On “The Well Women Revisited” (PD 2007:4)

It has been said that feminism is the radical notion that women are people. To that end, as we revisit the “well women,” I’d strongly urge that we truly take a critical, unbiased look, and not simply replace our biases for others.

With that caution out of the way, Davidson’s presentation of many of the “well women” we take for granted is enlightening and truly thought-provoking. In the end, perhaps that is what’s most needed. In reading Davidson’s account of Jesus’ encounter with the Samaritan woman at the well, it appears to me that the commentators are the ones oppressing women and propagating false images through time.

Indeed, we would all do well to check our assumptions. Does our image of Father God allow for the numerous places where “He” has revealed “His” nature through inspired writers as that of a suckling mother or other such feminine images?

We would be well served, then, to truly approach Scripture without bias—whether it be feminist, cultural, or even that which is “traditionally” Christian. Let us open our minds to what it is God has to reveal to us, allowing the Word to transform our lives and not vice versa.

Kaaryn Sanon
Baltimore, Maryland

Jo Ann Davidson in “The Well Women Revisited” reminds us of the matter of mistreatment, subjugation, and denigration of women in societies across the world despite the breaking of the glass ceiling in Western societies and the fact that women in some Eastern countries are power brokers. Thankfully, it is not all men who treat women disparagingly, and men in general, especially Christian gentlemen, need to scrutinize the methods Christ used both in word and deed so as to inform them as to how they need to act toward others.

I’m glad she reminds us that despite my status in life, my God still regards me as an equally created being, and He speaks to me “without prejudice,” just as He did the women He met and conversed with.

Thank God, my heavenly Father says He can use me just as He did the well women if I dedicate myself to Him, because I, too, am called, and despite my gender, He talks to me and I understand, and can act according to His will.

Beverly Henry
Mandeville, Jamaica

BY DENNIS PETTIBONE *

MARTIN LUTHER AND THE ANTICHRIST

A study of the Reformer’s interpretation of scriptural prophecies has serious considerations for today.

In the warm ecumenical afterglow of Vatican II, Martin Luther’s identification of the papacy as the antichrist of Bible prophecy is often seen as narrow-minded, bigoted, and even unchristian. His view, which until recently was shared by a broad spectrum of conservative evangelical Protestants, is now seen as an embarrassment by some members of churches that retain this interpretation. It is no longer socially acceptable to describe the papacy as the fulfillment of a collection of prophecies regarding a powerful spiritual tyranny.

Even the United States Congress has put itself on record regarding this issue. In 2000, Congress passed a joint resolution condemning Bob Jones University for promoting this belief.

The politicians who passed that resolution were probably unaware that they were undermining the historical foundations of Protestantism.

If Protestantism owes its very existence to Luther’s conviction that

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Luther’s target was not the papacy; it was a greedy Dominican monk named Johann Tetzel who was distorting Catholic doctrine by exaggerating the benefits of indulgences. Luther had no intention of splitting the church: he was only trying to protect his parishioners.

The papacy was the antichrist, it might be instructive to inquire how he came to this conclusion. He did, in fact, come to this view slowly and reluctantly, driven by historical circumstances and theological reflection.

It is important to focus primarily on Luther because it was his views on the subject that triggered the Protestant Reformation. It should be noted, however, that he was far from the first person to hold this view. He himself credited John Huss with being the first to call the Pope an antichrist.1 Huss did indeed consider the Pope to be the antichrist, but he was not the first to do so, nor was his mentor, John Wycliffe, although Wycliffe and at least some of his Lollard followers, including Sir John Oldcastle, held this belief. This idea also circulated among the Waldensians, the Albigensians, and the Fraticelli, a group of Franciscans with more regard for the rule of St. Francis than for papal authority.

But even earlier than that, back in 991, Bishop Arnulf of Orleans, describing papal murder, lust, and intrigue, asked, “Are there any bold enough to maintain that the priests of the Lord over all the world are to take their law from monsters of guilt like these?” When a person so deficient in virtue sits on the papal throne, Arnulf suggested that he must “be the Antichrist, sitting in the temple of God, and showing himself as God.”

Martin Luther was probably unaware of the previous attacks on the papacy when, in 1517, he drafted his 95 Theses. If he had been, he would have been unsympathetic. At the time, he regarded John Huss a heretic. His target was not the papacy; it was a greedy Dominican monk named Johann Tetzel who was distorting Catholic doctrine by exaggerating the benefits of indulgences. Luther had no intention of splitting the church: he was only trying to protect his parishioners.

Enraged, Tetzel made sure that Rome knew what was happening. This set in motion a chain of events that led to a summons for Luther to appear before a papal representative. It also led to a theological attack on Luther’s position by Sylvester Cardinal Prierias, the papal court’s chief theologian. Prierias wrote, “He who does not accept the doctrine of the Church of Rome and pontiff of Rome as an infallible rule of faith, from which the Holy Scriptures, too, draw their strength, is a heretic.” Furthermore, “Whoever says that the Church of Rome may not do what it is actually doing in the matter of indulgences is a heretic.”

Prierias had transformed the debate from a question of procedure to one of authority.

Responding to the papal summons, Luther traveled to Augsburg to appear before a papal legate, Cardinal Thomas Cajetan, who demanded that Luther recant. When Luther asked for scriptural reasons to do so, none was given him. Rome had ordered that Luther be arrested if he refused to recant, but Luther—mindful of the fate of John Huss—avoided arrest by stealing away from Augsburg on the night of October 16, 1518.

First Hesitant Steps
Luther had read Prierias’ assertions of papal infallibility and had experienced Cajetan’s reliance on tradition, refusal to discuss Scriptures, and implicit threats of force. Now he began to consider the possibility that these men might be serving antichrist. On December 18, 1518, he wrote to Wenzeslaus Link, soon to replace Staupitz as the head of the Augustinian order in Germany, asking him to evaluate, on the basis of some of his writings, whether his early suspicions that Rome was the center of the true antichrist.

A few months later, Luther wrote to his friend and former student Georg Spalatin, chaplain and secretary to Elector Frederick of Saxony, telling him that he had been studying papal decretals in preparation for the upcoming disputation at Leipzig. He added, “Confidentially, I do not know whether the Pope is Antichrist himself or his apostle, so miserably is Christ (that is, the truth) corrupted and crucified by the Pope in the decretals.”

In July 1519, at the Leipzig debate with Johann Eck for which Luther had been preparing, Luther took the position that both popes and church councils could err, averring that everything should be subject to the judgment of Scripture. He would soon be using Scripture to pass judgment on the Pope.

Luther read two things the following year that lessened his hesitation about calling the Pope antichrist. First, in February 1520, he read Lorenzo Valla’s demonstration that the Donation of Constantine—the document on which Rome based its claim as supreme in the Western World—was a forgery. This seems to have inspired another letter to
Spalatin (February 24, 1520): “I am practically cornered, and can hardly doubt any more that the Pope really is the Antichrist . . . because everything so exactly corresponds to his life, action, words, and commandments.”

After reading Valla’s treatise, Luther, hesitantly at first, began to say publicly what he had previously written privately to friends. Augustine Altveld was a monk in Leipzig who asserted that the Bible supported total papal control of the church and that submission to the Pope was essential for the operation of effective government. Luther responded early in 1520 with On the Papacy in Rome Against the Famous Romanist at Leipzig. This publication mentioned several reasons for possibly considering Rome to be the antichrist. “It is said that the Antichrist shall find the treasures of the earth,” Luther wrote, suggesting that the “insufferable Roman thieves” were finding their treasure by exploiting the Germans, and quoting what he said was a Roman proverb: “Squeeze the gold from the German fools, in any way you can.”

Luther then raised the issue of papal infallibility. Expressing a willingness to accept anything the Pope decreed after first testing it by the Bible, he contrasted this position with that of “Roman knaves” who placed the Pope “above Christ” and made him “a judge over the Scriptures” and said that he was infallible. If the Pope expected Christians to place their faith in something visible (himself) rather than that which was invisible, Luther concluded, “I would say right out that he is the real Antichrist.” Notice that in neither of these statements did Luther directly say that either the Pope or the papacy was the antichrist, but he raised the possibility.

The second source that weakened his hesitancy to openly declare that the Pope was antichrist was Prierias’ second treatise against Luther’s teachings. Reprising his earlier arguments that the Pope had more authority than either Scriptures or church councils, Prierias quoted a passage of canon law that horrified Luther: The Pope could not be deposed from office even if he “were so scandalously bad that he led multitudes of souls to the devil.”

Address to the Christian Nobility

Now Luther’s pen began to fly. First came Address to the Christian Nobility of the German Nation Concerning the Reform of the Christian Estate, which went to press June 13, 1520. Early in this treatise, a book that repeatedly linked the papacy and antichrist, came Luther’s reaction to Prierias’ appalling statement: “On this accursed and devilish foundation they build at Rome, and think that we should let all the world go to the devil, rather than resist their knavery. . . . It is to be feared that this is a game of Antichrist or a sign that he is close at hand.”

Luther then suggested calling a free church council and said if the Pope tried to block this, he would be hindering the church’s edification, thus violating 2 Corinthians 10:8, which Luther paraphrased as, “God has given us authority not for the destruction but for the edification of Christendom.” Then Luther said, “It is only the power of the devil and of Antichrist which resists the things that serve for the edification of Christendom.” If the Pope claimed the “power to interpret the Scriptures by mere authority,” that would—like trying to prevent or control a church council—be evidence that the papacy was “in truth the communion of Antichrist and of the devil,” Luther said.

Quoting Christ’s warning in Matthew 24 about false prophets deceiving the elect, Luther said miracles were no proof of papal authority. He said 2 Thessalonians 2:9 had predicted that antichrist would use deceit through Satan’s power.

He also attacked as “the very works of the very Antichrist” papal claims to power over earthly authorities and even over angels. Reminding his readers that Jesus said His kingdom was not “of this world,” Luther bluntly said, “No vicar’s rule can go beyond his lord’s.” These “over-presumptuous” claims were devil-devised devices to facilitate bringing in Antichrist and raising “the Pope above God, as many are already doing.”

Commenting on the report that the Pope had prevented the Bishop of Strassburg from implementing moral reform in his diocese, Luther said, “Thus priests are to be encouraged against their own bishop, and their disobedience to divine law is to be protected! Antichrist himself, I hope, will not dare to put God to such open shame.”

