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Mooroolbark Christian Fellowship

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The Greatest Commandment

By Joseph Tkach

Someone once asked Jesus which command was the most important. He answered, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind" (Matthew 22:36-38). Our relationship with God ought to be characterized by complete devotion.

Our need for grace

But who is able to keep this commandment completely? We all fall short. Yet in his grace, God not only forgives our failure, but also transforms us and works in us to make us righteous in Christ.

The fact that we fall short leads us to appreciate God's mercy and grace all the more. Without grace, we could not hope for a victorious life in Christ, for on our own, we are helpless to live in the love of God. But grace gives us hope and meaning in our walk with Christ. Grace encourages us to live in Christ, because it teaches us that righteousness is God's gift to us in his Son (Titus 2:11-14).

Even while we were enemies, God sent his Son to die and be raised for us. God's indescribable generosity toward us gives us reason and motivation to love him.

We gratefully give our lives in willing service to God, not out of the demands of law, but out of his love in us. Demands never produce love. Love produces love. God gave himself for us because he loves us, and our response is rooted in his love, not in his law, which could never save us (Romans 3:20-26).

Through no goodness of our own, we have been rescued from death and given eternal life. The more we realize how much God loves us, even though we deserve death, the more we are thankful for his grace, and the more glad we are to live for him. The more we know God, the more we love him, because he lives in us. "We love because he first loved us" (1 John 4:19).

Obedience motivated by love

There is no limit to the love God has for us, who gave us his own Son in whom we have died to sin and now live in righteousness. "If you love me," Jesus said, "you will obey what I command" (John 14:15). If we know Christ, we obey his commands (1 John 2:3-4).

Jesus did not say, "If you obey me, then you will love me." It never works that way. Obedience does not lead to love. But love does lead to obedience. The more we know Christ and rest in his love, the more we freely obey him. But striving to obey God

without first knowing him and trusting in him for love and grace produces guilt, frustration and a judgmental heart.

Obedience is the fruit of knowing God for who he really is—the one who loves us unconditionally and who places his love in us through Christ.

John wrote: "This is love: that we walk in obedience to his commands. As you have heard from the beginning, his command is that you walk in love" (2 John 6). Obedience to God springs from love. That's why love is the greatest commandment.

Obedience grows in the garden of God's love. Knowing God and trusting him to love us despite our sins, as he has already proven in Christ (Romans 5:10), motivates us to obey him.

The greatest commandment tells us that love should motivate everything we do. And yet we fall short in our motives. Sometimes we do right for the wrong reason. Perhaps we are afraid of what the neighbours might think, or what other Christians might think, or what the pastor might think. We want others to think well of us, so we do right, but our motive is essentially self-centred.

Sometimes we do right because we think God will punish us if we don't. That may be true (he chastens every child he loves), but it is a substandard motive for obeying our Creator. This is like the obedience a slave gives.

Other people do the right thing because they think they'll be blessed for it—they obey because they think God is paying them to do it. Their relationship with God is like that of a servant instead of a member of the family. It's better than not obeying at all, but it is less than the love relationship, the intimate fellowship with him, that God wants for us.

Acceptable to God

If we are in Christ, if our faith is in him, then we are acceptable to God. "There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (Romans 8:1).

God's grace is sufficient. We may fall 490 times, and yet God forgives (and he doesn't keep count). Sometimes we don't even know what we are doing, and we don't realize we need to quit, but God forgives our ignorance.

Is God too merciful? Maybe it seems that way sometimes. The Pharisees thought that Jesus was too merciful. And yet Jesus demanded more than

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they did. He told his disciples to take up a cross and follow him, to forsake everything and be willing to die for him.

Jesus walked to the cross by himself, forsaken by all his disciples, to die for us. What a precious gift! Though we deny Christ at times, as Peter did, God restores us, as he did Peter.

We are witnesses of Christ, as Peter was, and we sometimes get caught in hypocrisy, as Peter did. But in the end, we have God's assurance that he is faithful in his undying love for us and that he promises us eternal life in Christ, as he did Peter.

The greatest commandment helps us see the gospel. It tells us that we have an unlimited obligation to the one who is unlimited in his love and grace for us. Our life is a gift of God. The more we know God the more we love him, and the more we love him the more it is our pleasure to serve him and do his will. And his will, of course, is that we love him, that we trust him, that we have faith in him, and that we have eternal fellowship with him in his Son.

