes House, where we found a bookstall selling books by dozens of authors, including the summer school speakers. The tables reflected the deep level of scholarship and the breadth of subject matter at the RZIM conference. It was a wonderful time to pick up additional material to go deeper after the conference and add to my already-burgeoning library.

It was not long after break until we were engaged with the next theme of the morning, “The Uniqueness of the Christian Faith.” Throughout the week, we heard talks that elaborated on aspects of the Christian faith that are challenging on their face and plumbed the depths of questions we’d not carefully considered before. L.T. Jeyachandran tackled the difficult aspects of the Trinity while the Rev. Dr. Alister McGrath asked the question, “What difference does believing in a creator God make?” Amy Orr-Ewing engaged us with her thoughts on eternity, deity, sufficiency, exclusivity, and sovereignty in the “I Am” statements from Jesus, while Dr. Ravi Zacharias explored Christ in history.

On the final day, Michael Ramsden addressed the questions of judgment and (continued on page 26)
Profiles in Faith: Blaise Pascal

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the whole being.” If we live in a culture that profoundly doubts God, yet which at the same time craves satisfaction, then perhaps Pascal is just the kind of guide we need.

Throughout the *Pensées*, we can see Pascal countering two opposing attitudes, very familiar to his contemporaries, and also very familiar today, a fact which makes him such a fascinating figure for us.

**War on Two Fronts**

On the one hand, he was conscious of those who, like Descartes, were supremely and increasingly confident in the power of human reason and its ability to deliver sure, unequivocal certainty. On the other, a vigorous body of opinion in 17th century France was distinctly cynical and skeptical about knowing anything for sure. Taking their cue from the great 16th century moralist Montaigne, whose great question was “What can I know?”, these “Pyrrhonists” tended to be laid-back and ironic: if we can know nothing, what is there left but to enjoy life while you can? Poised between Descartes’ certainty and Montaigne’s skepticism, Pascal’s self-imposed task was to persuade his contemporaries on both sides that traditional orthodox Christianity was a better bet than either.

Perhaps all of this has a contemporary ring for us. New Age anti-rationalism and the laid-back postmodern suspicion of Truth and authority are both heirs of the non-Christian world. He has been for several years a member of the Theology Faculty of Oxford University. He studied English and subsequently Theology at Oxford University, was curate of a church in Exeter, and Chaplain of Jesus College, Oxford. He is the author of numerous articles and several books, including The Power of the Cross: Theology and the Death of Christ in Paul, Luther and Pascal (Paternoster 1999), The Provocative Church (SPCK 2002), Luther and his World (Lion 2002), The Responsive Church (IVP 2005), and Spiritual Fitness: Christian Character in a Consumer Culture (Continuum 2006). He is married with two children, and is an avid follower of various kinds of sport, especially football.

in 17th century France, all trying to show evidence from nature or miracles which proved the existence of God, or logical arguments designed to demonstrate the rationality of Christianity, so that anyone who read them would be compelled to believe. Pascal thought these pretty much a waste of time.

For starters, he pointed out that human reason is not actually as reliable as Descartes thought it was. Imagination, for example, is far more persuasive: “Put the world’s greatest philosopher on a plank that is wider than need be; if there is a precipice below, although his reason may convince him that he is safe, his imagination will prevail!” If we really want something to be true, we can persuade ourselves that it is, even if it doesn’t quite seem to fit. When an annoying fly is buzzing around our ears, the ability to think rationally and coolly somehow vanishes. Reason is easily upset. Furthermore, Pascal admitted, when you look closely at the world, it doesn’t prove God’s existence at all. God does not show himself at every corner; in fact, at times he seems distinctly shy and hard to find. The world does not shout out obvious compelling proofs for God’s existence, and if we’re honest even Christianity itself doesn’t always seem to make good rational sense.

Is this then because it isn’t true? Is it because God isn’t there? Is skeptical agnosticism the only answer? Well, no, says Pascal. There is still enough to make us think again. We do sometimes experience a hunger inside, an “infinite abyss” which can only be filled by God, yearning for meaning, transcendence. Until then we remain restless. We do have experiences, and see evidence, such as fulfilled prophecies and order in the world, that suggests there just might be a God, that it may be true after all. Not enough to convince, but not enough to silence the voice of faith either. In fact, Pascal is so sure that everyone has a niggling sense of the possibility that God might exist that if
skeptics disbelieve in God, he disbelieves in skeptics: “I maintain that a perfectly genuine skeptic has never existed.” The world is so confusing and ambiguous, that neither the rationalist nor the skeptic can fully explain it all.

The Hidden God
Pascal’s answer to this problem can be summed up in one simple sentence from the *Pensées*: “What can be seen on earth indicates neither the total absence, nor the manifest presence of divinity, but the presence of a Hidden God.” For Pascal, God deliberately hides himself in the world: we see glimpses of him, but then we’re not sure whether we can trust the evidence of our eyes. But the inevitable question comes: Why on earth should God do this?

