

## CAUSES OF UNBELIEF [PART III]

Bert Thompson, Ph.D.

[EDITOR'S NOTE: Parts I and II of this three-part series appeared in the May and June issues. Part III follows below and continues, without introductory comments, where the second article ended.]

### Evil, Pain, and Suffering

Surely it can be said without fear of contradiction that one of the most frequent, and thus one of the most important, causes of unbelief is the existence of evil, pain, and suffering in the world. But before we explore this concept, let us take a momentary diversion to separate the **genuine** problem from the **counterfeit**. When an individual claims not to believe in God because of the problem of evil, pain, and suffering, the person **making** such a claim may mean something entirely different than what the person **hearing** the claim thinks he means. Allow me to explain.

Admittedly, some people have difficulty believing in God because of what they consider to be **real intellectual obstacles** to such a belief. *Ex nihilo* creation, a virgin birth, or the bodily resurrection of Christ from the dead cause some to consider belief in God on par with belief in the Tooth Fairy or Santa Claus. Such concepts represent insurmountable barriers to the ultimate acceptance of God's existence.

Other people, however, face no such intellectual obstacles. Rather, they simply do not want to have to deal with the issue of the ultimate existence of a transcendent God. Their refusal to believe is not based necessarily on "this" barrier, or "that" bar-

rier. Rather, belief in God simply is inconvenient at best, or bothersome at worst. In a chapter titled "What Keeps People from Becoming Christians?" in his book, *Intellectuals Don't Need God*, Alister McGrath exerted considerable effort in an attempt to separate the claims of these two types of individuals when he wrote:

"I could never be a Christian because of the problem of suffering" can mean two quite different things: (a) Having thought the matter through carefully, it seems to me that there is a real problem posed to the intellectual coherence of the Christian faith because of the existence of human suffering; (b) I don't want to get involved in a discussion about Christianity, which could get very personal and threatening. But I don't want to admit this, as it might seem to imply that I lack intellectual courage, stamina, or honesty. I can save face by letting it be understood that there are good grounds for my rejection of Christianity. So let me select a problem...suffering will do very nicely. Anyway, it will stall the efforts of this guy who's trying to convert me.

For some, then, throwing intellectual problems at the Christian evangelist is like a warplane ejecting flares to divert heat-seeking missiles. It is a decoy meant to divert a deadly attack. But intellectual difficulties nevertheless constitute a real problem for some people, and answers must be given to their difficulties (1993, pp. 64-65, *ellipsis in orig.*).

It is not my intention in this section to deal with those in the second category who use the problem of evil, pain, and suffering merely as a ruse to hide their own cowardice in the face of overwhelming evidence regarding the existence of God. Likely, no evidence ever could convince them. They fall into the same category as Goethe, who said: "A voice from heaven would not convince me...that a woman gives birth without knowing man, and that a dead man rises from the grave" (as quoted in Smith, 1974, p. 175). Rather, I would like to discuss the unbelief of those who fall into the first category—i.e., people who view the co-existence of God and moral evil as an intellectual inconsistency that is incapable of being solved. Their number is legion, and their tribe is increasing.

For example, consider the following assessments offered by a variety of writers that runs the gamut from a Nobel laureate to a former well-known televangelist. The Nobel laureate is Steven Weinberg, author of *Dreams of a Final Theory*, which includes a chapter titled "What About God?" Within that chapter these comments can be found.

I have to admit that sometimes nature seems more beautiful than strictly necessary. Outside the window of my home office there is a hackberry tree, visited frequently by a convocation of politic birds: blue jays, yellow-throated vireos, and, loveliest of all, an occasional red cardinal. Although I understand pretty well how brightly colored feathers evolved out

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of a competition for mates, it is almost irresistible to imagine that all this beauty was somehow laid on for our benefit. **But the God of birds and trees would have to be also the God of birth defects and cancer....**

Remembrance of the Holocaust leaves me unsympathetic to attempts to justify the ways of God to man. **If there is a God that has special plans for humans, then He has taken very great pains to hide His concern for us** (1993, pp. 250-251, emp. added).