Joseph Tkach
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Astrophysics and Apologetics



The following article originally appeared in the August-September 1999 British Plain Truth. John Halford conducted the interview.

David Wilkinson is one of a rare breed—an ordained minister and an astrophysicist. He is chaplain at Liverpool University, but has accepted the appointment of Fellow of Christian Apologetics at St. John's College, Durham. We talked with Dr. Wilkinson about the challenge of reconciling science and faith.

BPT: What are "apologetics"? What is it that you do?

DW: Don't confuse apologetics with apologies. It means explaining and defending the Christian position by logical argument. I think apologetics today is twofold: one is a traditional understanding of apologetics, which is answering questions like "Why is there suffering in the world if there's a good God?" or "How can we reconcile science with Christianity?" But I think apologetics is far more than that. Apologetics is making the truth of the Christian faith relevant to the concerns and interests of people today.

BPT: The Bible tells us "the heavens declare God's glory." That was written 3,000 years ago. Today we know so much more, and we should have a much greater appreciation of the greatness and majesty of God. Yet so much of science seems to be against the concept of Creation and a Creator.

DW: Many people have this image of science being against the concept of Creation, but I don't think that's valid. One of the fascinating things over the last 20 to 30 years is that scientists have become more and more interested in questions about God. Maybe not questions about the Christian faith, but they are interested in the big questions. For instance, in my field of astrophysics, many of my colleagues would be fascinated by questions of purpose and why are we here? Science itself doesn't give answers to that. What science does show us are things like the extravagance of God.

BPT: What do you mean by that?

DW: Well, we know that our sun is one star in a galaxy of a hundred billion stars, and our galaxy is one of one hundred billion galaxies in the universe. Then when you read in the first chapter of Genesis, almost by the way of a side comment, "He made the stars also," you begin to see something of the greatness of God.

I think science has helped my faith, because it has given me an appreciation for things like the importance of evidence within the Christian faith. But my faith has also helped my science. Albert Einstein said that "science is thinking God's thoughts after him." Science has expanded my vision at just how good and elegant and beautiful and majestic the creation is.

BPT: Why is it then that some scientists tend to regard questions of faith and revelation as irrelevant?

DW: I think a lot of that comes from what we might call the conflict hypothesis. That is that science

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and faith are somehow opposed and mutually exclusive. You can trace that back historically to the turn of the last century where people like G.H. Huxley tried to free science from the control of the church. Up to that point the great scientists were Christian believers.

But I think the reality now is that most professional scientists would be far more open to religious questions than perhaps they would 30 to 40 years ago. There is a genuineness of interest and searching for spiritual answers as well as scientific ones.

BPT: Do you mean there is a level of curiosity or even an acceptance that goes beyond agnosticism?

DW: Yes, I think that's right. For instance if you look at the work of someone like Paul Davies, an eminent cosmologist and populariser of science, you see someone who is not afraid to explore questions that go beyond science. Questions about the purpose of the universe, questions about why the universe seems so finely balanced to make possible life. Questions about the intelligibility of the universe. Why is it that scientists can even do science?

BPT: Isn't there a danger, though, of laymen reading too much into this, and say, "Look—you see—they admit God exists"?

DW: I think you've got to be careful. The media particularly will hype up any discovery, and scientists today will even hype up discoveries in order to get funding. We need to be cautious about some of the claims that are made. These new discoveries in cosmology shouldn't worry us. They are exciting. We begin to see certain things that resonate with the Christian faith.

BPT: Like what?

DW: One of the things of interest at the moment in cosmology is not the beginning of the universe but the end. Is the universe going to expand forever or will it reach a point when it reaches its limit and collapses?

There are competing claims about this at the moment. But one of the interesting things for me as a Christian is what does that say about creation? If the universe expands forever it dies what is called heat death. Everything cools down. If the universe starts to collapse after expanding, everything is destroyed in a big crunch. Now at that point what I find interesting is that the Bible talks not just about the continuation of this earth, it talks about a new heaven and a new earth, because God's purposes are beyond this present universe.

Then there is what we've discovered about the fine balance within the universe that makes life possible. It's called the anthropic balance.



In order to make structure possible within the universe the gravitational force that pulls everything together, and the expansion force of the big bang, which causes the universe to expand, needed to have been balanced at a certain point in the universe's history. Very finely balanced too, with a precision of 10^{60} — that's 10 followed by 59 zeros. We really can't cope with numbers like that, but it's as if you're blindfolded and must hit a target one-centimetre square on the other side of the universe.