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Luther then spoke of the corruption and immorality in Rome. “There is buying, selling, bartering, trading, trafficking, lying, deceiving, robbing, stealing, luxury, harlotry, knavery and every sort of contempt of God, and even the rule of Antichrist could not be more scandalous.” He also complained of papal legates accepting money to “legalize unjust gain” and “dissolve oaths, vows, and agreements” while saying “the pope has authority to do this.” This alone, Luther said, was enough “to prove the pope the true Antichrist.” By accepting money for annulling oaths, the Pope was pressing his condemnations of Luther to trigger automatically his temporal punishment, probably by execution. Before his death, Emperor Maximilian I had promised Leo that he would enforce any papal verdict against Luther. On January 18, 1521, Leo ordered Maximilian’s successor, Charles V, to do likewise.

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Meanwhile, replying to Exsurge Domine’s charges in his Defense and Explanation of All the Articles, Luther said, “Beware of the Antichrist, the Pope!” 25 Arguing that Christ was the rock of Matthew 16:18, Luther said that interpreting this text to suggest papal authority perverted God’s Word. This, Luther continued, confirmed Paul’s prediction that antichrist’s entrance would be characterized by deceit and false scriptural interpretation. In this book he also called the Pope antichrist for giving people false assurance through indulgences, for denying that belief was required for forgiveness of sins, for imposing on people a system of contrition, confession, and satisfaction. 26

Returning to the Communion issue, Luther said that Jesus gave both bread and wine to everyone and told everyone to repeat the ordinance in exchange for “the wealth of the nations, and for imposing on people a system of contrition, confession, and satisfaction.” 26

One of the statements Leo had condemned in Exsurge Domine was, “The burning of heretics is contrary to the will of the Holy Spirit.” Luther responded that papists had burned the “good Christians” John Huss and Jerome of Prague and “the pope and other heresy-hunters have burned other good Christians,” including “the godly man of Florence, . . . Girolomo Savonarola,” thus “fulfilling the prophecy concerning the Antichrist that he will cast Christians into the oven.” 29 In this booklet Luther also condemned “the error about the free will” as “a peculiar teaching of Antichrist” 30 and denounced the creation of mendicant orders as a ruse of the antichrist to increase his own power.

To Worms and Wartburg (1521)

Having been twice condemned by the papacy, Luther’s life was clearly in jeopardy. Nevertheless, he opposed Ulrich von Hutten’s proposal to defend the new faith militarily. He fully expected, however, that he himself would lose his life. Nevertheless, when appearing before the imperial diet at Worms, he courageously refused to retract anything he had written unless convicted by Scripture or reason.

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Usurping God’s Place

Luther did not soften his characterization of the Pope as antichrist after the crisis had passed and he could feel reasonably secure under Frederick’s protection. Indeed, he expanded and strengthened this position. Of course, he could never feel
Leo’s successor, Hadrian VI, warned Frederick that, unless he separated himself from Martin Luther “and put a muzzle on his blasphemous tongue,” church and state would jointly subject Frederick to both earthly punishment and eternal torment. “Repent therefore,” he said, “before you feel the two swords.” Later, in 1530, Pope Clement VII specifically ordered Emperor Charles V to “exterminate the evangelical heretics.”

completely secure. Indeed, Leo’s successor, Hadrian VI, warned Frederick that, unless he separated himself from Martin Luther “and put a muzzle on his blasphemous tongue,” church and state would jointly subject Frederick to both earthly punishment and eternal torment. “Repent therefore,” he said, “before you feel the two swords.” Later, in 1530, Pope Clement VII specifically ordered Emperor Charles V to “exterminate the evangelical heretics.”

The chief reason the mature Luther described the Pope as antichrist was because, in Luther’s opinion, he had usurped God’s place as lawmaker, adding his own rules to those in the Bible, burdening consciences with human traditions, and infringing on Christian freedom, declaring as sinful things that Christ has said are not sinful, including clerical marriage. Indeed, Luther said, the Pope had deposed Scripture and established his own laws, sitting in judgment on God’s Word and making decrees that oppose what Scripture says, nullifying the texts assuring us of forgiveness of sins, distorting Christ’s words, falsely interpreting Scripture, diluting biblical mandates, and giving people a distorted picture of God. Rather than feeding Christ’s sheep, according to Luther, the Pope taught and did the very opposite of Christ’s life and teachings.

Luther charged that one way the Pope usurped God’s place was by teaching that the Scriptures derived their authority from the church rather than vice versa. Another way was by claiming authority not only over the church but over the whole world, judging everyone but not permitting himself to be judged. The Pope’s claim to divine prerogatives had “denied and utterly buried the office and divinity of Christ,” who never “intended the Pope to rule over the whole world.” He cited both Scripture and history to show that neither Peter nor the bishop of Rome at the time of the Council of Nicea ruled over the whole church.

Excommunicating and persecuting people for following God’s Word was another way the Pope was usurping God’s authority, according to Luther. “The false church is always the persecutor of the true church, not only spiritually . . . but also physically, by means of the sword and tyranny,” he said, declaring that the Bible had foretold that antichrist would “kill those who cling to the Word.”

Central to Luther’s understanding of the Pope as antichrist usurping God’s place was 2 Thessalonians 2:3 and 4. Noting that the villain in 2 Thessalonians 2 sits in God’s temple and exalts himself above God, Luther said, “The Antichrist took his seat in the church, yet not to govern it with divine laws, promises, and grace,” but with “his foolish and innumerable laws and altogether unnecessary traditions.”

Luther connected this passage with Matthew 15:3: “Paul tells the Thessalonians (2 Thess. 2:4) that the antichrist ‘exalts himself above every so-called god or object of worship’—surely by means of his self-invented holiness. Christ bears witness, Matt. 15:3, that the Jews transgress the commandments of God so that they might keep the traditions of men. We can also see this in the hostile monastery life and holy orders. There we find fasting, holiday-making, lying in hard beds, watching, keeping silent, wearing coarse clothes, being tonsured and locked in a cell, being unmarried—and God has commanded none of these things.”

Rather than being subject to God, the antichrist exalted himself “above God’s Word and worship,” thus “sitting in judgment over God.”

The prophecies of Daniel, Matthew, and Revelation were also significant for Luther’s understanding of the papacy as antichrist usurping God’s prerogatives. Luther interpreted Daniel 2 and 7 as depicting four great empires, culminating with the Roman Empire, which would be divided, after which the antichrist would arise. His own generation, he believed, was symbolized by the toes in the image of Daniel. The little horn arising out of the Roman Empire he identified as the papal antichrist. Perhaps he was thinking of the prophecy that the little horn would “think to change times and laws” (Dan. 7:25, KJV) in his earlier statement that the Pope had no power to change what Christ has made.

Luther believed that Daniel 8, 11, and 12 contained blended prophecies applying to both Antiochus and the antichrist. He interpreted Daniel’s prophecy of a ruler who would “exalt himself, and magnify himself above every god, and shall speak marvellous
things against the God of gods” and who would not “regard... the desire of women” (Dan. 11:36, 37, KJV) as referring to the papacy because of the Pope's ban on clerical marriage and his demand for obedience to himself and his rules rather than to God’s instruction.

Quoting Daniel 9:27 and 12:11, Jesus in Matthew 24:15 refers to the “abomination of desolation” spoken of by the prophet Daniel. Noting that the Pope had threatened burning to all who opposed him, Luther interpreted this text as follows: “The pope is a god on earth over everything heavenly, earthly, spiritual, and secular, and all on his own. No one is permitted to say to him: ‘What are you doing?’ That is the abomination and stench of which Christ speaks in Matthew 24.”

In other passages applying this text to the papacy, Luther said, “The desolating sacrilege stands in the holy place... and rules over us in the place of Christ” and “he has set up his own law, his own righteousness. He who is now at-... denied and completely suppressed the work of Christ and his divinity.” The blasphemy on the forehead of the scarlet whore he interpreted to be “the manifold, innumerable, self-chosen forms of worship” which were presented “as sacrifices in order to suppress Christ’s sacrifice.” Luther declared, “The chief article of the Christian doctrine is... that Christ is our righteousness. He who is now attacking this is taking the whole Christ away and is the true Antichrist.”

Luther said the papacy also negated Christ’s sacrifice by proclaiming the Mass to be “a sacrifice for the living and the dead,” obtaining “forgiveness of sins. It is as though Christ had not done this very thing on the cross, as though his sacrifice had no validity and were of no value.” Luther suggested that these “daily repeated sacrifices” were “counterfeiting Christ” and purporting to do “that which Christ alone by his sacrifice once for all effected.”

Negating Christ’s Sacrifice

Not only did the Roman antichrist usurp God’s prerogatives and persecute His people, according to Luther, but he also in effect negated Christ’s sacrifice and mediation. “Antichrist... abolishes grace and denies the blessings of Christ, our High Priest, who gave himself as a sacrifice for our sins,” he said. One way he did this was through the doctrine of merit. Said Luther, “The noxious notion of our own righteousness... was why we could not at all see Christ as the Mediator and Savior but simply sup-

posed that He was a severe judge, who had to be placated by our works. This was to blaspheme Christ to the utmost and... to nullify the grace of God, to make Christ die to no purpose... And this is... the desolating sacrilege, standing in the holy place” (Matt. 24:15).

The doctrine that monks could justify themselves by “their hypocritical sanctity... even though it is the proper function of Christ alone to justify the sinner” had, he said, “denied... that which Christ alone by his sacrifice once for all effected.” Luther insisted that Christ was still our only mediator and that the Scriptures recognized nothing of the priestly system set up by the papacy. Jesus had not abdicated His High Priestly office, nor had He transferred it to the Pope.

Eschatology

Luther believed that the Bible foretold the church’s future and sug-
gested that the time of judgment predicted in Daniel 7:8-10 was taking place during his lifetime. Affirming that his own teachings were those of “the ancient and true church at the time of the apostles,” he thought the little horn was being judged as “the original and ancient church” shone “forth once more (like the sun emerging from the clouds behind which it [had been] shining but where it could not be seen).” He found comfort in the prophecies that the last days would be shortened for the sake of the godly “and that the church would not encompass everything with error” be preserved and Antichrist [would] not encompass everything with error and falsehood."

