

# *Theology Matters*

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## No Other Gods

by Robert L. Wilken\*

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One of the lessons read at the Easter vigil is the story of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in the fiery furnace. It is a good story, told well and not without irony. Each year when it is read I can hardly conceal a smile as the author lists (and not just once) the titles of the king's advisors—the satraps, prefects, governors, counselors, treasurers, justices, magistrates, and officials of the provinces—or as he takes delight (again not just once) in naming the musical instruments that called people to worship the golden statue—the sound of the horn, pipe, lyre, trigon, harp, drum, and the entire musical ensemble. This year, however, it was another section of the lesson that caught my attention. After the deliverance of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego from the fiery furnace, King Nebuchadnezzar says, "Blessed be the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego.... They disobeyed the king's command and yielded up their bodies rather than serve and worship any god except their own God." (Daniel 3:28)

### **Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego ...yielded up their bodies rather than serve and worship any god except their own God**

It is a sign of the times that on the holiest night of the year the phrase from Daniel, "serve and worship any god except their own God," leaped out at me. In the past I remember listening intently as Genesis 1, the account of the Passover,

or the exhortations of Deuteronomy were read to the newly baptized. But this Easter the words of King Nebuchadnezzar brought to mind the First Commandment: You shall have no other gods besides me. In the waning years of the twentieth century the time has come for Christians to bear witness to the worship of the one true God.

Practical atheism, that is to say, secularism, has undermined beliefs, attitudes, and conventions that have nurtured our civilization for centuries. The changes we are witnessing are not the inevitable alterations by which older ways adapt to new circumstances. They are the result of a systematic dismembering, a "trashing" of our culture that is "intentional, not accidental," as Myron Magnet puts it in his recent *The Dream and the Nightmare*. Nothing is left untouched, whether it be our most cherished institutions, or the roles that have defined one's place in family, neighborhood, and city, or assumptions about duty, love, virtue, honor, and modesty. All are subject to the scalpel of impatient and haughty reformers; what has been received from our parents and grandparents and from their parents and grandparents must submit to our unforgiving formulas for correction.

The goal, of course, is to dismantle the common Western culture, to turn everything into a subculture. Secularism wants religious practice, especially Christian practice, banished to a private world of feelings and attitudes, while at the same time the realm of the public is to be expanded to include every aspect of one's life. The earlier secularist appearance of tolerance toward religion is now seen to have been a sham.

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Nor does secularism sustain any sense of obligation to the past. The texture of memory that is essential to a common culture cannot be sustained if the past is not lovingly transmitted to those who come after—even should some of its monuments offend us.

Christianity has proved to be more tolerant than the current revisionists. As the French philosopher Remi Brague observed in these pages ("Christ Culture & the New Europe," August/September 1992), Christian culture "resisted the temptation to absorb in itself what it had inherited from either the Greeks or the Jews—to suck in the content and to throw away the empty husk." Over its long history the Christian tradition has cultivated a studied openness to the wisdom of former ages, even when such wisdom provided intellectual resources with which to challenge Christian faith. Think how the *philosophes* in their attacks on Christianity depended upon their legacy from antiquity. Yet for centuries, Christian institutions have nurtured the study of the classics. Christianity is an essential ingredient in our culture, says Brague, for its form "enables it to remain open to whatever can come from the outside and enrich the hoard of its experiences with the human and divine."

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The ferocity of the current assault on the legacy of Christian culture, however, has brought a new clarity of vision. The alternatives are set before us with unusual starkness: either there will be a genuine renewal of Christian culture—there is no serious alternative—or we will be enveloped by the darkness of paganism in which the worship of the true God is abandoned and forgotten. The sources of the cultural crisis, it turns out, are theological.

In his lectures on *Christianity and Culture*, T. S. Eliot posed the issue of the relation between Christianity and Western culture in terms that were remarkably prescient. Writing in 1939 on the eve of the Second World War, Eliot said that the "choice before us is between the formation of a new Christian culture, and the acceptance of a pagan one." Distinguishing three epochs in the history of Christianity and Western culture, he spoke of the period when Christianity was a "minority in a society of positive pagan traditions, a second period when the society as a whole—law, education, literature, art, as well as religion—was formed by Christianity, and a third, our own period, in which the culture has become "mainly negative, but which, so far as it is positive, is still Christian." In his view, "a society has not ceased to be Christian until it has become something else." Yet, he continued, "I do not think that [a culture] can remain negative," and it is conceivable that there will be an attempt to build a new culture on wholly different "spiritual"

foundations. Eliot's proposal is that the way to meet this challenge is to form a "new Christian culture."

His lectures are filled with much wisdom: for example, that "Christianity is communal before being individual," and that there can be no Christian society where there is no respect for the religious life. "I cannot," he says, "conceive a Christian society without religious orders, even purely contemplative orders, even enclosed orders." If we are to speak of a Christian society, we "must treat Christianity with a great deal more intellectual respect than is our wont. . . ." And we must be concerned to make clear "its difference from the kind of society in which we are now living." Above all there is his observation that touches more directly on theology: it is, he writes, a "very dangerous inversion" for Christian thinkers "to advocate Christianity, not because it is true, but because it might be beneficial." Instead of showing that "Christianity provides a foundation for morality," one must show "the necessity of Christian morality from the truth of Christianity." "It is not enthusiasm, but dogma, that differentiates a Christian from a pagan society."

Dogma and truth are not the kind of words that will pass the test of political correctness, yet—or perhaps therefore—they are most useful in helping us precisely to identify the distinctively theological task that lies before us. It is time to return to first principles, to the First Commandment, and to take up anew the challenge faced by Christians many centuries ago when the Christian movement was first making its way in the Roman Empire. Christians are now called to persuade others (including many within the churches) that our first duty as human beings is to honor and venerate the one true God, and that without the worship of God, society disintegrates into an amoral aggregate of competing, self-centered interests destructive of the commonweal. To meet that challenge, Christians must learn again to speak forthrightly about who we are and what we know of God.