Pascal’s answer is very important. God is not the kind of being who stands at the end of an argument, who can be ticked off as something known, understood, and then ignored, the “god of the philosophers.” Nor does he want to be. He is instead an intensely passionate God, who, when he comes into relationship with people, “unites himself with them in the depths of their soul… and makes them incapable of having any other end but him.” You either have this kind of intimate personal encounter with God, or you don’t have him at all. He hides himself in creation, and reveals himself in humble, hidden form in a man who goes to a cross, so that those who are idly curious, who don’t really want this kind of relationship with God and are only playing theological games, will not find him. Yet those who hunger for him deep within themselves, who are desperate to know him, they and they alone will find what they are looking for.

The famous argument of “the Wager” is probably designed not to prove God’s existence, but to show that our passions rule our souls, rather than our minds. Pascal’s point is that to be rational, a betting man would always bet on God, given the smallness of the stake and the potentially huge amount to be won. Yet the fact that the cool, skeptical gamblers of his acquaintance do not bet on God shows that they are not rational when it comes to faith—they follow their passions and desires instead, that don’t want to believe in God and would rather he did not exist.

Pascal’s sophisticated, urbane Parisian contemporaries, who feigned an interest in truth yet, like Montaigne, were skeptical about ever finding it, could not be persuaded by mere arguments. There are enough distractions and diversions around to stop them ever thinking seriously about God. So, for Pascal, presenting an unbeliever with a list of proofs for Christianity or evidence for faith is probably a waste of breath. If someone basically doesn’t want to believe, no amount of proof can ever convince her. God will always remain hidden, and she will always find reasons not to believe. The crucial and primary factor in persuading someone to believe, suggests Pascal, is not to present evidence, but first to awaken a desire for God in them. In other words, when commending Christianity to people, “make it attractive, make good men wish it were true, and then show that it is.” Such proofs as there are for Christianity can convince those who hope it is true, but will never convince those who don’t.

Pascal for Today?
So what does this have to say to us, faced by our 21st century versions of rationalism and skepticism? Pascal would probably think that many of our assumptions about persuading others to be Christian start in the wrong place. We can very often feel that in order to persuade anyone else to become a Christian, they need to know how to answer lots of complicated apologetic questions such as “Why does God allow suffering?” and “Don’t other religions also lead to God?” Now these are important
questions, not least for Christians to work out: after all, they do puzzle us sometimes too, not just our non-Christian friends. The problem is that even if these convince rationalists, Pascal suspects we’ve probably convinced them about the wrong God. It is like getting on a train, finally arriving at the destination, only to find it’s the wrong place. Neither is such rationalist argumentation much use for skeptics, who aren’t that impressed by rational, logical arguments anyway.

The problem is, these approaches assume that everyone out there is dying to hear what we have to say, and if we just shout a bit louder, or explain a bit more articulately, then they’ll understand and believe. The truth is that it doesn’t work like that in the 21st century any more than it did in the 17th. Pascal’s point is that before we ever get to the stage of explaining or convincing, there needs to emerge in people the desire, the hunger to ask the question, to discover more, to find God. Now Pascal, like the great St. Augustine before him, whom Pascal closely followed, was fully aware that only God does that. Only God can touch the heart and make it long for himself, yet he also knew that God often uses people like himself and ourselves to awaken that desire in people.

So the first stage in my approach to my non-Christian friends is not to think, “How can I persuade them that it’s true?”, but to ask, “How can I make them want to know more?” This might involve questions of personal lifestyle: “How different are my values, my home, and my behavior from those of my neighbors and friends who are not Christians? Is there anything there which might make them want to know more, to desire what I have?” It also involves frank and honest questioning of church lifestyle: “Is our church just another little club for like-minded people who enjoy singing, emotional trips, and funny clothes? Or is there anything in the life or worship of our church that would make an outsider looking in want to have what we have?” An evangelistic lifestyle then becomes one which simply makes other people think; it stirs a faint echo of desire to discover what it is that makes the difference.

A while ago, a friend who had just come to a personal faith in Christ described what had happened: “I guess it has moved from here (pointing to his head) to here” (pointing one foot lower). For Pascal, “it is the heart that perceives God, and not the reason.” He would suggest we address the heart first, before the head, tackling the deeper reasons why many people do not want to believe, rather than kicking off with cool rational arguments. If Pascal was right, we cannot divorce ethics from evangelism: our thinking about evangelism needs to start with questions about how we live, rather than what we say.

It’s easy to mistake this point for pure pragmatism, as if evangelism is a sales pitch that needs to create a market before we sell our product. Pascal reminds us that creating a desire for God is the starting point for evangelism for soundly theological reasons. It is because the God of the Bible can only be known by those who are prepared for the costly and demanding business of a genuine and honest relationship with him. If you’re not prepared for that, you’ll never know him. And neither will anyone else.

Reading


Is the Content of the Biblical Manuscripts Reliable?