The former well-known televangelist is Charles B. Templeton, a high school dropout who, according to one writer, has “the natural flare and fluidity of a salesman” (Lockerbie, 1998, p. 228). He served for years as the pulpit minister for the Avenue Road Church (Toronto, Ontario, Canada) where his ubiquitous “Youth for Christ” rallies in the late 1940s were extremely popular. Eventually he became a world-renowned evangelist with the Billy Graham Crusade. Then, one day, he quit. He abandoned it all—not just the Billy Graham Crusade, but belief in God, belief in Christ, belief in the Bible, belief in heaven—everything! He explained why in his book, *Farewell to God*.

I was ridding myself of archaic, outdated notions. I was dealing with life as it is. There would be an end to asking the deity for his special interventions on my behalf because I was one of the family.... If there is a loving God, why does he permit—much less create—earthquakes, droughts, floods, tornadoes, and other natural disasters which kill thousands of innocent men, women, and children every year? How can a loving, omnipotent God permit—much less create—encephalitis, cerebral palsy, brain cancer, leprosy, Alzheimer’s and other incurable illnesses to afflict millions of men, women, and children, most of whom are decent people? (1996, pp. 221, 230).

It is not my intention here to provide an in-depth response to these (or similar) accusations. We have dealt with such matters elsewhere (see: Thompson, 1988; Thompson, 1990; Thompson and Jackson, 1992; Jackson, 1988; Major, 1998). Instead, for the purpose of this article I merely would like to document the role that evil, pain,

and suffering have played, and still continue to play, in man’s unbelief.

Many have been those who, through the ages, have abandoned their belief in God because of the presence of evil, pain, and suffering in their lives or in the lives of those close to them. Earlier, I documented how, in 1851, Charles Darwin abandoned once and for all any vestige of belief in God after the death of his oldest daughter, Annie (see Desmond and Moore, 1991, pp. 384,386-387). But Darwin was not the only one so affected. Nine years later, on September 15, 1860, Thomas Huxley was to watch his oldest son, four-year-old Noel, die in his arms from scarlet fever. In their massive, scholarly biography, *Darwin*, Desmond and Moore wrote that Noel’s death brought Huxley “...to the edge of a breakdown. Huxley tried to rationalize the ‘holy leave-taking’ as he stood over the body, with its staring blue eyes and tangled golden hair, **but the tragedy left a deep scar**” (1991, p. 503, emp. added).

At Noel’s funeral, the minister briefly referred to 1 Corinthians 15:14-19 in his eulogy. When he quoted the passage from that section of Scripture which mentions, “if the dead be not raised,” Huxley was outraged. Eight days after Noel’s death, on September 23, he wrote to his close friend, Charles Kingsley, about the minister’s words: “I cannot tell you how inexpressibly they shocked me. [The preacher—BT] had neither wife nor child, or he must have known that his alternative involved a blasphemy against all that was best and noblest in human nature. I could have laughed with scorn” (see Leonard Huxley, 1900, 1:151-152). In the equally scholarly (and equally massive) companion biography that he authored, *Huxley*, Adrian Desmond wrote of the man known as “Darwin’s Bulldog” on the day of his son’s death:

He sat in the study facing the tiny body. His emotions were unleashed as he looked back to that New Year’s Eve 1856, when he had sat at the same desk and pledged on his son’s birth to give “a new and healthier direction to all Biological Science.” He had found redemption on his son’s death. There was no blame, **only submission to Nature**, and that brought its own catharsis (1997, p. 287, emp. added).

“Submission to Nature” became Huxley’s watchword. Belief in God—however feeble it may have been prior to Noel’s death—now had evaporated completely. All that remained was to give “a new and healthier direction to all Biological Science.” And so it was to “Nature” that Huxley devoted the remainder of his life.

But not all such events have occurred in centuries long since gone. Modern-day parallels abound. Samuel Langhorne Clemens (a.k.a. Mark Twain) became implacably embittered against God after the death, in 1896, of his favorite daughter, Suzy. Famed English novelist, W. Somerset Maugham, recounted in his autobiography, *The Summing Up*, how that as a youngster he had prayed one night to God that he might be delivered from the terrible speech impediment that afflicted him. The next day he arose, only to find that the impediment still was present. So profound was his disappointment at the failure of God to cure him overnight that from that point forward he pledged never to believe in God again.