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The Christian faith, as Eliot reminds us, is concerned not simply with values or attitudes or feelings or even "beliefs" as we use the word today, but with truth. Christianity is based not simply on experience, tradition, inherited wisdom, and reason, but on God's self-disclosure in history. To be sure, Christian truth has been handed on through a learned tradition in which it has been formulated, criticized, analyzed, refined, and tested by experience. Thus it has been the bearer of wisdom about what is good in human life, about sexuality, about being young and growing old, about work and money, children and family, duty and sacrifice, about friendship and love, art, literature, and music. But, as Origen of Alexandria said in the third century in his response to charges brought against Christianity by its critics, the Christian religion has its origin in "God's manifestation not

in human sagacity," in the appearance of the divine Logos in human form. Christian faith is grounded in what was made known in Christ and confirmed by the Spirit's witness in the church. Consequently, Christian thinking, whether about God, about Christ, about the moral life, or about culture, must always begin with what has been made known.

A pernicious feature of Christian discourse in our day is its tentativeness, the corrosive assumption that everything we teach and practice is to be subject to correction by appeals to putative evidence, whether from science, history, or the religious experience of others. Nicholas Wolterstorff and Alvin Plantinga call this the evidentialist fallacy, the claim that it is not rational for a person to be a Christian unless he "holds his religious convictions on the basis of other beliefs of his which give to those convictions adequate evidential support." In this view, one's religious beliefs are to be held "probable" until evidence is deployed from elsewhere to support and legitimate them. The "presumption of atheism" must be the starting point of all our thinking, even about God.

One way of responding to this line of thought has been to offer arguments for the existence of God based on what is considered evidence acceptable to any reasonable person. Conventional wisdom has had it that proof of the existence of God has to be established without reference to the specifics of Christianity (or Judaism) or to the experience of the church. Atheism is to be countered by a defense of theism, not of Christian revelation. But this strategy has failed. In his book *At the Origins of Modern Atheism*, Michael Buckley helps us to understand why. To defend the existence of God, Christian thinkers in early modern times excluded all appeals to Christian behavior or practices, the very things that give Christianity its power and have been its most compelling testimony to the reality of God. Arguments against atheism inevitably took the form of arguments from nature or design, i.e., philosophical arguments without reference to Christ, to the sacraments, to the practice of prayer, to the church. Buckley's book is an account of how this came to be, but within its historical description is to be found an argument that the "god defined in religion cannot be affirmed or supported adequately . . . without the unique reality that is religion." Or, to put the matter more concretely: "What god is, and even that god is, has its primordial evidence in the person and in the event that is Jesus Christ."

What has given Christianity its strength as a religion, as a way of life, and as an intellectual tradition is that it has always been confident of what it knows, and has insisted from the very beginning, again to cite Origen, that the "gospel has a proof which is peculiar to itself." This phrase occurs at the very beginning of the Origen's defense of Christianity to its cultural despisers, his *Contra Celsum*. Celsus, a Greek philosopher who lived in the second century, had said that the "teaching" that was the source of Christianity was "originally barbarian," which meant that Christianity had its origins in Judaism. Origen grants the point and even compliments Celsus that he does not reproach the gospel because it arose among non-Greeks. Yet Celsus adds a condition. He is willing to accept what Christians have received from barbarians as long as

Christians are willing to subject their teaching to "Greek proof," i.e., to measure it by Celsus' standards as to what is reasonable. Celsus believes that "the Greeks are better able to judge the value of what the barbarians have discovered, and to establish the doctrines and put them into practice by virtue." This is presumptuous, says Origen, for it implies that the "truth of Christianity" is to be decided by a criterion external to itself; but, he continues, the "gospel has a *proof* which is *peculiar to itself* and which is more divine than a Greek proof based on dialectical arguments." This more "divine demonstration" St. Paul (I Corinthians 2:4) calls "demonstration of the Spirit and of power."

Insisting that the gospel has a "proof peculiar to itself" did not mean that Christian thinking ignored the claims of reason, dismissing questions that arose from history or experience or logic. In discussions with Greeks, Christian thinkers presented the new faith not only by reference to the Scriptures but also by appeal to classical literature and general conceptions, "common ideas" that they shared with other educated men and women. Critics tried to brand the Christians as mere "fideists," but the charge rang hollow. From the beginning, Christians heeded the claims of reason, and it did not take long for their adversaries to learn that they were able to match them argument for argument. Pagan thinkers had no franchise on rationality. The existence of a serious dialogue between Christians and Greek and Roman philosophers, conducted at the highest intellectual level for over three centuries (the mid-second century to the mid-fifth), is evidence that Christian thinkers did not supplant reason by faith and authority. The assertion that the gospel had a "proof peculiar to itself" was not a confession of unreasoning faith but an argument that commended itself to thoughtful men and women.

### **Christian thinkers argued that the knowledge of God rested on "divine action"**

At issue in the argument about reason was the question of its starting point. Origen argued that with the coming of Christ reason had to attend to something new in human experience. In the earliest period of the church's history Christian thinkers did not become philosophers in order to engage the philosophers. Or, to put the matter more accurately, to engage in philosophical discussion they did not assume a traditional philosophical starting point. In the philosophical texts of the time knowledge of God was derived through certain well-defined ways of knowing: by a process of successive abstractions—e.g., in the way one moves from a surface to a line and finally to a point in geometry; by analogy—i.e., by comparing the light of the sun and visible things with the light of God and intellectual things; or by contemplating physical objects and gradually moving to the contemplation of intellectual matters. Against the intellectualism of these ways of knowing God, Christian thinkers argued that the knowledge of God rested on "divine action" and on "God's appearance" among human beings in

the person of Christ. Even when speaking to the outsider, they insisted that it was more reasonable to begin with the history of Jesus (and of Israel) than with abstract reasoning. Reason could no longer be exercised independently of what had taken place in history and what had come to be because of that history: the new reality of the church, a people devoted to the worship of the one true God.