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experience. For a person who is skeptical about the possibility of the miraculous, it may be important to read a Gospel themselves. Many people who have this outlook have never really picked up a Gospel and read it. They may expect it to be a story full of goblins and fairies, not the down-to-earth but marvelous writing that it is.

Intentional Deception?

Just because the manuscript tradition is well attested does not mean that the content contained within it is truthful. While the manuscripts may be genuine ancient copies leaving no room for a hoax, this does not mean that what is written in them is not an attempt at deception. This question may be phrased along the following lines: “The stories were all invented by the writers as a deliberate attempt to inspire followers and to exonerate the disciples’ decision to follow this man Jesus. He didn’t ever want to found a religion, but his followers did.” There are a number of ways of answering this question:

1. Why would the disciples portray themselves in a bad light (e.g., Peter’s denial; their slowness to understand Jesus’ teaching; their lack of faith)?
2. Why is there so much in the New Testament about the cost of Christianity? (Surely they would have given it up after all the suffering, if it was a deception.)
3. Why would they be willing to be killed for their teachings? (For example, Peter was crucified upside down, and Thomas was torn in half.)

As John Stott says: “If anything is clear from the Gospels and the Acts it is that the apostles were sincere. They may have been deceived, if you like, but they were not deceivers. Hypocrites and martyrs are not made of the same stuff.”

Is the New Testament Comprehensible?

We should remember that many people today have the idea that the Bible is gobbledegook. However, a comparison between the Scriptures and rival literature shows the coherence of the Gospels. Let us take a section of the apocryphal Gospel of Thomas as an example:

Jesus said, “I have cast fire on the world and behold, I guard it until it blazes.” Jesus said, “This heaven will pass away and that which is above it will pass away, and the dead were not alive and the living will not die. In the days when you ate what is dead you made it alive; when you come into the light what will you do? On the day when you were one you became two. But when you have become two what will you do?”

The straightforward style of the New Testament Gospels is in stark contrast to this rambling alternative. Even Jesus’ more apocalyptic statements contained in the New Testament Gospels have a coherence and comprehensive style which is notably lacking here.

Other Ancient Literature

Skeptics would be surprised by the number of extrabiblical writings which refer to events and places mentioned by the writers of the Bible. These writings come from a variety of perspectives and backgrounds, demonstrating that at least some of the content of the Bible is credible to the skeptic.

Josephus. Josephus was born in A.D. 37 into a Jewish family, and he joined the Pharisaic party at the age of nineteen. He settled in Rome where he lived under the name of “Flavius Josephus.” He wrote prolifically, and it is in the pages of his books History of the Jewish War and Antiquities of the Jewish People that we come across various references to biblical characters, places and events. He mentions

1. Figures from the New Testament. The Herods, Pilate, Felix, Festus, the procurators of Judea, the high priestly families of Annas, Caiaphas and Ananias—all these people are referred to (continued on page 18)
Is the Content of the Biblical Manuscripts Reliable?
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by Josephus. He also mentions Judas the Galilean who led an uprising (see Acts 5:37), and at another point “James the brother of the so-called Christ.”

2. Events mentioned by the New Testament. The famine in the days of Claudius (see Acts 11:28).

3. The crucifixion of Jesus. Josephus writes:

And there arose about this time Jesus, a wise man, if indeed we should call him a man; for he was a doer of marvellous deeds, a teacher of men who receive the truth with pleasure. He led away many Jews, and also many of the Greeks. This man was the Christ. And when Pilate had condemned him to the cross on his impeachment by the chief men among us, those who had loved him at first did not cease; for he appeared to them on the third day alive again, the divine prophets having spoken these and thousands of other wonderful things about him; and even now the tribe of Christians, so named after him, has not yet died out.

This passage is controversial and should be handled with care, as many scholars have argued that it is a later interpolation by Christians, trying to prove something about Jesus. It is dismissed on the grounds that Josephus, a Jew, would not have written so positively about the Christian claims about Jesus. However, other scholars argue that the earliest copies of Josephus contain this paragraph, and so if this is an interpolation, a lot more of his writing must be held in question. These scholars also argue that Josephus is speaking in jest and is mocking those who believe in Jesus, and that the overall tone of the passage is heavy with irony and scorn. If this is the case, it is a useful historical document which mentions the bare facts of Christian belief about Jesus the historical person, and as such deserves our attention.

Thallus. Thallus wrote a work tracing the history of Greece and its relations with Asia from the time of the Trojan War to his own day (A.D. 52). Thallus had written about the darkness over the land following Christ’s crucifixion and had tried to dismiss the darkness as being of no religious importance. But by trying to dismiss it, he gives us a historical reference to it. None of his own manuscripts survive, but he is referred to by Julius Africanus in A.D. 221: “Thallus, in the third book of his histories, explains away this darkness as an eclipse of the sun—unreasonably, it seems to me”—unreasonably because it was Passover and hence the time of the full moon.