In the mid-1960s, a devoutly religious young man from Chattanooga, Tennessee was a role model for all of his classmates. He led a prayer group, and planned to become a foreign missionary—until his sister died of leukemia and his father committed suicide. The boy’s belief in God collapsed, and he became one of America’s most outspoken unbelievers, humanists, and pro-abortion advocates. That boy’s name?—Ted Turner, founder of world-famous CNN, the Turner Broadcasting System, and other well-known media enterprises.

### Hypocrisy or Misconduct of Believers

As much as those of us who believe in God hate to admit it, the truth of the matter is that on occasion our own actions have the potential to drive others toward unbelief. Try as we might, we still make mistakes. And sometimes our errors are egregious. There always have been sad stories of graphic hypocrisy and sordid misconduct on the part of believers (witness the drama of Ananias and Sapphira in Acts 5). But those cases have not always been publicized in such a “global” fashion as they now are. Today, when Jimmy Swaggart is photographed in a midnight tryst with a prostitute, or when Jim Bakker is tried in a court of law and

found guilty of fraud involving church funds, it is a dream come true for evening network television programs. And what self-respecting news anchor or late-night comedian can resist the temptation to point out that these indiscretions and crimes have been committed by “believers”? Juicy, salacious tidbits, these—made all the more prurient by the fact that they fly in the face of everything pure and holy that such people are supposed to emulate in their lives.

*It is difficult  
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men do not  
believe, or if men  
do not believe  
because it is an  
age  
of unbelief.*

Such hypocrisy and misconduct are hard pills to swallow even for fellow believers. But put yourself in the place of the person who already is struggling with doubts not only about the **system** of belief, but about the **God behind the system**. From their vantage point, when the system “fails” (i.e., when its adherents are unable to conform to it successfully in their own lives), what, then, shall be said about the God behind the system? As Bales observed: “The corruptions, or shortcomings, or the hypocrisy in the lives of some believers have been used to justify the rejection of Christianity. They are viewed as adequate samples of the faith, and since the samples are not good, the faith is viewed as bad” (1976, p. 49). The Proverbs writer emphasized: “Confidence in an unfaithful man in time of trouble is like a broken tooth, and a foot out of joint” (25:19).

The unfaithfulness, hypocrisy, or misconduct of a single believer can have severe repercussions not just for other believers, but for unbelievers as well. Such circumstances provide “grist for the mill” of those who continually are searching for what they consider to be legitimate reasons not to believe in God. Perhaps Paul had this in mind when he wrote his first epistle to the young evangelist Timothy, urging that his instructions be carried out so that there would be “no occasion to the adversary for reviling” (1 Timothy 5:14). When believers become hypocrites, it supplies ammunition for those who have set themselves against God. And oftentimes the seed of potential disbelief blossoms into the flower of full-fledged unbelief. History is filled with sad-but-true accounts of those who plunged headlong into the embracing arms of infidelity as the result of unpleasant experiences with believers. Two of the most prominent examples that come to mind are H.G. Wells (see Clark, 1945) and Thomas H. Huxley (see Clark, 1948).

While we readily acknowledge the devastating effect that can result from the hypocrisy and/or misconduct of believers, and while we make no attempt whatsoever to justify or excuse such conduct, at the same time we must recognize the fact that it is sheer folly to blame God for the blunders of humanity. Rejecting God because of hypocrisy in the lives of some of His followers can become a two-edged sword. It has been said that “hypocrisy is the tribute that vice pays to virtue.” Put another way, it is contradictory for an unbeliever to attempt to justify his unbelief by pointing out hypocrisy in someone else. The very fact that the unbeliever is willing to label the believer a “hypocrite” proves that he is aware of the fact that the believer is not measuring up to the high standards of the system he professes to follow. By suggesting that a believer is a hypocrite, the unbeliever implies that there is a system of belief that, when properly adhered to, would legitimize the conduct of the believer. Bales put it this way:

When an individual accuses another of being a hypocrite, he is appealing to a standard of integrity. He is saying that it is **wrong** to be a hypocrite.... Those who hold to a world view which justifies the acceptance

of moral law can consistently oppose hypocrisy. Those whose world view rules out moral law cannot be consistent and accept a standard which says that hypocrisy is wrong (1976, p. 50, emp. added).