He noted that in the second angel’s message of Revelation 14, the gospel was followed by a voice predicting that the spiritual papacy would be destroyed. This would be done, according to other passages, “without human hands,” with the breath of Christ’s mouth, “slaying him with spiritual preaching” before destroying him “by his glorious”—and sudden—coming, which would free “Christendom from every evil.” At that time, “those who cling to the papacy against the gospel shall be cast outside the city of Christ, into the winepress of God’s wrath.”

Luther’s Final Year
The intensity of Luther’s attacks on the papacy increased during 1545, the final year of his life. That year, in his preface to a compilation of his complete works, he described the Pope not only as antichrist but also as the devil’s vicar.

His final and most acerbic attack, Against the Roman Papacy, An Institution of the Devil, was written at the request of Elector John Frederick. It was a response to two letters from Pope Paul III forbidding the emperor from calling a German National Council to settle the religious disputes within the empire. Three times in this publication Luther referred to the Pope as “the most hellish father.” He denounced him as a “teacher of lies, blasphemy, and idolatries,” a murderer of kings, an inciter to all kinds of bloodshed, and “a brothel-keeper above all brothel-keepers and all vermin”—and even “a true werewolf.”

Were such attacks unchristian? Luther didn’t think so. Earlier, he denied that it was sinful to refute Satan’s “reviling against godliness and God himself.” They must, he said, “be exposed and refuted” so the people could “be corrected and liberated from the tyranny of Satan.”

Paul’s attacks on “the false apostles” were not slander: he was “judging them by his apostolic authority.” Likewise, when Luther called the Pope antichrist, he said, he was “judging . . . by divine authority” on the basis of Galatians 1:8.

It can be argued, however, that although Luther was antipapal, he was not anti-Catholic. He opposed the dictatorial monarchical episcopate at the head of the church, not the church itself.

By the time of Luther’s death, other voices had joined him in proclaiming that the Pope was the antichrist, including both his friend and disciple Philip Melanchthon and a man for whom he had little respect, Ulrich Zwingli.

Other contemporaries of Luther who shared his belief about the papal antichrist included John Calvin, John Knox, and Thomas Cranmer. Among the later reformers who held this view were the Anabaptist Menno Simons and various Huguenot theologians. Even King James I of England got into the act, writing an exposition of the Book of Revelation that called Rome the seat of the antichrist and Babylon. Many of the foundational creeds of Protestantism, including the Formula of Concord, the Second Scottish Confession, the Westminster Confession, the Savoy Declaration of the Congregational Churches, and the Baptist Confession of 1688, echoed Luther’s belief on this subject.

Conclusion
Luther’s conflict with church authorities over the financial exploitation of his parishioners through indulgences led to papal attempts to silence the independent-minded monk. He first began to suspect that the papacy was the antichrist when its representatives resorted to power plays rather than appealing to Scripture, supported the execution of dissidents, and—long before it became official dogma—claimed papal infallibility. He became sure of his position when the Pope himself threatened Luther with excommunication, pressured rulers to silence him, and ordered the extermination of his followers.

But Luther’s antichrist theology was the result of biblical analysis as well as personal experience. The key theological reason for Luther’s position was his belief that the Pope was in many ways usurping God’s place and negating Christ’s sacrifice.

Clearly, Luther’s position on the antichrist is no longer politically correct. It is out of sync with the groupthink of the 21st century.

However, with so great a number of voices stretching back so many centuries who courageously asserted that the papacy was the antichrist, the question for us should not be, Is this position embarrassing or is it politically correct or socially acceptable? Rather, it should be, Is this position biblically correct? This view was not politically correct in Luther’s day. And in Luther’s day, unlike ours, this opinion could have been literally fatal for the person holding it, as it was for John Huss and Thomas Cranmer.
The relationship between church and state throughout history has a direct relevance to post-9/11 America.

Arguments over the “union of church and state” include a connection between the two or a separation of the two, both for mutual benefit. With respect to a connection, the Judeo-Christian heritage offers an advantage to the state, compared to atheism, in upholding biblical values.

At the same time, the church is advantaged by tax exemption, protection of property, recognition of ministers and marriages, and freedom to preach religious liberty. With respect to separation, both state and church are free from the potential temptation to repress the other, with the state as neutral (not favoring one religion over another). The state is free to legislate in civil matters, and all citizens are free to follow the dictates of their conscience.

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Here are two major views on the relationship of church and state in America: (1) when religion is not al-
Many Christians associate the union of church and state with “taking America back for God.” Some argue that America was birthed by white Christian pilgrims, where church and state were united (as in Massachusetts and Connecticut and later in other colonies), yet others argue that these pilgrims and their successors did little more than rob native Indians of their lands, broke covenants made with them, and massacred millions of them.

Why It Is Important

Christians in America are rightly concerned about the lack of Judeo-Christian values in contemporary society, such as the absence of God, Scripture, and prayer in the upbringing of so many youth (in homes and public schools) and the bombardment of anti-Christian values that daily confront them. Many argue that if Christian legislation can prevail, things will get better.

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Some Christians argue that America became a Christian nation in 1776, when it gained its independence from Britain and was founded on freedom and inalienable rights. They look to the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution as grounds for claiming America as a Christian nation. Others ask whether America was truly a Christian nation when it shipped as many as six million Africans on atrociously cruel ships and enslaved the three million who survived the awful journeys.

The topic is too broad, requiring a book to do it justice. An examination of four examples in which a union of church and state has not benefited the church would be manageable and instructive.

The Constantinian Experiment

Roman Emperor Constantine the Great (ca. A.D. 275-337) elevated Christianity as the official religion of the Roman Empire in the year 313. His motive was political: to unite his empire of multiple religions. He must have been impressed with the growing influence of Christianity.

Evidence calls into question Constantine’s conversion to Christianity. He remained a heathen while outwardly an alleged Christian. While blind to the significance of theological disputes, he worked hard to settle them in calling church councils. “He first introduced the practice of subscription to the articles of a written creed and of the infliction of civil punishments for nonconformity.”

For the first three centuries after Christ, the Christian Church grew despite persecution. When Constantine “converted” to Christianity, the persecuted church became powerful. Clergy recognized in this new order “a reproduction of the theocratic constitution of the people of God under the ancient covenant,” except dissenting sects received no benefit and were “subject to persecution from the state and from the established Catholicism.” In other words, the Catholic Church fared well in the union with the state, while other churches (dubbed sects) were persecuted.

Yet the Catholic Church still suffered: “The Roman state, with its laws, institutions, and usages, was still deeply rooted in heathenism, and could not be transformed by a magical stroke. The Christianizing of the state amounted therefore in great measure to a paganizing and secularizing of the church. The world overcame the church, as much as the church overcame the world, and the temporal gain of Christianity was in many respects canceled by spiritual loss. The mass of the Roman Empire was baptized only with water, not with the Spirit and fire of the gospel, and it smuggled heathen manners and practices into the sanctuary under a new name.”

Baptists in Connecticut objected in 1803 to the union of church and state, referring back to what hap-
pened in the time of Constantine: “The doctrines of the gospel . . . retained much of their primitive purity, until the clergy became corrupted by a legal establishment under the Emperor Constantine, then, when church and world became united, and the clergy furnished with rich livings, and large salaries, the constant and main object of every such establishment, civil and religious oppression united their strength to the great injury of mankind.”

Early champions for freedom of conscience (Justin Martyr, Tertullian, Lactantius) were ignored as the union of church and state restricted religious freedom. Heretics were not only excommunicated from church, but also considered criminals against the state. Hence, in the Middle Ages, the Roman Church persecuted, even with death, those disagreeing with her dogmas.

The Geneva Experiment

The union of church and state in Geneva made it a theocracy. It was a marriage between John Calvin’s theology and his control of the state. “Calvin extended the authority and civil government to both Tables of the Law.” The first table (commandments 1-4, Exodus 20:3-11) refers to one’s relationship to humans (civil matters). The state usually confines its jurisdiction to the second table, but the union of state and church extended the jurisdiction of the state to all of the Ten Commandments. This meant that “offences against the Church are offences against the State, and vice versa, and deserve punishment by fines, imprisonment, exile, and, if necessary, by death.”

The church in Geneva was a “state church.” This meant that it was the duty of the state to legislate beyond its civil responsibilities. It was to legislate in religious matters as well: the number of dishes at meals was regulated; attendance at public worship was compulsory; watchmen were appointed to assure church attendance; men who laughed during a sermon were imprisoned for three days; heresy, idolatry, adultery, and blasphemy brought the death penalty; a girl was beheaded for striking her parents; and men and women were burned for witchcraft.

From 1542 to 1546, 58 judgments of death and 76 decrees of banishment were passed. During the years 1555 and 1559 the cases of various punishment for all sorts of offenses amounted to 414—a large proportion for a population of 20,000.

Calvin’s institution of a theocracy was based on principles “exclusively taken from the Old Testament. The Calvinistic as well as the papal theocracy was legalistic rather than evangelical.” Schaff notes that “the most cruel of those laws—against witchcraft, heresy, and blasphemy—were inherited from the Catholic Middle Ages, and continued in force in all countries of Europe, Protestant as well as Roman Catholic, down to the end of the seventeenth century.”

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Legally, all Geneva could do was to banish him. But they put him on trial, denied him benefit of counsel, even though the law provided for it. All the Geneva churches consulted thought Servetus should be banished, but none suggested execution. On October 27, 1553, however, he was burned at the stake.

Irwin Polishook says Calvin was “ruthless in suppressing heresy,” and with “few exceptions, the leading Protestants shared the intolerance of the medieval past.” Castellio writes, “What a tragedy that those who had so lately freed themselves from the terrible Inquisition should so soon imitate its tyranny, should so soon force men back into Cimmerian darkness after so promising a dawn!”

Zurich and Infant Baptism

Infant baptism was practiced by
all the Reformers, who considered re-baptism a heresy. Anabaptists were those who discovered that infant baptism is not taught in Scripture and argued that baptizing infants is an act without faith, for infants cannot exercise faith. The act of baptism goes against salvation by faith, the message of the Reformation. The Anabaptists rightly saw an inconsistency between the message of the Reformers and their practice of infant baptism.

Zurich was an early city where many Anabaptists lived. Although Ulrich Zwingli (1484-1531) worked in Zurich to forward the Reformation against the Catholic Church, he didn’t go any further than the city council’s approval to works in the Catholic system. So Anabaptists saw an inconsistency between the message of the Reformers and their practice of infant baptism.