Tacitus. Tacitus wrote a history of Rome around A.D. 110. When recording the time of Nero, he wrote about that emperor’s horrific decision to burn Rome down:

Therefore to scotch the rumor, Nero substituted as culprits and punished with the utmost refinements of cruelty, a class of men loathed for their vices whom the crowd styled Christians. Christus, from whom they got their name, had been executed by sentence of the procurator Pontius Pilate when Tiberius was emperor; and the pernicious superstition was checked for a short time, only to break out afresh, not only in Judea, the home of the plague, but in Rome itself, where all the horrible and shameful things in the world collect and find a home.

Here we have brief but credible references to the basic facts concerning the death of Christ under Pontius Pilate.

Suetonius. Suetonius wrote biographies of the first twelve Caesars. In his Life of Nero he writes: “Punishment was inflicted on the Christians, a class of men addicted to a novel and mischievous superstition.” In his Life of Claudius he says: “As the Jews were making constant disturbances at the instigation of Chrestus, he expelled them from Rome.”

Pliny Secundus (Pliny the Younger). Pliny was governor of Bithynia in Asia Minor from A.D. 111 to A.D. 113, and he wrote a number of letters to the Emperor Trajan during these two years. In one of these letters he asked for advice on how to deal with Christians:
They were in the habit of meeting on a certain fixed day before it was light, when they sang an anthem to Christ as God, and bound themselves by a solemn oath not to commit any wicked deed, but to abstain from all fraud, theft and adultery, never to break their word, or deny a trust when called upon to honour it; after which it was their custom to separate, and then meet again to partake of food, but food of an ordinary kind.

Has the Bible Been Changed in Transmission?
So we have seen a few examples of extrabiblical historical writers making reference to biblical events, and lending credence to the accuracy of those events. Another question which often follows on from this one (i.e., about the reliability of the content of the biblical record) concerns whether the Bible has been tampered with by different copyists. Some people have an image in their minds of many generations of scribes reproducing the biblical manuscripts for distribution, and each generation adding its own changes, so that what we have now bears little resemblance to the original and cannot be trusted.

However, the reality is that the textual variants that do exist are mostly single letters or grammatical differences. Our modern translations are extremely forthcoming at mentioning these minor differences; they are not hidden away but clearly noted and referenced in the margins and footnotes on each page. When we bear in mind that we are talking about large numbers of ancient, hand-copied manuscripts (around 24,000 manuscript copies for the New Testament alone), the Bible we have today is astoundingly free from questions. The scholar Norman Geisler comments:

Only about one-eighth of all the variants had any weight as most of them are merely mechanical matters such as spelling or style.

Of the whole, then, only about one-sixtieth rise above “trivialities” or can in any sense be called “substantial variations.”

The Talmudists. The Old Testament text is similarly robust. The Talmudists reproduced Old Testament manuscripts between A.D. 270 and A.D. 500. They were religious scholars who commented on and explained the Old Testament to the Jewish community. They had an intricate set of regulations which they followed in order to ensure the integrity of the manuscripts they were producing.

The Masoretes. The Masoretes took on the laborious job of editing and standardizing the Old Testament text between A.D. 500 and A.D. 900, working from the manuscripts that were available to them. F.F. Bruce writes:

With the greatest imaginable reverence, they devised a complicated system of safeguard against scribal slips. They counted, for example, the number of times each letter of the alphabet occurs in each book; they pointed out the middle letter of the Pentateuch and the middle letter of the whole Hebrew Bible, and made even more detailed calculations than these.

This kind of respect for the integrity of the text is important for us to remember, if we are to gain a true picture of how the Bible has been transmitted from ancient times until today. Popular images of ancient scribes making things up as they went along, and changing texts at will, are a travesty of what actually happened. The motivation of those who transmitted the texts was that successive generations would be able to find truth for themselves in the pages of Scripture. The integrity of the content of Scripture was of paramount importance to them. We now have to make our own minds up about whether that content is actually true or not, but to hide behind an idea that it has been corrupted and changed in transmission is a little disingenuous.
The more I read Brian McLaren, the more I am convinced that he has put his finger on some crucial issues facing evangelicals. I resonate with several of his concerns with the contemporary evangelical church in the United States. I also feel I can relate in many ways to the journey he has undergone, as well as to the one his character Dan Poole has experienced. However, I also do not agree with McLaren in several key ways. As committed followers of Christ, what should we learn from him? To what extent should we accept his diagnosis and suggestions for the contemporary church?