No one condemned hypocrisy more than the Son of God Himself when, in Matthew 23, He pronounced the well-known “seven woes” on the religious leaders of His day and condemned them for their own hypocrisy. Additionally, the point needs to be made that, on occasion, the label of “hypocrite” is misapplied.

A person is not a hypocrite because he is weak, and fails at times in his struggle against evil. He is not a hypocrite because he never perfectly achieves the perfect standard of life. In fact, he would be a hypocrite if he claimed that he **had** arrived at perfection. One is not a hypocrite because he is inconsistent. One may not be aware of the contradiction in his life. He may not be conscious of a particular clash between his profession and his conduct. Because the tares and the wheat may look alike for awhile does not mean that the wheat is made up of tares.... **Because weeds spring up in a garden, does this mean they were planted by the gardener?** (Bales, 1976, p. 50, emp. added).

The psalmist wrote: “It is better to take refuge in Jehovah than to put confidence in man” (Psalm 118:8). Oh, that the unbeliever could learn that lesson.

### Unjust Acts Committed by Believers in the Name of God

It has been said that perhaps the only thing that is consistent in this world is inconsistency. Anyone who has tried to live according to a standard can attest to the fact that such a statement contains an element of truth. The refrain, “Ah, consistency, thou art a rare jewel,” reverberates within the human soul on a daily basis. Likely, most people **want** to live a consistent (and, hopefully, a **consistently good**) life. But such a feat falls under the category of “easier said than done.” Especially is this true when the standard by which a person is attempting to live is itself a consistently high one.

Unfortunately, throughout human history there have been those who have professed the high standard of Christianity,

yet who have committed unjust acts in the name of God—acts that have been a blight to believers and a boon to unbelievers. For example, in the time period between A.D. 1095 and 1270, eight different crusades occurred, during which armies representing “Christendom” battled Muslims in and around Jerusalem to gain control of the “holy city” and force Mohammed’s followers into submission to Christ.

In 1613, Galileo published his first musings about the possible truthfulness of the Copernican system of planetary movements (i.e., that the Earth moves around the Sun, not the reverse as the old, revered Ptolemaic system suggested). In 1616, a de-

*One day our  
precious 19- or 20-  
year-old son or  
daughter unexpectedly  
announces, “I  
don’t think I believe  
in God any more.”  
And we stand in  
shocked amazement—  
wondering how  
this could  
have happened.*

creed was issued by the Catholic Church that prevented Galileo from publishing any additional supportive evidence for his hypothesis. But in 1632, he published *Dialogue Concerning the Two Great World Systems—Ptolemaic and Copernican*. One year later, in 1633, he found himself in front of an Inquisition in Rome—which found him guilty of violating church doctrine (in spite of the fact that he had been right in his defense of Copernicus’ views).

In modern times, we have witnessed things no less savory. In 1988, Salman Rushdie authored *The Satanic Verses*, a book that drew the ire of radical Iranian Muslim spiritual leader, Ayatollah Khomeini. On February 4, 1989 Khomeini issued a *fatwa* (reli-

gious decree) in the name of Allah (God), calling for the immediate assassination of Rushdie and offering a six-million-dollar reward to anyone carrying out the task successfully. Rushdie was forced to go into hiding in Britain, where he was given ’round-the-clock protection by Scotland Yard.

In Northern Ireland, Catholics and Protestants have battled each other for decades under the flags of their respective religions. Bullets rip through shopping centers and schoolyards. Snipers fire on passers-by. Innocent adults, teenagers, and children die by the hundreds—all in the name of God. In Yugoslavia, “Christian” Serbs depart on “search and destroy” missions in an effort to rout the opposing Muslim forces. “Ethnic cleansing” is carried out—again, in God’s name.

Or, to bring the matter closer to home, militants bomb abortion clinics, maiming and killing patients and staff alike. These same individuals declare “open season” on medical doctors who perform abortions, and these practitioners subsequently are shot dead as they stand at their kitchen window or get in their car to drive to work. All in the name of the God of heaven.

And the unbeliever’s case is made for him as he witnesses what he views as unjust, heinous acts carried out by people who are supposed to live daily by the Golden Rule and by the Word of the God Who established that Rule. The reaction is as swift as it is adamant. How could a good God sanction such barbaric inhumanity? And why would anyone want to serve such a God? While the unbeliever continues to ponder such questions and witness such atrocities, the roots of his unbelief grow ever deeper.