How this conviction worked itself out in Christian thinking can be seen in the work of one writer after another, in Athanasius' response to the Arians, or Augustine's efforts to disentangle himself from the sophistries of the Manichees. But for our purposes here, Origen is the most illuminating because he stands at the beginning of the Christian intellectual tradition. He was the first truly deep thinker to give a firm epistemological foundation to the claim that Christians had come to know the true God in the person of Christ.

One of the most familiar citations of Plato in this period was a passage from the *Timaeus* in which Plato wrote, "It is difficult to discover the Father and Maker of this universe; and having found Him, it is impossible to declare Him to all." This text was understood to mean that God was beyond our comprehension, though by the activity of enlightened minds it was possible to have some knowledge of God. Celsus had cited this passage in his argument against the Christians. Origen, in responding to Celsus, said that while Plato's statement was "noble and impressive," it rested on philosophical agnosticism. The best evidence of its limitation was that on the basis of such knowledge of God the philosophers had changed neither their lives nor their manner of worship. Even while claiming to know the true God, they went on worshipping the many gods of Greece and Rome—and went on defending such piety as well. For Origen, as well as for Augustine and other critics of the religion of the philosophers, this is the central point. Because their knowledge of God was limited to what they could know by the activity of the mind, they never came to a genuine knowledge of God. They kept falling back into idolatry. Had Plato known the true God, writes Origen, he "would not have revered anything else and called it God and worshipped it, either abandoning the true God or combining with the majesty of God things which ought not to be associated with Him."

### **The knowledge of God... begins with God, not with human reasoning**

The philosophers would not acknowledge that by "becoming flesh" the divine Logos made it possible for human beings to know God more fully than they could by means of human reasoning alone. "We affirm," writes Origen, "that human nature is not sufficient in any way to seek for God and to find Him in his pure nature, unless it is helped by the God who is the object of the search." The knowledge of God is unlike other forms of knowledge. For it begins with God, not with human reasoning, and how we conceive of God is dependent on the nature of the reality that is presented to

us—in the language of the Bible, that which is *seen*. The Church Fathers relied heavily on the Gospel of John in their "epistemology," and especially on John's conjunction between "seeing" and "knowing." One of the most frequently cited texts is John 1:18: "No one has ever *seen* God; the only Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, he has made him *known*."

One sign of the impoverishment of Christian speech in our day is that the term "faith" has been emptied of its cognitive dimension. As the Swiss Catholic theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar recognized, the logic of Christian discourse has collapsed at this point. "Nothing expresses more unequivocally the profound failure of [theologies] that separate the Christ of faith and the Jesus of history] than their deeply anguished, joyless, and cheerless tone: torn between knowing and believing, they are no longer able to *see* anything, nor can they be convincing in any visible way." He cites the now-classic essay of the French Jesuit Pierre Rousselot, "The Eyes of Faith," published in 1910. The word "eyes," says von Balthasar, "indicates that there is something there for faith to see and, indeed, that Christian faith essentially consists in an ability to see what God chooses to show and which cannot be seen without faith."

The key point here is that faith is not a form of interpretation, one perspective among others, but a seeing of what there is to see, and hence a form of knowing. Recall the opening words of the First Epistle of John: "We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life—this life was revealed, and we have seen it and testify to it, and declare to you the eternal life that was with the Father and was revealed to us...." First John states the primal truth that Christian faith rests on witness to what has happened in history, hence the honored place of the *martyrs* (witnesses) in Christian memory. Yet the witness to what was "seen" is never a testimony simply of what has happened in the past. In his Commentary on I John, St. Augustine noted a curious feature of its opening words. John does not simply say that he is bearing witness to what he has seen and touched; he says that he is also bearing witness to the "Word of Life." It does not escape Augustine that the phrase "Word of Life" does not refer to the body of Christ which could be seen and handled. "The life itself has been manifested in flesh—that what can be seen by the heart alone might be seen also by the eyes for the healing of hearts. Only by the heart is the Word seen, flesh is seen by the bodily eyes. We had the means of seeing the flesh, but not of seeing the Word: the Word was made flesh which we could see, that the heart, by which we should see the Word, might be healed."

The testimony that the church bears from one generation to another is at once a seeing of what was seen and a seeing of what cannot be seen. It is a seeing of what was seen in that the testimony is about something that happened in space and time, something that could be seen with the eyes and touched with the hands, and which is part of events that preceded and followed; it is also a seeing of what cannot be seen, in John's terms, a "knowing," in that God who cannot be seen is revealed in the events. The testimony that I John brings is not simply a witness to an historical event, as one

might, for example, tell others about a parade that passed in front of one's house. For that which one "saw" was the "Word of Life," not simply the words and actions of Jesus of Nazareth.

Faith is not something that is added to knowing: it is a constitutive part of the act of knowing God. Origen grasped this point with characteristic profundity. In his commentary on John 2:22—"After he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this; and they *believed* in the scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken"—Origen cites the words spoken to Thomas in chapter 20: "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." Then he asks: how could it be that those who have not seen and have believed are more blessed than those who have seen and believed? If that is the case, those who come after the apostles will be more blessed than the apostles. Origen's answer is that in this life faith is imperfect; only at the time of the Resurrection will it be complete. But faith will still be *necessary*. Without faith there is no knowledge of God. Hence it is possible to say of faith what Paul says of knowledge, "now we believe in part." When the "perfection of faith comes," that which is partial will disappear, "for faith complemented by vision is far superior to faith through a mirror."

## **Without faith there is no knowledge of God**

Faith's certainty comes from participating in the reality that is believed—that is, through fellowship with God. "By faith," writes Augustine, "we see and we know. For if faith does not yet see, why are we called *illuminati*?" It is not possible to know God from a distance, to be a spectator. Commenting on John 8:19—"You know neither me nor my Father. If you knew me, you would know my Father also"—Origen explains how the term "know" is used in John and in the Bible as a whole. "One should take note," he says, "that the Scripture says that those who are united to something or participate in something are said to know that to which they are united or in which they participate. Before such union and fellowship, even if they understand the reasons given for something, they do not know it." As illustration he mentions the union between Adam and Eve which the Bible described as "Adam knew his wife Eve," and in I Corinthians 6:16-17, the union with a prostitute. This shows, he says, that "knowing" means "being joined to" or "united with." The knowledge of God, then, is experiential. No doubt this is one reason why the knowledge of God is always conjoined with the love of God in early Christian literature. Love implies familiarity, intimacy, union.