I want to survey some of the most important strengths of McLaren’s ideas and proposals. To do that, first I will summarize his account of modernity and its influences upon the church. After examining some strengths of his proposals, I will question the extent of the accuracy of his description of modernity in regard to foundationalism, an epistemological view which he blames significantly for disastrous effects upon the church. The cogency of his solutions (which involve embracing a new way of being a Christian in postmodern times) depends upon how accurate his description and related criticisms of modernity are. If he is mistaken here, then I think his solutions simply will not follow. Moreover, I will survey and assess briefly his description of the philosophy of postmodernity.1

McLaren on Modernity

In the introduction to A New Kind of Christian, McLaren reveals some insights into his own journey through a crisis.2 First, McLaren discusses a high expectation he had of himself as a pastor, that he had to have “bombproof” answers to tough questions. He expected that Christians should have absolute certainty in their beliefs. Second, he thought that the gospel and the Christian life could be “reduced” to a set of simple steps. If Christians would just follow those steps, they should experience the fruit of the Spirit. But he started to realize that nothing in life is that simple, and when we treat the Christian life as a simple set of steps to follow programmatically, we are left without new insights into life’s demands and needs beyond those stock formulas. Furthermore, when people hit very hard realities, these formulas tend to make these situations worse. Third, McLaren noticed how many Christians were proud and arrogant, and not humble servants. They were not living authentically as Christ’s followers, and so the gospel was not making much difference in their lives.

It seems therefore that McLaren’s crisis was a product of his own expectations of the Christian life, and these in turn were reinforced by a particular way he had learned to approach and understand the faith. But he found hope to continue as a Christian by some believers who modeled for him a “new way” of being a Christian in postmodern times)

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the impact of modernity upon our broader culture, and even upon the church. In terms of affecting culture, I will highlight a few of his main observations. For one, modernity has fostered a desire to control and conquer, which has manifested itself in a variety of ways. Philosophically, we have sought to build grand systems that would explain everything, which take away the mystery and wonder of life and our faith. We have sought to master our world through continued scientific and technological development. And we have sought to extend our economic and political influence abroad by trying to dominate markets.

For another, modernity can be characterized as the age of the machine, in which we tend to treat the world and even people as mechanisms that can be controlled and reduced to their smallest constituent parts. The goal of this craving to control manifests itself in efforts to completely explain (and thereby master) all of life scientifically. But it is not just any form of science that will do in this era; the modern era legitimates only secular science.

Furthermore, modernity has given rise to analysis as the ultimate form of thought. We have tried to systematize all knowledge into neat categories. Indeed, this penchant goes even further to a quest for totalizing, utterly certain knowledge, which is based upon indubitable foundations. McLaren thinks that the epistemological theory known as foundationalism is a view that has perpetuated the search for absolutely certain beliefs, upon which the whole “edifice” of knowledge can rest. However, if you know truth with absolute certainty, then you must debunk any contrary views. Finally, McLaren observes that modernity stresses the priority of the individual. Whether that emphasis is in ethics upon the “autonomous” individual, or in marketing ads, McLaren points out the great emphasis upon the individual as one of the ways modernity has shaped our culture.

If these are some of the ways modernity has influenced our culture, how has modernity shaped the church? McLaren details several parallel effects. Starting with the desire to conquer and control, he observes that we may call our evangelistic efforts “crusades,” which implies the notion of an invasion and conquest. In evangelism, we have tried to reduce the gospel truths to simple formulas expressed in tracts, which contain absolute, spiritual truths. But with that mindset, where is there any room for people to discuss them with us? There is only room for people to accept or reject them, but not discuss them. He also thinks this approach tends to encourage simple answers to peoples’ questions, which may be rooted in deep, life struggles.

Furthermore, we tend to treat evangelism as “winning” people to Christ, but if that is so, then this implies that someone “loses.” So, for McLaren, this approach encourages us to use evangelistic encounters to convert the person through winning a rational argument, as though that were all that is involved in someone becoming a follower of Jesus. However, McLaren explains that this attitude ends up being coercive, and not loving people, nor valuing a genuine friendship with them. In addition, this attitude helps foster a view of our faith as acceptance of a rigid belief system, rather than a joyful relationship with Jesus.

According to McLaren, these kinds of approaches tend to turn off postmoderns, who value authenticity in their relationships and thus want to see that our lives match our message. However, if we think we must “defend” the faith against attacks, to give airtight, irrefutable, bombproof answers to questions, then postmoderns will tend to see our desire to “win” an argument, rather than to love them, and this will turn them off. Postmoderns also do not want a God shrunken down to modern (continued on page 22)
Brian McLaren, the Emerging Church, and the Issue of Foundationalism
(continued from page 21)

tastes. McLaren observes that Christians have tended to succumb to the same kind of deterministic, mechanistic views of modernity, by trying to reduce the gospel and the Christian life to simple laws to be rightly followed and applied. But this kind of approach tends to take away the awe and mystery of who God is, for it tends to treat God and His ways as being things we can master and neatly package.

In sum, McLaren sees the church as highly influenced by modernity, such that even the faith itself has become a belief system into which we neatly classify all truths. Furthermore, we should hold these truths with absolute, bombproof certainty, and if we struggle in the Christian life, it is due to our own fault of misapplying them. In these ways, Christians become rigid, controlling, arrogant, and legalistic, tending to try to coerce people into the kingdom and exert political control, rather than genuinely loving people. We also have mirrored the culture in our rampant individualism, which also manifests itself in the church’s own peculiar extension of the broader culture’s consumerism. That is, in McLaren’s view, the church has become a purveyor of religious goods and services, in which we are competing for our “market share.”