How should the believer respond to these things? First, let us admit forthrightly that such things as the brutality of the Crusades, the murder of abortionists, or the ethnic cleansing of non-Christians **are** unjust deeds that never should have occurred in the first place. The acts committed are abhorrent and the attitudes of those responsible are deplorable.

Neither God nor Christ ever has **forced** men to submit to the Divine Will. Christ specifically said: “My kingdom is not of this world: **if** my kingdom were of this world, **then** would my servants fight” (John 18:36, emp. added). Nothing can jus-

tify the torture inflicted on so many Muslims during the Crusades in an attempt to “cram Christianity down their collective throats.” And the very idea of eliminating through “ethnic cleansing” those who are considered by some to be “enemies” of God is as repugnant as it is contrary to God’s nature. The same God Who said, “As ye would that men should do to you, do ye to them likewise” (Luke 6:31), also commanded, “Love your enemies, do good to them that hate you, bless them that curse you, pray for them that spitefully use you” (Luke 6:27-28).

Nor does God condone the lawlessness involved in bombing abortion clinics or killing doctors who perform abortions. The same God Who condemns the slaughter of unborn children via abortion (Proverbs 6:16-17) likewise condemns the illegal slaughter of those who wrongly murder such children (Matthew 10:19).

Second, it is unfair to blame God for unjust acts committed in His name by those who claim to believe in Him, yet who disobey His will. While a person may be sincere, he or she may be **sincerely wrong**. The fact that someone commits an act “in God’s name” does not mean necessarily that the **act itself** is sanctioned by the One in Whose name it was committed. For example, when law-enforcement officers act “in the name of the law,” but illegally and unjustly pistol-whip a suspect to obtain a coerced confession, or commit perjury under oath in order to “frame” a defendant, does the “law” bear the blame for their offenses? Certainly not! The law specifically **forbade** their actions. The fact that those actions were carried out “in the name of the law” does not reflect poorly on the law itself. An unjust act that stands in opposition to an objective moral standard does

not impugn the standard. So should it be with God. Reprehensible acts carried out “in God’s name” should not reflect upon the high moral standard of God Himself.

Third, in this context it is important to separate the **real** believer from the **counterfeit** believer. Just because someone **claims** to be a believer does not necessarily mean that he or she actually **is** a believer. But how is that distinction to be made? God warned:

A good tree cannot bring forth evil fruit, neither can a corrupt tree bring forth good fruit.... Therefore by their fruits ye shall know them (Matthew 7:18,20).

A counterfeit remains a counterfeit regardless of the fact that it **claims** (or even **appears**) to be genuine. Its genuineness is determined by whether or not it successfully matches the list of characteristics for that which actually **is** real—the “genuine article” as we so often call it. The same is true of those who believe in God. The genuineness of both their claim and their actions is determined by whether or not what they say and do matches the list of characteristics for **true believers**.

Consider two modern-day analogies. Everything done in the name of “science” is not scientific. When a scientist says that in his professional opinion a nuclear bomb should be dropped on a certain country, he is not speaking as a scientist. He may have degrees in science and may even wear a white laboratory coat while peering into a microscope. But the fact remains that there is nothing inherent in the scientific method to determine whether or not nuclear energy should be employed to destroy cancer cells—or entire cities. This is not a decision that science is equipped to make because it falls far beyond the pale of the scientific method.

And, not everything done in the name of “morality” is moral. Surely, one of the saddest events in American history occurred between 1932 and 1972 when the U.S. Public Health Service sanctioned the “Tuskegee Experiments,” in which 399 poor African American men from Macon County, Alabama—known to be infected with *Treponema pallidum* (the microorganism responsible for the dreaded venereal disease, syphilis)—were studied to determine the effects of this debilitating disease. The government doctors involved in the study never told the participants that they had syphilis. Nor did they obtain “informed consent” from the men for their experiments. Even though the physicians knew that the disease was fatal if left untreated, and even though antibiotics were available that could have saved the lives of the test subjects, those subjects were denied access to such antibiotics. Instead, they were patronized, prodded, and poked in what can only be called one of the most shameful experiments ever perpetrated on Americans. What was the rationale offered in later years for the experiments, once the scheme finally was uncovered? Those responsible claimed that they wanted to provide knowledge of the disease in the hope that it might prevent the physical degradation and death so often associated with syphilis victims. And, of course, they wanted to secure information that could be used to slow, or halt, the “moral degradation” associated with contracting a venereal disease in the first place.