In terms such as these early Christian thinkers defended the worship of the one God. The boldness of the intellectuals as well as the courage of the martyrs (in some cases, e.g., Justin Martyr or Origen, they were the same persons) rested on the certainty that comes from "seeing." In a sermon on Acts 1, John Chrysostom said, referring to the phrase "witness of the Resurrection," that the apostles, who were witness of the Resurrection, did not say, "Angels said this to me, but we

have *seen* it." That is the inescapable foundation of Christian belief in God.

Matthew Arnold once said: "The uppermost idea with Hellenism is to see things as they really are." That puts things succinctly—and backwards. Early Christian thinkers insisted that the Greeks did *not* see things as they are. They only saw what lay on the surface. Like the pathetic creatures in Plato's cave, they saw only shadows and images. For this reason, it was the Greeks who had to be corrected, not the Christians. And on this basis Christian thinkers mounted an offensive against the pretensions of their culture. By ignoring the true God, their contemporaries not only did not know whom to worship or how, they failed to see that everything else in society—morality, art, literature, politics—was skewed. Hence, the early Christians were unwilling to bend the knee when they heard the sound of the horn, pipe, lyre, trigon, harp, drum, and entire musical ensemble. Their task, however, unlike that of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, was intellectual. They not only made confession, they set out to persuade others that they could love God more ardently and cleave to God more fervently if they sought God alone without the succor of rites that do not purify the soul. In doing so, they laid the foundations for a new kind of society, one in which serving God faithfully was the highest duty.

Of course, it was easy for Christians to criticize pagan religion, with its many gods, its veneration of objects of wood and stone and gold, its divining and use of auguries and portent, and most of all, its practice of animal sacrifice. Even pagan thinkers were critical of the practices that defined religious devotion in the cities. Before the rise of Christianity, there was a well-established tradition of criticism of religion in the ancient world. Philosophical religion, however, was another matter entirely, for many things the philosophers taught were compatible with Christian theology. Augustine, it will be remembered, was helped in his move to the Catholic faith by reading the *libri Platonici*, which meant of course the books of the neo-Platonists, Porphyry and Plotinus. Yet Christian thinkers, including Augustine, were no less critical of the theological ideas of the philosophers than they were of the religious practices of their fellow citizens.

Although the philosophers had an intuition of the true God, in the view of Christian thinkers, they did not know how to serve God. In a mordant passage in the *City of God*, Augustine, chiding Porphyry for proclaiming his devotion to the God of the Hebrews while venerating lesser gods, cites the words from Exodus: "Anyone who sacrifices to other gods instead of to the Lord alone will be extirpated." Augustine's argument is that worship is to be offered only to God, for "God himself is the source of our bliss, . . . the goal of our striving."

## **Where a people has no regard for God, there can be no social bond, no common life, and no virtue**

It has sometimes been argued that in the *City of God*, his apology *contra paganos*, Augustine made place for a neutral secular space that could accommodate paganism and promote a "coherence of wills" about things relevant to this mortal life. Here there could be a joining of hands of the city of God and the earthly city for the cultivation of the arts of civilization. But for Augustine, a neutral secular space could only be a society without God, subject to the *libido dominandi*, the lust for power. He was convinced that even in this fallen world there could be no genuine peace or justice unless a society were to honor the one supreme God. There can, he writes, be no association of men united by a common sense of right where there is no true justice, and there can be no justice where God is not honored. "When a man does not serve God, what amount of justice are we to suppose exists in his being?" Where a people has no regard for God, there can be no social bond, no common life, and no virtue. "Although the virtues are reckoned by some people to be genuine and honorable when they are related only to themselves and are sought for no other end, even then they are puffed up and proud, and so are to be accounted vices rather than virtues."

### **Only God can give ultimate purpose to our lives and direction to our society**

In the *City of God*, Augustine is an apologist neither for a secular public space nor for theism. His great book is a defense of the worship of the one true God, the God who was acknowledged in ancient Israel, revealed in Christ, and venerated in the church. Like other early Christian apologists, he realized that it was not enough to make vague appeals to transcendent reality, to the god of philosophers, to a deity that takes no particular form in human life. The god of theism has no life independent of the practice of religion, of those who know God in prayer and devotion, who belong to a community of memory, and are bound together in common service. Only people schooled in the religious life, people like Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, can tell the difference between serving the one God faithfully and bowing down to idols. For Augustine defense of the worship of the true God inevitably required a defense of the church, the *City of God* as it exists in time.

### **Summary of Wilken's Article**

"One of the lessons read at the Easter vigil is the story of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in the fiery furnace . . . the words of King Nebuchadnezzar brought to mind the First Commandment: You shall have no other gods besides me. In the waning years of the twentieth century the time has come for Christians to bear witness to the worship of the one true God.

Practical atheism, that is to say, secularism, has undermined beliefs, attitudes, and conventions that have nurtured our civilization for centuries. The changes we are witnessing are not the inevitable alterations by which older ways adapt to new circumstances. They are the result of a systematic dismembering, a "trashing" of our culture that is "intentional, not accidental," as Myron Magnet puts it in his recent *The Dream and the Nightmare*. Nothing is left untouched, whether it be our most cherished institutions, or the roles that have defined one's place in family, neighborhood, and city, or assumptions about duty, love, virtue, honor, and modesty.

Eliot's *Christianity and Culture* admonishes us to take up the challenge of conceiving anew a Christian society. By a Christian society, he did not mean one that was composed solely of Christians, but one in which human life is ordered to ends that are befitting the true God. "It would be a society in which the natural end of man—virtue and well-being in community—is acknowledged for all, and the supernatural end—beatitude—for those who have the eyes to see it." Only God can give ultimate purpose to our lives and direction to our society. The First Commandment is not just a text to be memorized in catechism class; it is the theological basis for a just and humane society.