In January 1525, the city council decided to stand by infant baptism and ordered Grebel and the Brethren Church to discontinue their movement. The Anabaptists did not comply, so Grebel and others were arrested and condemned by the state to life imprisonment. One of them (Manz) escaped, then was recaptured and executed by drowning on January 25, 1527.

Anabaptists, in fact, met with persecution under Protestant and Roman Catholic governments. It didn’t matter whether the state was united to Protestant or Catholic churches—persecution replaced proclamation as the arbiter between truth and error. The union of church and state was an affront to the sola scriptura principle. Often the union of church and state, rather than Scripture, handed down verdicts. The union of church and state in Protestant countries had become a new magisterium, the same kind of power opposed by Protestants in their battle with the Catholic Church.

The 16th century Reformation was mostly confined to continental Europe, although the influence of John Calvin came to Scotland. Because Pope Clement VII refused the king’s request for a divorce from Catherine of Aragon, King Henry VIII broke away from the Catholic Church and became the head of the Church of England (Anglican).
made no essential difference, for both were tyrannical against other religions, with limited room for religious liberty. These were troubled times in Great Britain. For example, the punishment for non-compliance to state legislated religion was severe, as described in the story of John Lothrop, a minister in England’s Newgate prison, with its filth, stench, and people of conscience locked into cells with the worst of criminals, who vented their cruelty on them. The cells were dark, damp, cold, small (nine feet by six feet), with no bathrooms, and plagued by disease and rats. In this tomb-like space, food was scarce and lacked nutrition—being only water, soup, and bread boiled in water, served once a day. Prisoners were gaunt with sallow faces, and the sane were crowded in with the insane.

The persecution carried out by Archbishop of Canterbury William Laud caused 23,000 people to leave for New England between 1629 and 1640. John Lothrop and 32 members of his congregation arrived in Boston, Massachusetts, September 18, 1634. The Virginia Company of London brought Anglicans to Virginia in 1607, and they became the established church, whereas in Massachusetts, a generation later, Congregationalists became the established church. The New England Experiment, which included the Congregational Church in Massachusetts and the Baptist Church in Rhode Island, was embodied by John Cotton and Roger Williams, respectively, both graduates of Cambridge University, and pastors who fled from persecution in England.

The Puritan movement began in England in the 1560s and 1570s. Fifty years later, in 1620, the Mayflower took 66 days to cross the Atlantic with 102 passengers and 25 to 30 crew packed into cramped quarters. Although all wanted to improve their financial prospects, perhaps half of them wanted to improve their church experience, which they hoped possible with 3,000 miles between them and the English king and the Anglican Church.

Pilgrims who escaped to the new world included Puritans, who remained loyal to the Anglican Church and to England, wanting to purify the church from within, thus forwarding the Reformation. Others were separatists, like Roger Williams, Anne Hutchinson, and John Lothrop, who separated from the Anglican Church and England in order to create a separate and thus a reformed church in the new world. Both sides were reformers and likened their mission to a new exodus, leaving behind slavery (state church persecution) to cross the Red Sea (Atlantic Ocean) to arrive in Canaan or the New Jerusalem (New World), an analogy applied at other times in history.

The Puritans were Calvinists with “a theology of Divine sovereignty rather than Divine love.” They wanted to establish a theocracy in the new world as Calvin had in Geneva, and this included a number of rigid rules. The English Calvinists brought the doctrine of persecution with them, and they persecuted other religions much as the Anglican Church did in England. Puritanism gave rise to Pharisaism, ruthlessly persecuting dissenters and those it considered sinners.

The Massachusetts Bay Colony organized like a new state with one religion (Anglican) following its charter from England. Among many others, they banished Anne Hutchinson and Roger Williams. Hutchinson claimed direct revelation from God, thus making Scripture secondary; Roger Williams argued that the state church in Massachusetts meant that a civil magistrate was placed over the clergy to enforce religious matters. Furthermore, he averred that the use of the civil sword to enforce religious compliance was not the way to reform the church. Rather, it was the way to produce hypocrites, persons who merely complied outwardly to escape persecution. So the exercise was counter-productive and made the church in even greater need of reform.

Williams rejected persecuting persons for differing religious beliefs, believing that freedom of conscience was far more important. In the 1650s, Puritans executed three Quakers and in 1692 hanged 19 for witchcraft. And membership in the church was required for citizenship in Massachusetts.

Perry Miller and Thomas Johnson comment: “There was almost always an element of narrowness, harshness, and literal-mindedness associated with Puritanism, enough to justify some of the criticisms of the bishops and some of the condemnations that have been made on the Puritan spirit in recent times.”

30 31
Roger Williams was a graduate of Cambridge University who arrived in Boston in 1631, two years before John Cotton.

Though a Calvinist, Williams was so different from Cotton and the Puritans that they banished him from Massachusetts in 1635 because he respected those who differed with him in matters of religion. He fled south during the winter (1635-1636).

David Hull notes that 17th-century Puritans portrayed “God as indeed a stern disciplinarian and one not to be trifled with,” yet with a caveat that God is not savage enough to place His “helpless captives” in “protracted writhings.” Calvin’s theology of God’s eternal hell for those He doesn’t choose to save calls this statement into question, for eternal burning of those God doesn’t love is as severe a view of God as one could imagine.

John Cotton, who was trained at Cambridge University but repulsed by Calvin’s theocracy and his part in the death of Servetus, had a large impact on Massachusetts. He arrived in 1633. Six years later he became a Congregationalist, and the union of church and state was illustrated by the civil magistrate excommunicating a church member. Cotton opposed democracy, promoting government by governors, not by the people. “The theory that America, at least the northeastern portion of it, was a haven for the persecuted had never been accepted by John Cotton.” A law passed in 1644 forbade the existence of a Baptist church in the colony of Massachusetts.

Roger Williams was a graduate of Cambridge University who arrived in Boston in 1631, two years before John Cotton. Though a Calvinist, Williams was so different from Cotton and the Puritans that they banished him from Massachusetts in 1635 because he respected those who differed with him in matters of religion. He fled south during the winter (1635-1636).

Believing in “soul liberty,” his greatest work was The Bloudy Tenet of Persecution, for Cause of Conscience (1644), which notes how church and state union since Constantine (Geneva and Massachusetts) has harmed the church, for the church is not Christian if it persecutes, for Jesus used no secular weapons, only love. (Cotton and Williams debated these issues.)

Williams recognized that churches can excommunicate members for spiritual matters, but considered persecution for matters of conscience as wrong. Nearly all of Williams’s opponents relied upon Old Testament views of dealing with religious offenders.

Williams showed respect for Indians, including their religion and language. He learned their language and traveled with the Algonquins, and wrote A Key Into the Language of America (1643). “Williams was perhaps the only educated colonist willing and able to cross the cultural barrier between English and Native Americans in early New England.”

The early history of America should be remembered in reading Abraham Lincoln’s Gettysburg address (November 19, 1863): “Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent, a new nation, conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.” Lincoln was speaking of 1776, not about the Massachusetts Bay Colony. He was not referring to those who followed a rigid union of church and state, so different from Roger Williams and Rhode Island.

Roger Williams used the metaphor of a hedge or wall of separation of church and state long before Thomas Jefferson did. Rhode Island was the last of the 13 original colonies to approve the U.S. Constitution (May 29, 1790), delaying until the Bill of Rights was added. Rhode Islanders were the earlier colonists who grasped the understanding of liberty of which Lincoln spoke, and were the first Americans to accept all humans as equal, whatever their differences—racial or religious.

Williams lived as a Christian (unlike other nominal Christians). He was troubled that in the name of Christianity, Indians were deprived of their land without due compensation. Rhode Island became “the safest refuge for liberty of conscience.” Williams invited persecuted Baptists and Seventh Day Baptists to Rhode Island and became a Baptist. He said: “I believe their practice comes nearer the practice of our great founder Jesus Christ than other practices of religion do.”

Nearly 200 years after the Pilgrims landed in the new world, the New England Baptists had a minority status compared to the Congregationalists. This is why the Danbury Baptist Association in Connecticut wrote to President Thomas Jefferson (October 1801) and months later (January 1, 1802) received his famous reply about the separation of church and state. “No Baptist organizations made separation their demand. Instead, Baptists focused on other, more traditional, claims of religious liberty.”

New England church establishments collapsed in the 1820s and...
There is an important distinction between (1) using the state to push one’s religious agenda, which has happened often in history, and (2) allowing religious values to inform politicians in making decisions for the good of all citizens. The first method overrides the religious freedom of those whose beliefs differ from those held by the state-enforced religious ideas. The second method takes into consideration the broader context (beyond the merely secular) for addressing moral issues like abortion and euthanasia.

1830s. One could argue that in its place, a growing fear of the Catholic Church in America developed. In 1832, Pope Gregory XVI issued his encyclical *Mirari Vos* condemning the separation of church and state.

For Americans, the crisis of slavery eclipsed worry about Catholicism, but by 1870, Elisha P. Hurlbut, former judge of the New York Supreme Court, “argued that there was an irreconcilable conflict between ‘Democracy and Theocracy’—a conflict ‘stronger and fiercer’ than between ‘freedom and slavery.’” He argued that “the theocracy of Rome and the democracy of America, being utterly antagonistic, have no other way to peace, but by an entire separation.”

With respect to Calvin’s Geneva, Schaff says: “The union of Church and State rests on the false assumption that all citizens are members of the Church and subject to its discipline.” This applies to all the experiments considered above.

The Augsburg Confession could be considered the founding manifesto of Protestantism. It was issued in 1530 after Martin Luther, on October 31, 1517, nailed the 95 Theses, or arguments, against the practice of indulgences on the door of the church in Wittenberg, Germany.

Article 28, “Of Ecclesiastical Power,” includes the following: “Therefore, since the power of the Church grants eternal things, and is exercised only by the ministry of the Word, it does not interfere with civil government; no more than the art of singing interferes with civil government. For civil government deals with other things than does the Gospel. The civil rulers defend not minds, but bodies and bodily things against manifest injuries, and restrain men with the sword and bodily punishments in order to preserve civil justice and peace. Therefore the power of the Church and the civil power must not be confounded. The power of the Church has its own commission to teach the Gospel and to administer the Sacraments. Let it not break into the office of another; let it not transfer the kingdoms of this world; let it not abrogate the laws of civil rulers; let it not abolish lawful obedience; let it not interfere with judgments concerning civil ordinances or contracts; let it not prescribe laws to civil rulers concerning the form of the Commonwealth. As Christ says, John 18, 33: My kingdom is not of this world; also Luke 12, 14: Who made Me a judge or a divider over you? Paul also says, Phil. 3, 20: Our citizenship is in heaven; 2 Cor. 10, 4: The weapons of our warfare are not carnal, but mighty through God to the casting down of imaginations.”