Counterfeit actions carried out “in the name of God” are just that—counterfeit. Just because someone “claims” that certain actions are sanctioned by God does not mean necessarily that they are. What is needed here is a “fruit inspector” who can compare the counterfeit to the original and thereby separate fact from fiction. J.M. Matthews stated it well: “We ask that the consequences which can be proved to flow from Christianity as the legitimate fruit of the system should be distinguished from those which have no true alliance with her teachings or her influences” (1857, pp. 73-78).

## Unbelief

When you see the above section heading of “Unbelief” listed as a **cause** of unbelief, you might think that surely I have erred. How, pray tell, could **unbelief** be a cause of **unbelief**? Allow me to explain.



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It is my contention that unbelief engenders **more** unbelief. In his book, *Therefore Stand*, Wilbur M. Smith compared unchecked unbelief to

...a contagious disease. Unless it is restrained it grows in intensity, and will infect an increasingly large number of people. It is difficult to determine whether this is an age of unbelief because so many men do not believe, or many men do not believe because it is an age of unbelief. I suppose that some would say you cannot have an age of unbelief unless it is caused by the unbelief of men. Well, I am not so sure. There are certain intellectual and moral characteristics that mark each age of human history, and it would seem that the outstanding mark of our particular age is Unbelief (1974, p. 173).

Dr. Smith made these comments in the original printing of his book in 1945. If he was correct in his assessment that **his** was an “age of unbelief” (and the documentation he provided incontrovertibly proved his point), then what may be said about **our** age? Smith wrote at a time when America had just emerged from the shadows and ravages of World War II. It was a time in our nation’s history when people had sacrificed—first, their finances at home and, second, their sons and daughters on foreign battle fields—to bring an end to tyranny. It also was a time when people actually realized that they **needed** God.

Compare that set of circumstances to those of today. The economy is booming. America has not been involved in a war in over thirty years. Unemployment is at an all-time low. Simply put, people do not feel the “need” for God that they did in post-war America. And there are other factors to be considered. As Smith explained:

Great thinkers, leaders of thought, men of achievement, men with great gifts of expression, inevitably must influence vast multitudes of people who look up to them as their leaders, as their guide, and when the outstanding men of the great segments of thought in our generation are atheistic, and antagonistic to the Christian Faith, what can one expect the younger generation to be, willingly following in their steps? (1974, p. 174).

We are living in an age where some of the most visible, most respected, and most prolific intellectuals on the world stage are outspoken proponents of unbelief. We view the late Carl Sagan’s lavish television extravaganza, *Cosmos*, and are informed that organic evolution is a “fact” from which no reasonable person dissents. Our children go to their school libraries to select a book for a required reading assignment and are able to choose from over 500 volumes authored by the late evolutionist and

*When men act correctly, congruously, and consistently—in keeping with the cardinal doctrines of their respective world views—which system has more to recommend itself, belief or unbelief?*

humanist, Isaac Asimov, whose vitriolic diatribes against God were his stock-in-trade.

Those same children then go off to college and receive class handouts that are reprints from *Natural History* magazine of the monthly column, “This View of Life,” authored by Harvard’s famous Marxist and evolutionist, Stephen Jay Gould. The editors of *National Geographic* send their full-color, professionally produced, eye-catching magazine into our homes each month so that we, our children, and our grandchildren can read articles by such renowned evolutionists as Donald C. Johanson (discoverer of our alleged hominid ancestor, “Lucy”) or the late Louis and Mary Leakey (both of whom spent their entire professional careers in Africa searching for the ever-elusive “missing link” between humans and ape-like ancestors).

Our children sit at the feet of evolutionary professors who strive to convince them that they evolved from primordial slime. They view television shows (produced by unbelievers who have become Hollywood’s darlings) intended to help rid them of their archaic “Bible-belt mentality.” They are required to read and digest articles by atheistic wordsmiths whose purpose it is to convince them that God is no more real than the Man in the Moon or the Easter Bunny. They digest books by prolific, infidelic authors who revel in every facet of human immorality—and who beckon them to do likewise.