I am reminded of a story I heard years ago in Germany when Walter Ulbricht, the German Communist leader, was head of the DDR. It was said that Ulbricht once had a conversation with Karl Barth about the new society that was being built in East Germany. Ulbricht boasted to Barth that the Communists would be teaching the Ten Commandments in the schools and that the precepts of the decalogue would provide the moral foundation for the new society. Barth listened politely and then said: "I have only one question, Herr Minister. Will you also be teaching the First Commandment?"

### **Discussion Questions:**

1. What is the difference between arriving at an understanding of God through human wisdom versus divine revelation? Why is it not possible to arrive at a knowledge of God through human wisdom? What do the Confessions say about how we come to a knowledge of God?
2. What does Wilken mean by "the gospel has a proof peculiar to itself?" What role according to Wilken does human reason play in defending Christian faith?
3. What do our eyes allow us to see with regard to Jesus? What do our eyes of faith allow us to see? Give an example.
4. What is the relationship between faith and culture?

The ferocity of the current assault on the legacy of Christian culture, however, has brought a new clarity of vision. The alternatives are set before us with unusual starkness: either there will be a genuine renewal of Christian culture—there is no serious alternative—or we will be enveloped by the darkness of paganism in which the worship of the true God is abandoned and forgotten. The sources of the cultural crisis, it turns out, are theological.

Above all there is his[T.S. Eliot] observation that touches more directly on theology: it is, he writes, a "very dangerous inversion" for Christian thinkers "to advocate Christianity, not because it is true, but because it might be beneficial." Instead of showing that "Christianity provides a foundation for morality," one must show "the necessity of Christian morality from the truth of Christianity." "It is not enthusiasm, but dogma, that differentiates a Christian from a pagan society."

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One way of responding to this line of thought has been to offer arguments for the existence of God based on what is considered evidence acceptable to any reasonable person. Conventional wisdom has had it that proof of the existence of God has to be established without reference to the specifics of Christianity (or Judaism) or to the experience of the church. Atheism is to be countered by a defense of theism, not of Christian revelation. But this strategy has failed. In his book *At the Origins of Modern Atheism*, Michael Buckley helps us to understand why. To defend the existence of God, Christian thinkers in early modern times excluded all appeals to Christian behavior or practices, the very things that give Christianity its power and have been its most compelling testimony to the reality of God. Arguments against atheism inevitably took the form of arguments from nature or design, i.e., philosophical arguments without reference to Christ, to the sacraments, to the practice of prayer, to the church

What has given Christianity its strength as a religion, as a way of life, and as an intellectual tradition is that it has always been confident of what it knows, and has insisted from the very beginning, again to cite Origen, that the "gospel has a proof which is peculiar to itself."

Insisting that the gospel has a "proof peculiar to itself" did not mean that Christian thinking ignored the claims of reason, dismissing questions that arose from history or experience or logic. In discussions with Greeks, Christian thinkers presented the new faith not only by reference to the Scriptures but also by appeal to classical literature and general conceptions, "common ideas" that they shared with other educated men and women. Critics tried to brand the Christians as mere "fideists," but the charge rang hollow. From the beginning, Christians heeded the claims of reason, and it did not take long for their adversaries to learn that they were able to match them argument for argument. . . . The assertion that the gospel had a "proof peculiar to itself" was not a confession of unreasoning faith but an argument that commended itself to thoughtful men and women.

The knowledge of God is unlike other forms of knowledge. For it begins with God, not with human reasoning, and how we conceive of God is dependent on the nature of the reality that is presented to us—in the language of the Bible, that which is seen. . . . " . . . Only by the heart is the Word seen, flesh is seen by the bodily eyes. We had the means of seeing the flesh, but not of seeing the Word: the Word was made flesh which we could see, that the heart, by which we should see the Word, might be healed."

Only God can give ultimate purpose to our lives and direction to our society. The First Commandment is not just a text to be memorized in catechism class; it is the theological basis for a just and humane society."

To continue serving as a resource for renewal, Presbyterians for Faith, Family and Ministry needs your support. PFFM is supported solely by individuals and churches who believe *theology does matter*.

## *The Confessions on: “Thou shalt have no other gods before me”*

The *Book of Confessions* together with the *Book of Order* form the Constitution of the Presbyterian Church(USA). The *Book of Order* says of the Confessions, “These statements identify the Church as a community of people known by its convictions as well as by its actions. They guide the Church in its study and interpretation of the Scriptures; they summarize the essence of Christian tradition; they direct the Church in maintaining sound doctrines; they equip the Church for its work of proclamation.” To order a *Book of Confessions* for \$4.00 plus s/h, call the PCUSA at 1-800-524-2612.

### **The Larger Catechism** (reprinted from the *Book of Confessions* with permission from the Office of General Assembly)

Q. 93. What is the moral law?

A. The moral law is the declaration of the will of God to mankind, directing and binding everyone to personal, perfect, and perpetual conformity and obedience thereunto, in the frame and disposition of the whole man, soul and body, and in performance of all those duties of holiness and righteousness which he oweth to God and man: promising life upon the fulfilling and threatening death upon the breach of it.

Q. 95. Of what use is the moral law to all men?

A. The moral law is of use to all men, to inform them of the holy nature and will of God, and of their duty binding them to walk accordingly, to convince them of their disability to keep it, and of the sinful pollution of their nature, hearts and lives, to humble them in the sense of their sin and misery, and thereby help them to a clearer sight of the need they have of Christ, and of the perfection of his obedience.

Q. 98 Wherein is the moral law summarily comprehended?

A. The moral law is summarily comprehended in the ten commandments, which were delivered by the voice of God upon Mount Sinai, and written by him on two tables of stone; and are recorded in the twentieth chapter of Exodus; the first four commandments containing our duty to God, and the other six our duty to man.