**Contemporary Arguments**

J. Budziszewiski writes: “Evangelical Christians have been conspicuous in the American public square since colonial days.” He notes that conventional wisdom says their re-entry into public affairs began with “the spectacular rise of the fundamentalist Religious Right in the 1970s,” but he suggests that “the founding in 1941 of the National Association of Evangelicals” is a better re-entry date.

Ronald Reagan’s presidential victory in 1980 heartened conservative Christians. It appeared that faith and politics could form a positive partnership. Later, when the Moral Majority petered out, the Christian Coalition took over and became the new evangelical presence in political activism. Conservative evangelicals become a force in politics. Cal Thomas and Ed Dobson’s book *Blinded by Might* (1999) shows that both movements failed in their mission to stop abortion and pornography and to restore the American family in order to bring about a new world built on “traditional values.” They tried to build the kingdom of God through their own works (political means), which is just as impossible as earning salvation through one’s own works.

The failure of these movements resulted from mixing two kingdoms, human and divine. They were repeating what had failed at the time of Christ. “Many of the religious leaders,” said Cal Thomas, “and even his disciples were looking for a political deliverer to break the grip of Roman rule. They wanted a Messiah who would give them heaven on earth, end their oppression, and put them in charge. But Jesus would have none of it. His kingdom, he said, ‘is not of this world’ (John 18:36).”

There is an important distinction between (1) using the state to push one’s religious agenda, which has happened often in history, and (2)
allowing religious values to inform politicians in making decisions for the good of all citizens. The first method overrides the religious freedom of those whose beliefs differ from those held by the state-enforced religious ideas. The second method takes into consideration the broader context (beyond the merely secular) for addressing moral issues like abortion and euthanasia.

Philosopher Brendan Sweetman considers secular and religious ideas that are brought to the political table. He argues that secularism and religion are both worldviews. Furthermore, he argues that secularism is a religion.

Study of evolutionary theory proves this true. It takes faith to believe foundational premises of evolution, and once secularism has been accepted, its believers become as ardent as any believer who has faith in the existence of God. In fact, evidence for God is found in nature (intelligent design or ID) whereas evolutionists credit ID to the blind forces of the survival of the fittest and natural selection over deep-time. This takes great faith, given the complexity of the cell—thought simple in Darwin’s day but now proven to be a veritable factory of interconnected precision machines discovered by biochemists using sophisticated electron microscopy.

It is no longer acceptable to label secular beliefs as reasonable and religious beliefs as unreasonable. Secular worldviews cannot claim ownership of the rational realm. It is as appropriate to apply reason to a religious worldview as it is to a secular worldview. Faith-based reason qualifies as a religion, and this must include secularism. Supernaturalism and naturalism both qualify as religions. Sweetman points out that the ideas of both are based on (1) a written source, such as “the Bible, the Qur’an, John Stuart Mills’ On Liberty, Karl Marx’s Das Kapital, [or] John Rawl’s A Theory of Justice”; (2) an authority like Billy Graham or Richard Dawkins; (3) “a profound personal experience of some kind (e.g., the experience that God is near, the experience that people are fundamentally equal”); (4) on tradition; and (5) on an “appeal to faith.” Nevertheless, Sweetman concludes: “I am prepared to agree that one should not introduce into the public square religious beliefs based on the above five sources.” He suggests the same policy for the secularist.

“We must also note that all positions that are made the basis of law—whether secularist or religious—restrict human conduct. This is true even if an activity is made legal (and not just illegal). If abortion is legalized it also restricts the conduct of religious believers in the sense that although they want to live in a world where abortion is illegal, they are forced to live in a society where it is legal. Almost everyone who contributes to public debates wants some aspect of their views imposed (usually by law) on those who disagree with them.”

Sweetman argues a difference between higher-order and lower-order religious beliefs. The distinction is made between the moral rights of workers, or treatment of the homeless (lower-order) compared to the Eucharist (higher-order). Only lower-order religious beliefs can be brought to the debate in the public square. So for Sweetman, the phrase “separation of church and state” now means that higher-order beliefs only must be excluded from the public square.

We live in a postmodern world where absolutes are dismissed. Rampant relativism is not conducive to true living. With this in mind, Sweetman is right to state: “The secularist often approaches many of the topics in dispute in U.S. society mainly from a relativistic perspective, while proponents of the religious worldview approach them from a more objective moral perspective. Most important, secularists often appeal in U.S. society to what I like to call ‘the rhetoric of relativism.’ This rhetoric is used in an attempt to keep traditional religious beliefs and values out of public arguments and debates, while at the same time avoiding a substantive debate about these beliefs and values.”

Moral relativism has problems: logical and practical. First the logical problems: Relativists oppose objectivists for imposing moral values on all persons, but by stating that this is wrong, relativists make an absolute moral statement, the very thing they oppose. Now for the practical problem: A true relativist (1) could not
criticize someone for stealing his car, (2) could not complain about a bank overcharging him, (3) could not condemn racism, or (4) could not condemn murder, to name some examples.

In a secular postmodern world, where relativism does not contribute to life in a pragmatic or practical way, persons with religious values need a place at the table to bring to the debate values that benefit human life. This means that politicians informed by the simpler religious values can better contribute to society. Their values enable them to rise above meaningless relativism and speak from a broader context that evaluates the liability of relativism and points to a better way forward. But this in no way allows any religion to legislate the more complex religious doctrines or to impose its understanding of biblical insights on others, whether religious or secular. Whatever help religious values bring to the state must never violate the religious freedom of all citizens.

This is why Roy Moore, Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of Alabama, was wrong to place a large monument of the Ten Commandments in the central rotunda of the Alabama State Judicial Building, unveiled on August 1, 2001. The monument suggested that the state of Alabama endorses the Christian religion, which is only one of many religions among its citizens. Therefore, by August 21, the Alabama Supreme Court unanimously voted to remove the monument.

“As Christians we affirm the separation of church and state. We denounce every effort to establish the Christian religion as the law of the land. The role of the state is to protect religious freedom, not to ensure Christian truth. Thus, the widespread effort to enshrine the Ten Commandments in the public sphere—however well intended—does not spring from the confessing church but from a misguided conservative ideology.”

Writing in *The Christian Statesman*, Gordon Keddie calls for a “restoration of the so-called blue laws” (Sunday laws), for the state to uphold the law of God. He argues that it is proper for the state to protect Sunday, irrespective of what the majority might say to the contrary, because such legislation upholds God’s unchangeable law. He evidently overlooks that God’s unchangeable law singles out Saturday as the Sabbath (Ex. 20:8-11), as a memorial of Creation (Gen. 2:1-3). This is why Christ said “the sabbath was made for man” (Mark 2:27, KJV)—for the human race, and not just for the Jewish race. That’s why Christ urged that the same Sabbath law be kept nearly 40 years after His resurrection at the time of Jerusalem’s destruction (Matt. 24:20), which refutes any change of God’s immutable law in honor of the resurrection. Keddie says God’s law is immutable, yet he has not understood the biblical meaning of God’s unchanging law.

Scripture has predicted that a power would “try to change the set times and the laws” (Dan. 7:25, NIV). This needs to be understood in its original Aramaic. Two words are used for time in Daniel 7:25: (1) *iddan*, meaning a span of time (“a time, times and half a time”), and *zemàn*, plural of *zimmîn*, meaning a point in time in the singular and in the plural meaning repeated points in time. Law is singular in the original, so the text speaks of changing repeated points of time in the Law, which can refer only to the weekly seventh-day (Saturday) Sabbath. This is why Christ urged His followers: “When you see standing in the holy place “the abomination that causes desolation,” spoken of through the prophet Daniel—let the reader understand”’ (Matt. 24:15). William Shea insightfully says: “The setting up of the abomination of desolation of Daniel 12:11 can be seen as the union of church and state and what the church set out to accomplish through the power of the state.”

Churches are uniting on common points of doctrine. “Christian Churches Together” (CCT) began in the United States in September 2001, and 34 churches adopted the by-laws and officially organized in Atlanta in 2006. Among other purposes, the corporation is formed “to speak to society with a common voice whenever possible” and to “promote the common good of society” (Article Three, Nos. 6 and 7).

**The Biblical Contribution**

1. “God is love” (1 John 4:8, KJV) means the Trinity experience an inner history of eternal reciprocal love and created Adam and Eve to image that love. The Trinity are three Persons in an eternal freedom of equality, where each one loves the other two more than Himself. The intent of the Trinity was that humans reflect this love in the finite...
Christian love reveals a citizenship in the kingdom of heaven, and makes Christians and the church the salt and light to the world, for it springs from union with the King of kings, rather than from union with state and rulers. Unbelievers need to see the gospel in the lives of Christians, particularly because “the god of this age” has done so much to keep the gospel from them.

Sphere, through the indwelling of God’s love within them.

Selfless love was not new to Christ in becoming the God-man. It was the overflow of the Trinitarian love outward that had always existed inward, as the very essence of God. Here is the profound eternal depth of the gospel, the good news of Jesus Christ, who didn’t enter the world as a conquering King, but as a helpless babe. He left the royal throne of glory where He was praised, adored, and loved and began a long, lonely journey as the Man of sorrows, acquainted with human grief and struggle, often misunderstood, hated, betrayed. He came to His own, and His own received Him not.

2. Jesus said, “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? And if you greet only your brothers, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Matt. 5:44-48).

Christian love reveals a citizenship in the kingdom of heaven, and makes Christians and the church the salt and light to the world (Matt. 5:13, 14), for it springs from union with the King of kings, rather than from union with state and rulers. Unbelievers need to see the gospel in the lives of Christians, particularly because “the god of this age” has done so much to keep the gospel from them (2 Cor. 4:4).