Then one day our precious 19- or 20-year-old son or daughter unexpectedly announces, “Mom, Dad, I don’t think I believe in God any more.” And we stand in shocked amazement—wondering how in the world this could have happened. This is the point I am trying to make when I say that unbelief causes unbelief.

## CONCLUSION

In the New Testament book of Mark, there is an intriguing comment about the Lord. The text states simply: “And he could there do no mighty work,... and he marvelled because of their unbelief” (6:5-6). What is the meaning of this statement?

Certainly, it cannot mean that Jesus was **incapable** of performing miracles on this particular occasion. As a member of the Godhead, He was all-powerful (cf. Genesis 17:1, 1 Timothy 6:16), and could not be restrained (cf. Job 42:2). Thus, He could do anything not contradictory to His nature (Habakkuk 1:13; Hebrews 6:18; James 1:13). Performing a miracle certainly was not contradictory to that nature. In fact, on numerous other occasions He had cured those who were blind (Matthew 9:27ff.), deaf and dumb (Mark 7:31ff.), leprosy (Luke 17:11ff.), or had crippled limbs (Matthew 9:2; 12:10). He even raised the dead (Luke 7:11ff.). Why, then, does the text record that “he could do there no mighty work”?

When Matthew discussed this event in his Gospel, he wrote: “And he **did not** many mighty works there **because of their unbelief**” (13:58, emp. added). Why, then, did Mark say that the Lord **could not** do mighty works? The Greek employed in Mark’s expression is *ouk edunato*. Wayne Jackson has pointed out:

These words are idiomatically used in the New Testament occasionally to denote what one **deliberately proposed not to do**. Perhaps some examples will be helpful. In one of the Lord's parables, he has a man, who is rejecting the invitation to a great supper, say, "I have married a wife, and therefore I cannot [*ou dunami*] come" (Luke 14:20). It was not that the man was literally unable to attend; rather, for other reasons he **chose not to do so**. Again, John writes: "Whosoever is begotten of God doeth no sin, because his [God's] seed abideth in him: and he cannot [*ou dunatai*] sin, because he is begotten of God" (I Jn. 3:9). This passage teaches that the child of God, because of the seed [the Word of God—Luke 8:11] that abides in him, **chooses** to refrain from practicing a life of habitual sin. So, similarly, the Lord determined not to perform many mighty works in his own country because of the quality of unbelief that was characteristic of them.

This latter observation needs a little amplification. In both Matthew 13:58 and Mark 6:6, the term "unbelief" is preceded by the definite article (*ten*), literally, therefore, "the unbelief of them." Now the Greek article is sort of like an index finger, it points to, draws attention to, an object. Here, it calls attention to the fact that the unbelief of these people was so strong, so downright rebellious, that Jesus would not perform many miracles in their presence in an attempt to coerce them into accepting him (1981, 2:13, emp. and brackets in orig.).

These people had heard the testimony of the many "mighty works" Christ had done throughout the region, and even had witnessed some of His miracles themselves. [The text in Mark indicates that while He did not perform "many" miracles among them, He did heal some of their illnesses (Mark 6:5).] They had the miracle-working Son of God in their midst, and yet their attitude was one of such staunch stubbornness that—in spite of the evidence before them—they steadfastly refused to believe. Today, unbelief often is seen as a "badge of courage" to be displayed openly and worn proudly. Modern spiritual descendants of those first-century unbelievers exhibit what the Hebrew writer termed "an evil heart of

unbelief" that has driven them "away from the living God" (Hebrews 10:12).

The Lord was happy to help those of His day whose unbelief resulted from a genuine ignorance of God's teachings. In Mark 9:20-24, the story is told of a father who brought his son to Christ, requesting that He remove the demon that had possessed the youngster from the time he was a small child. The pleading-but-not-quite-able-to-believe father implored the Lord with these words: "If thou canst do anything, have compassion on us, and help us" (9:22). Christ's response to the man's doubt was, "If thou canst! All things are possible to him that believeth" (9:23). Then, "straightway the father of the child cried out, and said, 'I believe; help thou mine unbelief'" (9:24). And the Lord did just that!