Q. 102. What is the sum of the four Commandments which contain our duty to God?

A. The sum of the four Commandments containing our duty to God is, to love the Lord our God with all our heart, and with all our soul, and with all our strength, and with all our mind.

Q. 103. Which is the First Commandment?

A. The First commandment is, “Thou shalt have no other gods before me.”

Q. 104 What are the duties required in the First Commandment?

A. The duties required in the First Commandment are: the knowing and acknowledging of God to be the only true God, and our God; and to worship and glorify him accordingly; by thinking, meditating, remembering, highly esteeming, honoring, adoring, choosing, loving, desiring, fearing of him; believing him; trusting, hoping, delighting, rejoicing in him; being zealous for him; calling upon him, giving all praise and thanks, and yielding all obedience and submission to him with the whole man; being careful in all things to please him, and sorrowful when in anything he is offended; and walking humbly with him.

Q. 105. What are the sins forbidden in the First Commandment?

A. The sins forbidden in the First commandment are: atheism, in denying or not having a God; idolatry, in having or worshiping more gods than one, or any with, or instead of the true God; the not having and vouching him for God, and our God; the omission or neglect of anything due to him, required in this commandment; ignorance, forgetfulness, misapprehensions, false opinions, unworthy and wicked thoughts of him; bold and curious searchings into his secrets; all profaneness, hatred of God, self-love, self-seeking, and all other inordinate and immoderate setting of our mind, will, or affections upon other things and taking them off from him in whole or in part; vain credulity, unbelief, heresy, misbelief, distrust, despair, incorrigibleness, and insensibleness under judgments, hardness of heart, pride, presumption, carnal security, tempting of God; using unlawful means, and trusting in lawful means; carnal delights and joys, corrupt, blind and indiscreet zeal; lukewarmness, and deadness in the things of God; estranging ourselves and apostatizing from God; praying or giving any religious worship to saints, angels or any other creatures; all compacts and consulting with the devil, and hearkening to his suggestions; making men the lords of our faith and conscience; slighting and despising God, and his commands; resisting and grieving of his Spirit, discontent and impatience at his dispensations, charging him foolishly for the evils he inflicts on us; and ascribing the praise of any good, we either are, have, or can do, to fortune, idols, ourselves, or any other creature.

Q. 122. What is the sum of the six Commandments which contain our duty to man?

A. The sum of the six Commandments which contain our duty to man is, to love our neighbor as ourselves, and to do to others what we would have them to do to us.

## ***The Great Encourager: A Study of John 14***

Ten lessons on Jesus Christ the Great Encourager! Encouraging facts: God has a plan! God is enough! God enables! God cares! God is faithful! God counsels! God is in control! Results: An active working faith! This study examines Scripture by looking at the text and cross-references and then challenging us to apply the teachings. It is suited to personal study as well as small group study and discussion. Author Marilyn Anderes is a Christian wife and mother of three living in Maryland. Marilyn attends a United Methodist church and has published numerous articles in magazines such as *Decision* and *Discipleship Journal*. *The Great Encourager* (85 pages) is published by RENEW a United Methodist women's renewal ministry. Copies are available from Presbyterians for Faith, Family and Ministry by writing PFFM, P.O. Box 10249, Blacksburg, VA 24062-0249. Please include a donation to PFFM of: \$5.00 for 1 copy ; 2-10 copies, \$4.50 each; 11-20 copies \$4.25 each.

### ***What You Can Do***

- \* Become a serious student of Scripture. Know what the Bible teaches.
- \* Study the Confessions of the Church in the *Book of Confessions* carefully.
- \* Form discussion groups using the articles in *Theology Matters* as beginning points. Discuss the issues raised. Know *both* sides of the argument. Express the Scriptural, confessional position. Do you agree? Can you defend it?
- \* Attend Presbytery meetings and the General Assembly to observe the Presbyterian process.
- \* Become a commissioner to Presbytery and the GA. Present overtures to your session for their discussion and possible approval.

**Pray \* Know Scripture and the Confessions \* Be informed on Church issues \* Stand up and defend the Gospel \* Pray.**

**“What is idolatry? It is to imagine or possess something in which to put one's trust in place of or beside the one true God who has revealed himself in his Word.”**

**Heidelberg Catechism,  
4.095**

### ***Presbyterians for Faith, Family and Ministry***

1. We believe in the One living and true God who exists eternally in three persons -- the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. We believe that "God is a Spirit, infinite, eternal, and unchangeable, in his being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness, and truth."<sup>(1)</sup> We believe that God is our Creator, that he has revealed himself to us through the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, and that apart from this revelation we remain ignorant of his name, his nature, and his will.

Therefore, we reject the false ideology that asserts that the creature has the right to name and define the Creator, or to determine how God should act in any time and place.

2. We believe that Jesus Christ is God in human flesh. We believe that he was born of a virgin, lived a sinless life, performed miracles, suffered and died on the cross as an atoning sacrifice for our sins, rose again on the third day, ascended into heaven, is seated in glorious authority making intercession for his elect, and that he will return to judge sin and establish his eternal kingdom.

Therefore, we reject the false ideology that denies either the human or divine natures of Christ, his atoning work, or his exalted Lordship.

3. "Jesus Christ, as he is attested for us in Holy Scripture, is the one Word of God which we have to hear and which we have to trust and obey in life and in death."<sup>(2)</sup>

Therefore, we reject the false ideology that asserts that there are other "lords" to whom we owe allegiance.

4. We believe the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments to be, by the Holy Spirit, the inspired Word of God -- the unique, reliable, and authoritative witness to Jesus Christ and his will for our lives. We believe that the Creeds and Confessions of the church, while subordinate to Christ and the Scriptures, are nevertheless authoritative standards.

Therefore, we reject the false ideology that declares that the Bible is an ancient document inapplicable to modern life, that God continues to give new revelation apart from Scripture, or that the meaning of Scripture is at variance with the plain meaning of its words understood in their historic context. We also reject the false ideology that teaches that the plain meaning of the Creeds and Confessions, understood in their historic context, are without authority in the church.