What therefore should Christians do? In short, we need to learn, as McLaren did, to become a “new kind” of Christian, one who is learning how to live faithfully to Christ in the emerging postmodern culture. The modern mindset, with its values, is fading away, he claims, and in its place, several new values are emerging. We already have seen one, the desire for authentic relationships, in which postmoderns can see that we truly live out our faith, and not just preach it.

For another, they highly value community, in part as a response to the radical individualism of our culture. McLaren claims that postmoderns want to find in a church a place where they can belong before they have to believe. Rather than trying to pin people down into neat, simple “in” or “out” categories, which McLaren thinks is a modern penchant, instead we should learn to witness more like Jesus did, who was long on stories but short on sermons.

Postmoderns also want to see if God is just and compassionate, or rigid and pharisaical like many Christians. They “are concerned about God’s attitude toward contemporary women, minorities, and homosexuals,” and so they want to see what kinds of attitudes God’s people have.

A Few Reasons Why We Need To Listen To Brian McLaren
From this brief overview of McLaren’s description of modernity, its influences upon our culture and Christians, and the attitudes and values of postmoderns, what are some of the strengths of McLaren’s writings? While I do not intend to be exhaustive, I will briefly mention a few of what I think are the important observations he has made of them.

First, McLaren is right to call Christians to live authentically. Clearly, we are living in a time of a widespread, appalling lack of integrity, with great distrust of our governmental and business leaders, and perhaps anyone in a position of authority. Unfortunately, too often Christians have fallen into these same kinds of disgraceful behaviors. Postmoderns are right to expect integrity and authenticity of Christians, and people should see the truth of our faith by how we live.

Second, McLaren is on target to call believers to live in community. This is a good reminder to Christians in the United States today, for we have been highly influenced by the rampant individualism of our culture. Third, I think McLaren is appealing to good missiological principles when he asks us to consider how to contextualize the gospel in ways to reach postmoderns. Fourth, he rightly calls our attention to how we use
our language, including the use of terms like “defending” the faith for apologetics, or “winning” people to Christ. These words can have an effect on postmodern people that they may not have had on others in recent times. Without intending to, we can close peoples’ minds to the gospel (or at least, our presentation of it) by our choice of terms.

Let me highlight a fifth kind of strength, which I take to be highly significant. McLaren is very concerned with how we should live as Christians, and he has often described “modern” Christians as being arrogant, legalistic, and so on. He says that we have tended to conceive of our discipleship (and even salvation) as the transmission of information and our proper application of simple formulas. But what happens when Christians encounter problematic situations that seem to defy simple explanations? For instance, what should we think about the case of a Christian woman who had been molested as a child by a man? What may happen is that she sincerely wants to please God, but, due to her childhood trauma, has great difficulties in believing that God the Father really loves and cares for her. In cases like this, where there has been deep emotional woundedness, if she has been taught to expect that Christians should have absolute certainty in their Christian beliefs, she may very well fall into doubt, which leads to guilt. Any struggles we face must be the result of a misapplication of a formula, and that places the blame squarely on us—that is, there is something wrong with us. Furthermore, if we struggle emotionally, or with doubts, or in some other way, McLaren observes that there are few “safe” Christians with whom we can open up and admit our struggles and hurts. If we struggle when the going gets tough, then mainly (apart from spiritual warfare) it is due to our own sin and our lack of repenting of it.

I call this understanding of being spiritual an “input-output” approach. If we just follow all the right “inputs” (e.g., read and memorize Scripture, witness, pray, fellowship with other believers, etc.), then the right “outputs” (e.g., the fruit of the Spirit) definitely will follow. If not, then it is our fault, due to our sin.

McLaren has identified this formulaic approach to living the Christian life, which, if coupled with the belief that we must not ever have any doubts, will lead to a legalistic way of trying to live as a Christian, one that almost surely will lead to perhaps lengthy periods of defeat. McLaren has identified a mindset within conservative Christian circles that resonates with many people. They are tired of living legalistically, with defeat, and they long for a joyful, grace-filled walk with Jesus, which will involve a rich communion with Him in all His awesomeness.

Now, however, let us turn to assess his views, in particular his treatment of foundationalism as a mistaken, modern view that has led to disastrous consequences.

This article will continue in the Spring 2007 issue of Knowing & Doing. Dr. Smith will go on to discuss “How Accurate Is McLaren’s Description of Foundationalism?”

Notes

1 I will not be able to address in detail what I think are the constructivist implications of his views. I do discuss them in Truth and the New Kind of Christian, from 134-140, and I also discuss other concerns I have with constructivist thought when used by Christians, especially in chapters five and seven.


3 Ibid., 16-18.

4 Brian McLaren, More Ready Than You Realize (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 52.

5 McLaren, A New Kind of Christian, 156.

6 McLaren, More Ready Than You Realize, 9, 84.

7 Ibid., 71.
Character, Part Two
(continued from page 5)

That initial pleasure is like a hook that then draws you in. It is better to stop the habit in the beginning or as with crack cocaine, not begin at all.