3. In Christ’s day, Israel hated the oppressive Romans and thought more of their temporal freedom than of telling their captors how to gain eternal freedom. They were bent on restoring the theocracy for selfish reasons. At the same time, Christ gave up His freedom in heaven to tell the good news to Israel and others of how to gain eternal freedom—in Him. Christ said, “My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jews” (John 18:36). He rebuked Peter for using the sword in response to His capture (vs. 11).

The union of church and state (Jews and Romans), although temporary, put Christ through terrible torture, staggering injustice, inhuman humiliation, and the worst death possible: crucifixion. All hell broke loose through that uniting of church and state, yet Jesus did not retaliate in kind, bearing it all with longsuffering and dignity because He was filled with the “fruit of the Spirit,” which is “love” with its attributes of “joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control” (Gal. 5:22, 23).

4. Calvinistic predestination must be evaluated by Calvary, and not the other way round. Jesus “is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world” (1 John 2:2). Atonement is unlimited, but is it universalism? Jesus answers: “God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him” (John 3:16, 17).

Christ’s mission is global, but belief or disbelief in Him causes one to “perish” or receive “eternal life.”

What did Jesus mean by “perish”? The Greek means “destroy.” This is why “the wages of sin is death” (Rom. 6:23). God said it first in Eden: “you will surely die” (Gen. 2:17) if disobedient, but Satan countered, “You will not surely die” (3:4). Who was right?

Think of it this way. Jesus believes in religious liberty, for salvation is given to those who choose to believe in the Giver and His gift. Jesus respects human freedom to respond to His love. Jesus draws people to Him without coercion. Those who accept His death in their place will live eternally. Those who refuse to come to Christ and accept His gift “perish.”

Jesus died to redeem humankind and to destroy the devil (Heb. 2:14, 1 John 3:8), and if the devil perishes, why not his followers? Hell fire is biblical, but needs to be understood in the context of Christ’s word perish, for fire consumes, so the result (not process) is everlasting. If we believe that God tortures forever, what is wrong with church and state torturing for a fraction of that time? Doesn’t one’s view of God cause one to want to be like Him, and is this why there has been so much torture of others in the name of Christ by Christians?

How can the unselfish eternal
reciprocal love in the Trinity ever have anything to do with torturing the reprobate whom They have allegedly never loved? If destiny is based on an arbitrary choice of God in eternal history, why did the Trinity send Christ to tell the world that destiny is based on human choice? And why have a future judgment if the Trinity have already judged in eternity? And why take the gospel to the whole world when it cannot change God’s predestination?

On the cross Jesus pled, “Father, forgive them” (Luke 23:34, KJV). His love was unconditional. He loved His enemies just as He taught His church to do. This was His response to the worst religious persecution ever committed by a union of church and state. He died loving everyone—even His persecutors. Scripture says: “If I . . . surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing” (1 Cor. 13:3). Can God ever forget those who turned Him down? Can His love for them ever be less than eternal, though hating their sins? Eternal suffering in the heart of God, missing His children who rejected Him, is a view of God compatible with His Calvary love.

This eternal love may illumine a text about the Cross: “I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself” (John 12:32). Has this ever been fulfilled? Few were drawn to Him among the rabble at Calvary. Christians have been drawn to Him through two millennia, but when have all been drawn to Him? Not yet. Not until the final judgment, when all bow before Him (Isa. 45:23; Rom. 14:11; Phil. 2:10, 11; Rev. 5:13). Although rebels don’t change, they will realize Jesus died for them and wanted to save them.

5. Jesus said entrance to His kingdom is based on the way we relate to others, for this reveals our relationship to Him. We can only love as He loves when filled with His love. In the end Christ will say: “‘I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me’” (Matt. 25:40), just as He said to Saul, the persecutor of Christians: “‘Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?’” (Acts 9:4). Christ changed Saul the persecutor to Paul the proclaimer. Paul declared: “The entire law is summed up in a single command: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself’” (Gal. 5:14), and he also said, quoting Proverbs 25:21, “If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink.” (Rom. 12:20). Saul could never forget the words of Stephen about those stoning him to death: “‘Lord, do not hold this sin against them’” (Acts 7:60), which echoed Christ’s “Father, forgive them.” Stephen was “full of the Holy Spirit” (vs. 55).

Spirit-filled Christians love their enemies, for such is Calvary love. Those devoid of Calvary love cannot enter the kingdom (Matt. 25:41-46). Sadly, Christ says, “‘Many will say to me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?’ Then I will tell them plainly, ‘I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!’” (7:22, 23).

Works done in the name of Christianity devoid of Calvary love are evil, for they fail to reflect Christ’s love, and so fail to reveal the gospel to the world in order to win unbelievers to Christ, just as Christ won Saul.

This is the foundational problem with the experiments studied above. Calvary love extends the gospel through revealing it in acts as well as words. Calvary love is foreign to secular kingdoms, even if they are a union of church and state, for loving everyone as Christ does cannot galvanize armies to kill enemies. But God’s lavish love for His world, revealed through Christian lives and acts, is the mission Christ gave to His church (28:19, 20), and not through alliances or acts unsupported by Jesus in the New Testament.

The lives of great Christians and the death of martyrs has done more to extend the gospel than all the crusades, inquisitions, “Christian” theocracies, and religious legislation by states combined. The greatest life and death is that of Jesus Christ. No other life and death has done more to advance the gospel through revealing to hearts and minds that God is love (1 John 4:7-16).

Jesus said, “‘My kingdom is not of this world’” (John 18:36), and “A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another’” (13:34, 35).

Christ calls Christians to unite with Him, rather than calling for the church to unite with the state. God calls Christians to extend the kingdom of heaven, rather than to extend any kingdom on earth. God “sets up kings and deposes them” (Dan. 2:21) and calls individuals to be as salt and light to the world (Matt. 5:13, 14) and hence to kings and kingdoms as He did through Joseph in Egypt, Daniel in Babylon, and Esther in Medo-Persia. But Christ does not call His church to rule any state or any state to rule His church, but to follow Him in servant-leadership to convince the citizens and leaders of states to become citizens of the kingdom of Heaven.

In a post 9/11 world, where terrorism has caused the loss of some freedom to gain an elusive security, we need to be reminded of what happened in 68 B.C. In the New York Times,” Robert Harris refers to pagan Rome as the world’s only superpower of its time, and it was dealt a profound psychological blow when Mediterranean pirates at-
tacked Rome’s port at Ostia in a terrorist attack that destroyed their fleet, resulting in decisions that set them on a path to the destruction of their constitution, democracy, and liberty. Is history being repeated? Will the separation of church and state be a casualty in the response to terrorism?

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“Knowledge is power’ is a familiar slogan . . . , but I doubt if there is much truth in it as a generalization. In reality, our greater knowledge of events is as likely to increase our frustration as to increase our power. . . . The world is not any more of our making just because we know more about it. Indeed, the very fact that we know more may bring us to a greater realization of how little control we have” (Gordon Graham, The Internet: A Philosophical Inquiry).

“A modern habit of saying, ‘this is my opinion, but I may be wrong,’ is entirely irrational. If I say that it may be wrong I say that it is not my opinion. The modern habit of saying, ‘Every man has a different philosophy; this is my philosophy and it suits me’; the habit of saying this is mere weakmindedness. A cosmic philosophy is not constructed to fit a man; a cosmic philosophy is constructed to fit a cosmos. A man can no more possess a private religion than he can possess a private sun and moon” (G. K. Chesterton).

“When the world was created, it might have seemed to be enough to have it work. To include beauty seems unnecessary for a mechanistic universe. We have been given a sense of the beautiful which can be regarded as gratuitous. Which it is—a gift of pure grace” (Luci Shaw).

“A perspective digest feature

More to the point

“The two most easily recognizable hallmarks of secularization in America are the exaltation of numbers and of technique . . . . Numbers—or what the Southern Baptists call ‘nickels and noses’—have little to do with truth, excellence, or character. As one sociologist says, ‘Big Mac,’ even with billions and billions of hamburgers served, need not mean ‘Good Mac.’ . . . Church growth viewed in measurable terms, such as numbers, is trivial compared with growth in less measurable but more important terms, such as faith, character, and godliness” (Os Guinness, Dining With the Devil).
n the remarkable passage regarding the unity of the church (1 Cor. 12:12-27) that clearly alludes to the care and intent of an intelligent designer, the apostle Paul begins by underscoring the fact that “God has set the members, each one of them, in the body just as He pleased” (vs. 18, NKJV). This is profoundly divine intelligent design.

Within this context, several insights may be drawn about the loving care and attention exhibited by our Designer that illustrate the harmonious beauty that God intended His people to have in their relationships with one another and with Christ. Although much attention could be devoted to grasping the full meaning of this passage, we will focus on what it may mean to God-fearing scientists as they examine the complexity of the human body. Modern science has added a new depth of meaning to the harmonious and complementary beauty that our bodies, and its parts, contain.

One illustration of this may be found within the DNA codes that make up much of the “programming” of our body. Ever since Francis Crick and James Watson, among others, first unraveled the basic double helix structure of DNA molecules in 1953, scientists have worked hard to discover and explain—or “decode”—which parts of our DNA represent the codes for which genes, acting as switches, as it were, for all the various traits and characteristics of our bodies, such as the color of our eyes and hair.

Molecular biologists soon noticed that approximately 95 to 98 percent of DNA in the nucleus of human cells seemingly did not code for genes and dismissed these portions as “junk DNA,” the leftovers of evolutionary development. In other words, these sections of DNA sequences were designated as junk DNA because science could not ascribe any function to them. Researchers assumed that they were just molecular garbage, and the sequence of the “syllables,” i.e., the nucleotides in these DNA, should be completely random.

Recently, however, this junk DNA
has received new attention. According to research released through Johns Hopkins Medicine News & Information Services, and several other places as well, these junk DNA sequences formerly thought of as useless may in fact be critical control regions that do indeed assist in switching genes on and off. They have discovered that the majority of DNA in the human genome is transcribed into functional molecules, called RNA, and that these transcripts extensively overlap one another.

This broad pattern of transcription challenges the long-standing view that the human genome consists of a relatively small set of discrete genes, along with a vast amount of so-called junk DNA that is not biologically active. Also, much to the surprise of evolutionary biologists, researchers have discovered that control regions that perform the same function don’t necessarily have to look the same among different species, as noted for zebra fish and humans. This indicates that our non-coding regions are in fact filled with important enhancers and suppressors that we are only beginning to understand.