5. We believe that from every generation and race, God has sovereignly called and redeemed a people for his own glory -- "a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people."<sup>(3)</sup> We believe that Jesus Christ is alive and present with this people by the indwelling and empowering Holy Spirit whose work it is to regenerate, give faith, justify, sanctify, and give assurance that we are, by grace, at the price of Christ's shed blood, the adopted sons and daughters of God.

Therefore, we reject the false ideology that teaches that human beings have the capacity within themselves, by virtue of their humanity alone, and apart from redemption, to become the sons and daughters of God.

6. We believe that as the people of God, we have been called and commanded to proclaim the good news of salvation through Jesus Christ, to call men and women, boys and girls, to the obedience of faith, and in every generation to reclaim and reform the purity of the Church's witness.

Therefore, we reject the false ideology that denies the Church's call, in every generation, to challenge cultural distortions of the gospel and to witness to the uniqueness of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, the one mediator between God and human beings.

(1) The Shorter Catechism (2) The Theological Declaration of Barmen (3) 1 Peter 2:9

# Bible Study of the Gospel of Mark

## CHAPTER 7

(chapter 8 will follow in the next issue)

### of THE GOSPEL OF MARK

*Observe the Text to understand the author's meaning:*

#### **Read 7:1-13.**

What is the problem in vs 1-2 that the Pharisees and scribes, "saw" (at this point they are not accusing). Notice where the Pharisees and scribes are from.

What is the "law" that the Pharisees observe according to vs 3-4? In vs 5-6 what is the question or challenge that these Pharisees confront Jesus with? According to the Pharisees who wrote the law that they want obeyed?

What is Jesus' response in vs 6-7? Does he deny it? What does he accuse the Pharisees of?

Does Jesus say "doctrine" or teaching about God's law is wrong? What is wrong? Read Is 29:13-16.

In vs 8 Jesus describes the heart of the problem which is a focus throughout Scripture. What is the problem?

Does this mean that we are to ignore God's laws? How are our religious, civil and cultural laws to relate to God's laws?

Jesus then gives an example in vs 9-13 of how pharisaical laws supersede God's laws. Both laws cannot be obeyed and the Pharisees want their laws obeyed. What happens to God's law? Do you see this as the Pharisees claiming to be a higher authority than God?

Read Ex 20:12, Deu 5:16, Ex 21:17, Lev 20:9. What was the punishment for not honoring parents?

What would the response of the Pharisees be toward Jesus who openly despised and condemned their law?

#### **Read 7:14-15.**

Jesus then explains further to the multitude who were listening to his exchange with the Pharisees. What does he tell them?

For those who were not ready to reject the Pharisees' law and obey God's laws, how does this help them understand the Pharisees' hand washing law?

The Pharisees' law was not for physical cleanliness but spiritual holiness. What is Jesus saying?

How does one become holy or clean before God?

**Read 7:16-23.** What laws does Jesus now reject? Were these part of the OT?

Can you relate vs 21-22 to the 10 Commandments--the moral law. Jesus rejects the Pharisees' law and the cultic-jewishness laws but not the moral laws.

#### **Read 7:24-30.**

This whole chapter deals with the Law and authority. God has authority to give us commands. Human beings do not have greater authority than God to create laws which contradict God's laws.

Contrast the two narratives. 7:1-13 and 7:24-30.

Who comes to Jesus?

Where from?

What is their heritage?

What if any is their relationship through the covenant?

Who is privileged?

Who should have recognized Jesus as the Son of God?

Who bows before Jesus? Don't the Pharisees want Jesus to "bow" to them by obeying their law?

Who is humble before Jesus, deserving nothing, yet asking for healing?

Who receives healing? who is condemned?

Now, who are the "children" in vs 27?

What does Jesus mean when he says it is not good to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs?

#### **Read 7:31-37.**

The Decapolis is the same area as Geresenes in chapter 5. The Decapolis identifies ten Greek cities all but one east of the Sea of Galilee. Jesus is staying in the northern part of Israel and in Gentile territory.

Notice Jesus' reference to ears and hearing in 7:16 in relation to the Pharisees and Jews. Those with ears don't hear but here a man who is deaf "hears." Explain.

Read Isaiah 35:2b-6, Is 29:18-24 (notice 29:13 was quoted earlier in this chapter), Is 42:5-7. In light of Isaiah, what is Mark 7:37 saying about who Jesus is?

Jesus could have just spoken and the man would have been healed. Yet, what effect would the visible acts have on the multitude?

Why do you think Jesus told the people to tell no one?

### ***Interpret the Text***

1. What is the response of the official “church” leadership to Jesus? Why?  
What is the response of the disciples?  
What is the response of the Gentiles?

Do you see this as a caution for us?

2. What is Jesus’ understanding of God’s Law?  
What is his understanding of the Pharisees’ law?

Are people saved (or healed) by the law? In other words is obedience a requirement for Christ to heal and act? Nevertheless, does he demand obedience from those who know the law?

3. What is this chapter saying about who Jesus is?  
As the fulfillment of the OT?  
As the Messiah? We have seen where Jesus was identified with the Kingdom of God as God, as King, now as Messiah.

## **BIBLE STUDY NOTES**

(Compare these notes to your thoughts after you have looked at the passages and answered the questions yourself)

### **Mark 7:1-13.**

The Pharisees and scribes who were entrusted with teaching people the law so they might have life, are the ones who force people to break God’s law in order to obey their man-made laws.

Often we misinterpret that the NT is grace and the OT is law and what we really mean by that is situational ethics. We place “love” above the law and declare that we are free to do anything which we evaluate as loving. Look at how the Larger and Smaller Catechism define the first and second great commandments as the *summary of the Law*. Jesus continually pointed to the right understanding of the moral law and the deep meaning of it. He rejected human laws that superseded God’s laws. He rejected human claims to have more authority than God.

The Confessions of the Church do not distinguish between the OT and NT as law and grace. For example, the Westminster confession says there are two covenants, the old which is works and the new which is grace. The old ended with Adam and his disobedience. The new is from Adam on.