Sow a Habit, Reap a Character
In Hebrews 5:14, we see the whole process from thought to character described in a nutshell. This verse says, “But solid food is for the mature, who, because of practice, have their senses trained to discern good and evil.” First, you must take in not milk but solid food—meaning in-depth teaching rather than just the basics (see Hebrews 5:12-14). Second, these thoughts need to not just stay in the mind but be put into practice regularly so that they become habit and issue in the characteristic of wisdom. Then our “senses are trained to discern good and evil.” We need solid biblical content and regular practice of it in order for character and wisdom to be produced.

Sow a Character, Reap a Destiny
Often character flaws profoundly affect a person’s destiny. A wrong word or phrase has destroyed the careers of radio and television announcers. Politicians have let go a slip of the tongue and lost power and position because of it. I once heard a proverb: A slip of the tongue leads to a slip of the mind, which leads to a slip of the soul. Something slips out of the tongue and because of pride has to be rationalized and justified (slip of the mind). But that very denial of our original mistake leads to a “slip of the soul.”

Our destiny is like a diet. Dieting is won or lost in the little things. You may start with great resolve, so for breakfast you have orange juice and a piece of toast without butter. Lunch consists of a small piece of broiled chicken and a salad with no salad dressing. For an afternoon snack, you have one Oreo cookie; then later in the afternoon, the rest of the package. For dinner there is a large pizza with everything on it and a large cheesecake (the whole thing). Well, you get the idea. What is the problem with the one Oreo cookie? I have heard that you could have a diet consisting of Oreo cookies if you did not eat too many. But the problem is that our resolve is broken and, like taking our finger out of a dike, the flood waters flow in. It takes only a moment of irresolution to alter your destiny.

The C. S. Lewis Institute used to have (for 10 years) a summer program on the Eastern Shore of the Chesapeake Bay. The property there was expensive to maintain and the least obvious things were the most expensive. Around the edge of the property was built a sea wall consisting of large rocks that cost tens of thousands of dollars to install. The owner of the property next door did not put out the money to build a sea wall and lost about five acres or more of valuable land to the bay. Erosion is a perennial problem on the Eastern Shore and
in our own lives. When we neglect time in Scripture and time in prayer, we do not always see or feel immediate consequences. It may take time before the erosion is evident. On the property there is a house not far from the shore. If there were no sea wall, the house would fall into the bay, not this year or next year and maybe not even in five or ten years. But sooner or later that house would be destroyed. Often people fall in private before they fall in public. There is a tendency for prayer to drive out sin or for sin to drive out prayer. The erosion, unless battled, is relentless.

Another problem on this Eastern Shore property is accumulation of silt. At one time large boats could come right up a channel and dock in the harbor there, but because of silt accumulation, the channel needs to be dredged and that is a difficult and expensive proposition. So in our lives there can be an accumulation of silt that can muddy the waters and make it difficult for us to see clearly. Periodically, we need to dredge the channel so that clear water can flow again and we can restore clear communication with our Lord. Once the dredging is done, it has to be maintained or silt accumulates again.

Often when the big moments come, the decisions have already been made. Iris Murdoch writes, “At crucial moments of choice most of the business of choosing is already over.” The habitual patterns of vice or virtue make it well nigh irresistible to choose otherwise. The battle for our destiny is fought not just at the big moments, but in the little decisions made previously. A list of taboos may not work when a young man and woman are in the back seat of a car. What happens there is often a matter of previous thoughts and choices. It is also influenced by considering the outcome—our destiny. Thomas Aquinas said the two vices that most obscure the future consequences of our actions are lust and covetousness. What are the future consequences of this choice?

What kind of life do I want to live? What kind of person do I want to be? What is to be the story of my life? Will my choice now affect my destiny later? Sadly, many have found out that it does. My choice now can have a profound impact on the outcome of my life.

On the positive side, you can prepare for heroic acts by living your ordinary lives well. The best preparation for the big moments are all the little moments when you choose the right thing.

Creating Character
So how do we reverse patterns that we don’t like? Obviously, we have to start with our thoughts and resolve to act in a different manner. That is a beginning, but this resolution will not necessarily take us where we want to go. The process of change involves commitment, conscience, community, and courage.

Lord, help us face defects in our character and resolve to deal with them starting in our thoughts and acts.

When we neglect time in Scripture and time in prayer, we do not always see or feel immediate consequences. It may take time before the erosion is evident.
love in “How Can a Loving God Judge Us?”

Lunch was served in the Keble Dining Hall, where we always found much to talk about after the two morning sessions. Following lunch, we had an hour of free time before the afternoon sessions began. Being a lover of books and science, I used my free time to visit Blackwell’s Bookstore just down the road and the Museum of Natural History just across the street. Others welcomed some quiet time on a bench in the Liddon Quad or in the chapel before the afternoon sessions began.