These discoveries have left evolutionists baffled, as they indicate that, if true, a simple story of descent through natural phenomena would need to be much more complex than scientists realized.

“Our perspective of transcription and genes may have to evolve,” researchers note in an article published by Nature, as their new network model of the genome “poses some interesting mechanistic questions” that have yet to be answered.

Adds Francis Collins, the director of the National Human Genome Research Institute in Bethesda, Maryland, “I don’t think it should be surprising that what we have discovered is complex.” Referring to humans, he observed, “We are intended to be complicated and we obviously are.” Or, perhaps, this complexity is one more indication of the presence of an intelligent and loving Designer, God, who so composed us, even our inward parts, to work together mysteriously and harmoniously, thereby giving more abundant honor to God, the Designer of the mistakenly called junk DNA of our bodies.

“God has set the members, each one of them, in the body just as He pleased” (1 Cor. 12:18, NKJV). With the above discussion in mind, it becomes clear that our bodies are not the development of random chance, with junk portions that are the leftovers of evolution.

Rather, God has carefully designed each part, including the eye and the hand (as Paul implies in verse 16), and also the DNA sequences of our bodies to reflect the mark of intelligence and intentionality. God made us they way He desired!

As 1 Corinthians 12:22 continues, “It is much truer that the members of the body which seem to be weaker are necessary” (NASB). This applies well to our analogy with “junk DNA.” Those parts of our body that biologists were ready to dismiss as useless, God intentionally created to be quite useful! True were the words of the Psalmist, “I will give thanks to You, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made; Wonderful are Your works” (139:14, NASB). Indeed, concerning all the parts of body including the DNA, we can join David in saying to our caring Designer, “In wisdom You have made them all” (104:24, NASB).
Katrina. How could we forget the horrific images of the aftermath of one of the most devastating hurricanes to hit American shores? The thriving metropolis of New Orleans was reduced to a gutted city flooded by broken levees and numberless shattered lives.

Romans 1:20 tells us that God uses the things that we can see to help us understand the things we cannot see. They are visual aids for teaching us important truths. This principle is illustrated in Proverbs 25:28: “Like a city whose walls are broken down is a man who lacks self-control” (NIV).

The picture is one of a city with two major problems: inner desolation and overall defenselessness. It possesses few inner resources and no power to protect itself. Such a city is subject to looting by vandals, vagrants, and the violent. It has lost its economy, community, synchrony, and vitality.

The sole driving force of the broken city is survival. As a result, it has lost the power to diversify, prosper, and progress. It is a city in need of renewal, restoration, and repair. No sector is unaffected; no quarter is without need of serious attention.

Such a city is a graphic caricature of a brain (and a life) that has been ravaged by stress, vandalized by sin, overcome by bad habits and addictions, flooded by negative thinking and depression, and overwhelmed by the storms of life. Such a brain is in survival mode, having lost self-control. It is in need of renewal, restoration, and repair.

Here we see a picture of human-kind whose image is far removed from God’s original plan: “Man was originally endowed with noble powers and a well-balanced mind.” The Bible is clear that hereditary tendencies, environmental influences, and our own poor choices create hurricane-force damage—damage that requires as complete a plan for recovery and renewal as any storm-struck city. “Like fish caught in a treacherous net and birds trapped in a snare, so the sons of men are ensnared at an evil time when it suddenly falls on them” (Eccl. 9:12, NASB).

God uses the graphic visual aid of a ravaged city to describe a deeper human problem—the broken brain—and He has the most complete recovery plan available. He has promised to redirect the desires and renew the thinking of anyone who desires a saving relationship with Him.

“If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new” (2 Cor. 5:17, NKJV). New life, new desires, and new motives spring from the heart that has been surrendered to Christ. This is the starting place for true and lasting growth—growth that will continue as long as life shall last.

God has promised that He will restore hope, courage, perseverance, healing, and joy to anyone who has suffered a life of brokenness (Rom. 15:13). And how does this process happen? Because of God’s great love for humanity, He has engineered us for growth and restoration, so that day by day, as we follow His plan, the original mind—well-balanced, noble, and “sound”—can be achieved (2 Tim. 1:7).

The ability of the brain to respond to new choices, learn, grow, and adapt is referred to as experience-based plasticity. As we make new decisions; follow new and positive lifestyle choices; think, perceive, and respond in new ways; changes take place in the structure, function, and even genetic expression of the brain.

Ellen White speaks hope as she proclaims our ability even to overcome hereditary leanings: “Christ has given His Spirit as a divine power to overcome all hereditary tendencies to evil, and to impress His own character upon His church.”

Today, science is echoing the words of Inspiration. Noted neuropsychiatrist and author, John Ratey, M.D., notes: “We must remember that genetics is not destiny. . . Genes set boundaries for human behavior, but within these boundaries there is immense room for variation determined by experience, personal choice, and even chance.

“The point to remember is that genes can be active or inactive and that everything we do affects the activity of our genes. [For example], adult learning increases the activation of genes that turn on the production of proteins in the brain needed to solidify memory.”

This is not to say that there is not a place for various types of medical intervention or counseling. For instance, individuals suffering from bipolar disorder must be maintained with medication. God has many ways to help His children, and we
must respect those who utilize those choices and appreciate the ways God intervenes in lives.

But a loving God has designed the human brain—the seat of all action—for continual progress and growth, a truth that science is just beginning to understand: “The brain has a tremendous ability to compensate and rewire with practice... Our brains are wonderfully plastic throughout adulthood. Brain structure is not predetermined and fixed. We can alter the ongoing development of our brains and thus our capabilities...”

“The human brain’s amazing plasticity enables it to continually rewire and learn—not just through academic study, but through experience, thought, action, and emotion. As with our muscles, we can strengthen our neural pathways with brain exercise. Or we can let them wither. The principle is the same: Use it or lose it! Although the brain’s flexibility may decrease with age, it remains plastic throughout life, restructuring itself according to what it learns.”

Our minds enlarge or diminish in proportion to what we focus on. As a man thinks in his heart, the Scripture says, “so is he” (Prov. 23:7). This amazing principle of growth is recognized by Ellen White: “An understanding of the revealed will of God enlarges the mind, expands, elevates, and endows it with new vigor, by bringing its faculties into contact with stupendous truth. No study is better suited to give energy to the mind, to strengthen the intellect, than the study of the word of God. No other book is so potent in elevating the thoughts, in giving vigor to the faculties, as is the Bible, which contains the most ennobling truths. If God’s word were studied as it should be, we would see breadth of mind, stability of purpose, nobility of character, such as is rarely seen in these times.”

Rebuilding a broken city requires a plan; so does rebuilding a broken brain. Long-term success is achieved by working hard and working smart. The power and the plan both come from God, and He will strengthen you to do your part.

However, for permanent success we must learn to respect the process of change and determine to engage in the battle over the long haul. Notice: “Character is not obtained by amassing wealth, or by gaining worldly honor. Character is not obtained by trying to have others fight the battle of life for us. It must be sought, worked for, fought for; and it requires a purpose, a will, a determination.”

Ellen White talks about how some have harder battles with self to fight than others—they may feel their need more keenly and mistakes more acutely than others—but with perseverance and prayer, success is within the reach of all. Dr. John Ratey observes: “Genes and the environment work together to shape our brains, and we can manage them both if we want to. It may be harder for people with certain genes or surroundings, but ‘harder’ is a long way from predetermination.”

God will rebuild your life one day at a time by unfolding His plan for living free. That plan includes tools for restoring the entire brain, not just overcoming one bad habit. His plan begins with creating an internal environment of hope, optimism, and thankfulness—a mindset that helps you get up, instead of give up, when you make a mistake.

Just as important is creating an external environment that draws you into making positive choices. That can include simple changes such as keeping your walking shoes at the table with fresh fruit. These small changes redirect your brain toward the formation of new, positive habits.

But it doesn’t stop there. Rebuilding continues by creating a lifestyle that promotes physical and mental health such as healthful food choices, daily exercise, and plenty of rest. These activities will throttle down stress and improve your mood—two important safeguards against addiction triggers.

Finally, creating a connection with others and with God provides support and practical resources for learning new skills for living, thinking, and relating to others. Helping others and taking an interest in their lives are the best ways to keep our own problems in perspective. And much practical and spiritual guidance are found in the study of God’s Word.

God has provided other valuable tools such as counseling and medical intervention, both of which may yield great benefit for some on their journey to health and wholeness.

You are valuable, unique, and special. God has a plan for your life. The process of rebuilding, whether a city or a brain, may seem daunting, but with the right tools and the power of God, restoration is sure.

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The Word Upon My Heart—1

Isaac was found early in the morning meditating in the fields (Gen. 24:63); David meditated regularly (Ps. 19:14); Mary, the mother of Jesus, pondered in her heart what was said about Jesus (Luke 2:19); Timothy is told to meditate on the words of his mentor, the apostle Paul (1 Tim. 4:15). God told Joshua that the key to victory in his new leadership post was meditation upon God’s law day and night (Joshua 1:8).

Engaging in “muchness” and “manyness” is a disease that affects Christians with particular virulence. Although our constant busyness makes us useful on the outside, our lives may be hollow and empty from having little of substance inside. Eventually, exhausted, we collapse. Psychiatrist Carl Jung once said: “Hurry is not the Devil; it is the Devil.” There is much truth in the statement.

Slowing down to meditate and think about God is neither easy nor natural for many of us. The messenger of the Lord once warned: “One reason that there is not more sincere piety and religious fervor, is because the mind is occupied with unimportant things and there is no time to meditate, search the Scriptures, or pray.”

But the very notion of meditation makes many Christians nervous: Is it truly biblical? Isn’t meditation associated with mystical practices?

In the Bible we find familiar characters who meditated. Isaac was found early in the morning meditating in the fields (Gen. 24:63); David meditated regularly (Ps. 19:14); Mary, the mother of Jesus, pondered in her heart what was said about Jesus (Luke 2:19); Timothy is told to meditate on the words of his mentor, the apostle Paul (1 Tim. 4:15). God told Joshua that the key to victory in his new leadership post was meditation upon God’s law day and night (Joshua 1:8).