God’s law was never seen as curse by the Hebrews. It was a delight. See Ps 119. The laws that Jesus objected to were the man made tradition, the laws of the Pharisees. He objected to these because they caused people to neglect the commandments of God.

**Mark 7:16-23.** Now Jesus teaches the disciples in more depth. Notice again the disciples lack of understanding. “Defiled” means common or ceremonially unclean.

“Holy” is set aside for God’s use. Now Jesus is not just talking about clean hands but the type of food one eats. Jesus deepened the original teaching to include rejecting food laws which were part of the OT law. These were given by God. These laws that dealt with identifying Jews as a separate people--the kosher laws--were superseded by Christ. These “cultic” laws also included temple rituals.

**Mark 7:24-30.** Tyre and Sidon are in northern most Palestine. The people who lived there were Canaanites. In Matt 15:22, the woman is referred to as a Canaanite. Here the emphasis is that she is a Gentile. She is a non-Jew who is a descendent of the Canaanites who were enemies of the Hebrews in the OT.

Calvin suggests the bread referred to is, “the blessing which was to be hoped for in Christ.”

Jesus’ questions challenge her--will she go to any one, any god, any magician to see if they will heal her daughter or does she have faith in him as the Jewish Messiah. Is she coming to him as the Redeemer of Israel or is she coming because she will try anything and anyone? Her answer shows that she knows who he is and is responding to him.

Jesus did come to the “lost sheep of the house of Israel”. The Gospel of Matthew is very clear about this. It is only after the resurrection when the Jews have rejected Jesus that the way is opened for Gentiles. Paul speaks of this in Romans 11:1, 28ff.

This narrative stresses one of the important themes found throughout Scripture. The Jews, especially the Pharisees in Jerusalem, who should have recognized and worshiped the One who fulfilled the OT laws and prophecies, instead reject Jesus out of their sinful arrogance and pride. The one who has no standing, in humility recognizes Jesus and receives healing.

The miracle of the covenant is that those who were formerly dogs become children. We are offended at this text because we do not want to admit we were all dogs before becoming children of the covenant. Calvin says, “The pride of the flesh needs to be humbled to the ground when we hear that by origin we are dogs....Although in the beginning the image of God shone in human nature by the sin of Adam all became degenerate-”(in other words-dogs.)

**Mark 7:31-37.** Calvin offers that Jesus touched the man’s ears and put spittle on his tongue to show that we receive speech and hearing from Christ. When we hear Christ’s words then we have something to say. Notice that after Christ healed the man, in vs 36, the people “proclaim it.” Their message was to announce the fulfillment of the prophecy.

Jesus’ touching, healing, sighing, speaking, shows that we are individuals. Christ doesn’t heal the multitude from a distance but touches, sighs, speaks to us as individuals.

## News from Around the World

THE PRESBYTERIAN WOMEN'S PLANNING COMMITTEE for the 1997 Churchwide Gathering agreed to meet with Terry Schlossberg, Executive Director of Presbyterians Pro-Life(PPL) to hear her concerns. Prevented from attending by the recent blizzard, Schlossberg faxed her presentation to the group. Among her concerns were: 1) that PW provide complete disclosure of all organizations which receive grants from the Thank Offering and the Birthday Offering, 2) In fulfillment of the GA policy, that a workshop on abortion be included in the 1997 Gathering with opportunity for PPL to discuss the pro-life theological and ethical perspective, 3) In recognition of the advocacy at the 1994 Gathering for homosexual practice and Re-Imagining theology, that the 1997 Gathering observe the boundaries of reformed faith and uphold the Church's standards. Schlossberg requested the planning committee respond to the concerns.

PRESBYTERIANS FOR FAITH, FAMILY AND MINISTRY and PPL reviewed a sampling of publications produced by the Presbyterian Church(USA) and reported their findings to the General Assembly Review Committee. They found serious departures from Christian faith and advocacy for ethical practices in contradiction to church policy. Professing to celebrate diversity and pluralism, non-Christian beliefs were not distinguished from Christian

beliefs and historic confessional faith was excluded and denigrated. For example, The PREM Older Youth Curriculum boasts, "there is much that we as Christians stand to learn from the New Age Movement, including new ways of deepening our spirituality..."

Re-Imagining speakers were highlighted with articles, book reviews and citations. For example, a prayer by Miriam Theresa Winter was included in the PREM Youth Curriculum. Winter was the featured speaker at the 1995 annual Re-Imagining Conference and use of her "Psalm in Search of the Goddess" provoked a major controversy at Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary last spring (see TM Sep/Oct, 1995)

The National Network of Presbyterian College Women's Issues Packet, used on over 35 campuses, speaks approvingly of sexual expression outside of marriage and misrepresents reformed teaching by declaring, "...it is often hard to know how to make the 'right' decision when it comes to our own sexual activity. In keeping with the Reformed tradition these decisions are yours alone to make remembering that 'God alone is Lord of the conscious[sic].'"

For a copy of the report sent to the Review Committee write or call PFFM, P.O. Box 10249, Blacksburg, VA 24062, (540) 552-5325.

### Come Join Us Working for Renewal in the Presbyterian Church (USA)

Join us in being a voice calling the Presbyterian Church(USA) and individual Presbyterians back to Reformed Christian faith rooted in Scripture and our Confessions while also rejecting false gods and their ideologies.

\_\_\_\_\_ Enclosed are names and addresses of people I think would be interested in receiving *Theology Matters*.

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The Rev. Dr. Kari McClellan is President of Presbyterians for Faith, Family and Ministry (PFFM). Susan Cyre is Executive Director and editor of *Theology Matters*. The Board of Directors of PFFM includes eight clergy and two lay people, seven women and three men. PFFM is working to restore the strength and integrity of the PC(USA)'s witness to Jesus Christ as the only Lord and Savior, by helping Presbyterians develop a consistent Reformed Christian world view. *Theology Matters* is sent free to anyone who requests it.

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