The first of the afternoon sessions divided us into two different tracks, “Searching Issues” and “Spiritual Disciplines.” Those who taught the “Uniqueness of the Christian Faith” series again engaged us in the “Searching Issues” series, while Thomas A. Tarrants III, President of the C.S. Lewis Institute in Washington, D.C, taught the “Spiritual Disciplines” track.

“Searching Issues” included lectures on the historicity and reality of the Bible; “Suffering”; “The Da Vinci Code Book and Movie”; and “Atheism and Agnosticism.” These lectures provided exceptional guidance in responding to secular questions in these areas. “Spiritual Disciplines” focused on how the Holy Spirit led the early Church to grow in areas essential to all Christians, including Scripture, prayer, fellowship, and worship, as exemplified in Acts 2:42. Though we each attended a single track throughout the week for these series of talks, all sessions were recorded and made available later.

The late afternoon session rejoined everyone in a new session called “On the Spot.” Each day, two different members of the RZIM Team would tackle the most burning questions that most of us fear being asked about our faith, and they received some tough ones! They gave us immediate, intelligent, thoughtful, and deep responses, leaving us inspired to defend the faith. After this challenging and fun session, supper awaited us.

After dinner, we had one more seminar series before us. This year’s evening theme was “With All of Your Heart,” and each seminar focused on a different topic, including sacrifice, the workplace, service, and outreach, with the concluding evening’s talk given by Dr. Zacharias. These evening talks were held in the Museum of Natural History, in a lecture hall literally feet away from the original hall where Bishop Samuel Wilberforce and T. H. Huxley had their famous debate on Darwin’s book, The Origin of Species. As a scientist, I often wondered during those evening lectures how often God might be on the minds of people who work in this building or pass through it as tourists.

The evening’s seminars ended around 9:15, but many of us found we had some energy left to spend. Those of us not ready
to tuck it in for the night found our way down Museum Road to the Eagle & Child or the Lamb & Flag, local pubs where members of the Inklings, such as C.S Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien, once met on a regular basis. In these historic pubs, we talked about the lessons and insights of the day and shared what had impacted us the most. Sleep began to overtake us all around 11:00 p.m. or so, but the anticipation of the next day was palpable as we bid each other a “good night.”

Given that the majority of the delegates attending the summer school were from the States, our British brothers and sisters from RZIM threw us a 4th of July celebration that included punting on the River Cherwell for the adventurous ones and dinner at the Cherwell Boathouse for all. Michael Ramsden’s comedic streak kept us entertained throughout the week with quick, pithy humor. Just before the 4th of July festivities began, Michael brought loads of laughter from us as he teased that they would be setting up a booth for repatriation for those who would like to stop their rebellious ways. He also joked that we’d each be given a tea bag to throw over the side of the boat while punting on the river. In reality, though, the gift we were given was a wonderful key ring with the Oxford College Symbol, which is inscribed with the words “The Lord Is My Light” in Latin. Later in the week, the RZIM Team offered us tours of Oxford. The week ended with a talk and a book signing by Dr. Zacharias followed by a farewell Hog Roast.

The conference follows a tight schedule that does not allow much in the way of getting out and seeing Oxford to its fullest. If you’re interested in attending summer school in 2007, I would recommend arriving a few days in advance or staying a few days afterward so you can explore Oxford. For those staying longer, I would recommend Evensong at Christ Church for the days you will be in town and Sunday worship at either Saint Aldates or Saint Ebbs. For those who still find themselves spiritually hungry, Wycliffe Hall has their Summer School during the week immediately following RZIM’s Summer School. The schedule for the Wycliffe Hall Summer School is less concentrated and you’ll get more of a chance to see Oxford.

While Oxford is a great place to visit, the city itself is not the reason I’ve attended the RZIM summer school two years in a row. I look forward to attending because of the depth and thoughtfulness of the teaching. I have always come away enriched and ready to give seekers relevant and meaningful answers, and I believe you can too.

The week flew by in a flash, but it was full of worship, fellowship, and the deepening and fortifying of our faith. I left Oxford with new friends that I’ve continued to stay in touch with, and a ton of material to meditate on and inwardly digest. It’s a time in your life to think, to reflect, and to be equipped to respond to the call of 1 Peter 3:15.

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Who Was C.S. Lewis?

C.S. Lewis—or “Jack,” as his friends called him—was an outstanding scholar of English Literature, author, apologist, and ardent follower of Jesus Christ. An Oxford University don for almost three decades and a former atheist, Lewis was never a minister in the formal sense, yet he ranks among the 20th century’s most influential exponents of “mere Christianity,” the essential truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

More on Lewis at www.cslewisinstitute.org

If you’d like to know more about C.S. Lewis, visit our web site and click on the link that says, “Looking for More Information on C.S. Lewis?” You’ll find numerous articles and links to a wealth of information on Lewis’s life, his writings, his associates, and his impact on the world, as well as rich content taken from his works, including book reviews, essays, and articles.

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