The Lord also is happy to help those today who live in honest unbelief, and has provided ample evidence that they might believe. Speaking through the apostle John, God addressed those who, having seen and accepted that evidence, spent a lifetime building their faith upon it. "I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. I will give unto him that is athirst of the fountain of the water of life freely. He that overcometh shall inherit these things; and I will be his God, and he shall be my son" (Revelation 21:6-7).

But what of those who resolutely reject God's message? Their fate, too, was discussed by John: "But for the fearful, and **unbelieving**, and abominable, and murderers, and fornicators, and sorcerers, and idolaters, and all liars, their part shall be in the lake that burneth with fire and brimstone; which is the second death" (Revelation 21:8). Paul, writing to the first-century Christians in Rome, said:

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who hinder the truth in unrighteousness; because that which is known of God is manifest in them; for God manifested it unto them. For the invisible things of him since the creation of the world are clearly seen, being perceived through the things that are made, even his everlasting power and divinity; that they may be without excuse: because that, knowing God, they glorified him not as God, neither gave thanks; but became vain in

their reasonings, and their senseless heart was darkened. Professing themselves to be wise, they became fools (Romans 1:18-22).

Surely, the words of poet John Greenleaf Whittier are appropriate here: "For all sad words of tongue or pen, the saddest are these: 'It might have been'."

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**NOTE FROM THE EDITOR**

**“SCIENCE & NATURE: TWO VOTES FOR GOD”**

I suspect most of our readers are aware of the fact (having seen my schedule published regularly in *Reason & Revelation*) that I travel extensively as a result of various speaking engagements. In fact, on average I am out of the office approximately 40 weekends per year (and sometimes more) due to these assignments. In October of 1978, I gave the first of what eventually was to become over twenty years’ worth of weekend seminars on Christian evidences. The program is titled *Science & Nature: Two Votes for God* and has three objectives: (1) to defend the Bible—especially the creation account in Genesis—as the inspired, inerrant, authoritative Word of God; (2) to aid in the conversion of the non-Christian; and (3) to strengthen the faith of the Christian.

A standard weekend program begins on Friday evening, goes through much of the day on Saturday, and ends with the Bible class and sermon on Sunday morning. Since the program was designed to be—and often is—used as an evangelistic tool, and since numerous non-believers generally are in attendance (some of whom may have come either with an “axe to grind” or a hefty dose of skepticism), the Friday and Saturday lectures are presented intentionally in the format of a scientific seminar (i.e., without songs or public prayers, and followed by open-ended question and answer periods). They are not intended, nor should they be viewed, as religious services in the format of, say, a Gospel meeting. In the more than two decades that I have been presenting this series, I have learned through repeated, firsthand experience that presenting the Friday and Saturday lectures without any religious overtones (and often in a neutral, non-religious setting such as a public auditorium) makes it much easier to reach those who initially may be indifferent, skeptical, or even antagonistic toward the subject matter. In fact, over the years hundreds (literally!) have been reached with the Gospel message via the seminar by using this particular format, and as a result have become faithful Christians. [Sunday morn-

ing services, of course, are part of the normal Bible study/worship period, and do include songs, prayers, etc.]

The venue changes from one weekend to another, with the series variously being presented in civic centers, on university campuses, in school auditoriums, and in church buildings. The content of the program also varies on occasion, but generally includes lectures on the creation/evolution controversy (including discussions on dinosaurs and the Bible, the age of the Earth, the origin of races, the early Earth, fossil man, compromises of the Genesis account of creation, theistic evolution, etc.), the existence of God, the inspiration of the Bible, and the effect of evolution on the home, church, and nation.

I am pleased to announce that we now are able to make available the entire weekend seminar in both video and audio formats (each of which includes presentations made before live audiences). The 4-tape video set is professionally produced in full color and sells for \$75. The 12-tape audio set (packaged in an attractive plastic album) sells for \$36. Either, or both, may be ordered with a credit card by calling 800/234-8558 (\$5 postage for video set; \$3 for audio). The material included in the presentations is ideal for either classroom or individual study. Call us if we can help, or if you would like additional information about scheduling a *Science & Nature* seminar in your area.

— Bert Thompson