Often the psalms admonish the reader to meditate, the psalmist speaking from experience: “My meditation of him shall be sweet: I will be glad in the Lord” (Ps. 104:34, KJV). Psalm 119 reveals the author’s conviction upon meditation: “I will meditate in thy precepts, and have respect unto thy commandments, which I have loved; and I will meditate in thy statutes” (vs. 15, KJV); “Let the proud be ashamed; for they dealt perversely...
with me without a cause: but I will meditate in thy precepts” (vs. 78, KJV); “Mine eyes prevent the night watches, that I might meditate in thy word” (vs. 148, KJV).

While an increasing number of busy and sophisticated people have found the benefits of meditation—such as a sense of well-being—that is not what drives a Christian to meditate. For the Christian, meditation is reflection upon God’s Word.

Note the persistence on that point by Ellen White: “Merely to hear or to read the word is not enough. He who desires to be profited by the Scriptures must meditate upon the truth that has been presented to him.” Christian meditation, in its truest sense, is the experience in between Bible study and prayer—after reading (or hearing) what God says, and before responding to Him in prayer. It is like taking prayer—after reading (or hearing) the Word just read for a walk, allowing it to seep through the mind sufficiently to prompt meaningful conversations with the Almighty. We must meditate on the Word to understand better the God behind the words.

King David said: “The meditation of my heart shall be of understanding” (Ps. 49:3, KJV). So, followers of God meditate to understand. Ellen White added, “It is what we meditate upon that will give tone and strength to our spiritual nature.”

Even though any mediation upon the Word would yield profit, I have found three specific areas the Bible itself recommends we reflect upon with care and intentionality:

1. Meditate on the expressed commandments of God (Ps. 1:2; 119:23, 48, 78, 97; Joshua 1:8). The legendary missionary-humanitarian David Livingstone memorized Psalm 119 at the age of nine. One wonders how much having stored such word in his mind influenced such an extraordinary life. This very psalm, the longest in Scripture, encourages frequent meditation on God’s commandments. “O how love I thy law!” said David, “it is my meditation all the day” (Ps. 119:97, KJV); “I will meditate in thy precepts” (vs. 15, KJV); “thy servant did meditate in thy statutes” (vs. 23, KJV).

Why meditate on God’s laws or statutes? Doesn’t focus on the law smack of legalism? We must remember that the people of the Lord will be distinguished in the last days for having the faith of Jesus and for keeping the commandments of God (Rev. 14:12). God’s law is the reflection of His character or His glory (Ex. 33:18-34:7). The more we meditate on His character the more like Him we’ll become.

This was Jesus’ whole point in His Sermon on the Mount. If we want to be like our Father in heaven, we must assimilate into our lives the spirit of the law and not merely its letter. So, though the scribes understood the letter of the law to say, for instance, not to kill, meditation upon such law would have led them to understand that any ill-feeling, any animosity toward another breaks the spirit of God’s intent (Matt. 5:21-25, 44-48). This is achieved when one meditates on what is read.

2. Meditate on the love of Christ (Eph. 3:14-19). Ellen White becomes rapturous with the prospect: “Christ’s sacrifice for fallen man has no parallel. It is the most exalted, sacred theme on which we can meditate. Every heart that is enlightened by the grace of God is constrained to bow with inexpressible gratitude and adoration before the Redeemer for His infinite sacrifice.” In spite of her long illness while writing this in Australia, Ellen White exclaimed, “I love to meditate upon the love of Jesus.” No wonder she advised to spend an hour each day in contemplation of His life.

I remember one morning I felt very distant from God, with renewed evidence of personal sinfulness. I was depressed because I felt victory in my life was elusive. But as I meditated on Psalm 51, David’s prayer for forgiveness after his great sin with Bathsheba, it took several re-readings to discover something all too obvious: David insisted on the greatness of his heavenly Father’s mercy rather than the greatness of his sin.

“Have mercy upon me, O God, according to thy lovingkindness: according unto the multitude of thy tender mercies blot out my transgressions” (vs. 1, KJV, italics supplied).

It is the love of Christ that will constrain us (2 Cor. 5:14). Only understanding some of the breadth and depth of His love will make us want to die to self and yield to Him who gave up all for us. Without such meditation, our lives remain unchanged.

“We should meditate,” Ellen White writes, “upon the Scriptures. . . . The infinite mercy and love of Jesus, the sacrifice made in our behalf, call for most serious and solemn reflection. We should dwell upon the character of our dear Redeemer and Intercessor. . . . We should meditate upon the mission of Him who came to save His people from their sins. By constantly contemplating heavenly themes, our faith and love will grow stronger.”

3. Meditate on God’s ways (Ps. 77:12; 143:5). The Psalmist says he reflects on God’s creation, on how He does things. Jonathan Edwards, the key figure in the First Great Awakening of the 18th century, was accustomed to the contemplation of God’s works for his meditation. It is reflection on the way God works that leads us to an increased understanding of His
character and of His will for our lives.

Years ago, I decided to listen to the Bible on cassette for a few minutes each day. It took only three months to listen to the whole Bible, and then I’d begin again, and so on. I did this for a number of years. The first few times I took up this habit, Nehemiah, lights came on all over Israel as recorded from the time of God’s activity among the children of while taking the sweeping view of Industries each day. It took only three months to listen to the whole Bible, and then I’d begin again, and so on. I understood His insistence on faithfulness. I grasped why He longs for us to be obedient. The immense sacrifice God was making to lead His wayward children came to me with full force. Understanding His ways led me to a much greater confidence in His words. Many times hence, when faced with difficult decisions or asked to counsel others facing them, I was able to review “This is how God usually works” and allow light to give clarity to the issues at hand.

I once heard prolific author and theologian John Piper tell the story of Albert Einstein and his disappointment with Christian leadership’s lack of substance. Einstein had come to know, better than most, the majesty of God in the heavens. His friend, physicist Karl Meissner, articulated an explanation for Einstein’s frustration with Christian preachers: “He must have looked at what preachers said about God and thought that [that was] blasphemy. He had seen much more majesty than they had imagined. They [the preachers] were just not talking about the real thing.”

If we want to know God, He reveals Himself through His Word. Only by meditating upon His Word can we come to realize how truly real He is to His children.

In my next column, I will share the how and the why of mediation upon the Word. I hope you can join me then.

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WORKSTATION TWO

Gary B. Swanson

Country and Western singer Anita Cochran made history in 2004 by releasing a brand new song, “(I Wanna Hear) a Cheatin’ Song” from her album God Created Woman. This recording was unique for its time because in it Cochran fulfilled a lifelong dream—in a way—of singing with Country and Western legend Conway Twitty, who died of an abdominal aneurysm 11 years before.

Yet Twitty never recorded the song—and he has not returned from the grave.

Actually the Cochran recording itself is a kind of “cheatin’ song” in that during his lifetime Conway Twitty unknowingly provided his part in the piece in more than 50 of his songs. With the help of his wife, who co-produced most of his music, producers used sophisticated computer equipment to stitch together Twitty’s part in the new song from words, phrases, and even single syllables of his previously recorded music.

The result is a seamless piece in which today and yesterday virtually become one.

“We are thrilled,” gushed Twitty’s daughter Joni Jenkins in an interview. “When we heard this was happening, we couldn’t wait to hear it and to hear Daddy singing again.”

Virtually, of course!

Using technology for a somewhat similar project, several years ago a soft drink company cobbled together vintage video footage of jazz icon Louis Armstrong, who died in 1971, to make a TV commercial look as if he were singing with today’s flamboyant rock star Elton John. If ever there were a prime example of postmodernism’s juxtaposition of disparate images, this would have to be it.

Technology can be great fun. It can make illusion increasingly entertaining—as long as we are in on the joke, as long as we can voluntarily suspend disbelief.

Yet some current thinkers are beginning to assert that we are facing “the end of the real.” Christian writer Os Guinness puts it this way:
“Images now dominate words—the visual over the verbal, entertainment over exposition, and the artificial (including virtual reality) over the real and the natural.”

Obviously the Louis Armstrong-Elton John commercial was a clever and arresting digital manipulation in the relatively harmless interest of marketing a brand of soft drink. Any semi-sophisticated TV viewer could easily recognize that. But the concept raises a troubling question about what technology will enable communicators to do next. If such skills were in the wrong hands, someone could possibly be able to deceive many into making decisions they wouldn’t otherwise make. And it could have potential consequences far more significant than the choice of soft drink. David Dockery points out that “for modernism, there is still a universe to be known, truth to be found. The project of the mind is to go about its discovery. For postmodernism, truth is not to be found. Anyone who ever tries to match wits with the devil—on one’s own—is hopelessly outclassed.”

And now it’s become evident that documentaries, once produced only from a journalistic basis in objectivity, have changed their style and approach to the subjective and highly personalized. Even those who resonated completely with the message of such “documentaries” as Bowling for Columbine and Super Size Me must recognize that they are produced as a genre that is not completely objective, that they undertake their production with intentional, subjective premises.

Because of these new approaches in mass communication, there are those who advocate isolation from popular culture—a monastic answer to the problem. But in media-saturated society, this is virtually impossible. Even if one were to consider complete insulation from popular culture, there are times when it becomes intrusive. Like it or not, popular culture is the current that humanity is swimming in. Do fish know they are wet?

The media are a gift from God. But the devil can use them in the same way he can counterfeit or hybridize any of God’s other good gifts. This means that we must be ever more careful of the effects of the media on our lives. Can any of us truly claim that the media have absolutely no influence on us? To what extent does our thinking and behavior derive, consciously or unconsciously, from what is going on in radio and television and motion pictures, magazines and newspapers, blogs and podcasts?

These are the kinds of questions Christians should be asking themselves as they face the millions of messages that the media produce every day. At first glance, some may wonder how the Bible—written thousands of years before television and radio and motion pictures and the Internet—could be of any help in withstanding the insidious influence that these media can have. But the timeless principles of God’s Word will never be obsolete.

In his letter to the Philippians, the apostle Paul lists very practical ways to evaluate the messages in the media: “Whatever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things” (4:8, KJV).

It’s important not to overlook the underlying basis for this list. It admonishes Christians to analyze and evaluate everything they see and hear and think about. “The story of God’s action in Jesus Christ,” says Millard Erickson, “is the criterion by which all interpretations of reality are to be measured.” The explicit and implicit messages that emanate from today’s media must be evaluated for their value—or lack of it. A thinking Christian must never become a clueless “couch potato.”

With reality becoming such a slippery concept in today’s discourse, Jesus’ talk of the deception of “even the elect” (Mark 13:22, KJV) takes on ever new dimensions.

REFERENCES