Now, discoveries like this are not proofs for God, but they raise questions that the Christian faith has natural answers to.

BPT: The idea that you can prove God by design is flawed though, isn't it?

DW: There's a whole number of problems with trying to prove God through design. In terms of modern science you cannot prove God either through the argument of design, because there are always alternative theories. For example, lets go back to anthropic balances.

The Christian may look at the way the universe is so finely tuned and say, "That proves there is a God." An atheist can quite validly come along, "Perhaps there's an infinite number of universes, all with different conditions in them and ours just happens to be balanced and we're here because of that. In fact there are billions and billions of other universes that don't have life. Therefore it is just chance."

Well, scientifically you can say that, but you've got to be careful. When we introduce the phrase "in other universes," we go beyond science. That's actually a metaphysical explanation, even a theological explanation. The person who believes in many, many universes can't prove that they exist because there's no information that's passed between these various universes. But the Christian can say, "My metaphysical explanation in terms of God actually does have some basis because of the

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Christian claim that God has come into our universe in the person of Jesus." So there is the possibility of knowing what's beyond this physical universe.

That's not the classic argument from design. It recognizes that the insights into design and balances need to be put beside the Christian claim that God can only be known because he reveals himself in a way that we can understand. The Creation can help us to understand his nature, but it doesn't give the complete picture. Take for example the question—and it is a valid one—is God a loving God? For every beautiful sunset I could show you a child dying of leukaemia.

The question then is how do you establish whether God is loving or not. For me it's simply that I see revealed in the man Jesus Christ, the God of compassion, the God of mercy, the God of justice. Within that framework I can then look at the universe and look at the beautiful sunset to see that this God's love and compassion is expressed within artistic beauty, creativity. And at the same time I can see a God who cares for the child suffering with leukaemia.

For every "good" bit of the universe there's also a "bad" bit. Creation confronts us with the problem of suffering, and few Christians would be arrogant enough to say that they had a full answer to that.

BPT: It could be argued that a loving God wouldn't have created the possibly of leukaemia in the first place.

DW: I think then that we're evaluating God and we're also probably straying into areas where the personal and the theological become in tension. You and I could have an interesting intellectual discussion about a child dying of leukaemia. But you do not go to the bedside of a child and have an intellectual discussion with the parents. What you hope to do is to bring the love of God into that situation through the giving of support and the concern.

BPT: If you say that the only way we can really know God is through Jesus Christ, a scientist could say, "Well how do I research Jesus Christ?"

DW: Very important. I remember a conversation I had at a breakfast table with a student who'd just arrived at the university where I was a postgraduate. He was a first year physicist, and he sat down and said, "I gather you're a Christian?" I said, "Yes I am." He asked, "How can you be a scientist and a Christian?"

It was early in the morning and I was a little brusque with him and said, "Tell me, have you ever

looked at the evidence for the historicity of Jesus?" To which he said, "No, but I saw a program on Channel 4 that said he didn't exist." I said, "Have you ever looked at the evidence of his teaching or his death on the cross?" He said, "Well we did all of that a long time ago and I don't really remember it."

I said, "Have you ever looked seriously at the historical evidence of the resurrection of Jesus and the appearance to the disciples of the empty tomb that grew up with the Christian church?" He said, "No, but even if I did, it wouldn't change my mind because I know dead people can't rise." At which point I wanted to say to him, "You're going to have to learn a lot before you become a scientist, because to a scientist, evidence is key."

As a scientist, I approach the man Jesus Christ, not with any a priori belief that the Bible is infallible or that this man is exactly what he says he is. I come as someone first and foremost who wants to assess the evidence. I look at the evidence of the history within the New Testament. I look at the evidence contained within the growth of the Christian church. I look at the evidence of men and women, boys and girls, who claim to experience Jesus Christ and see if this evidence stands up.

Now that's a very scientific way of doing it. Now of course I need at the same time to say, although that evidence is there, there is a point that then goes beyond science. Because the Christian claim is that Jesus Christ is personal, and when we come to persons rather than scientific theories, we're on different ground.

As a scientist, you might ask me, "How do I know that my wife loves me?" Well, I've got scientific evidence for that: does she buy me a Valentine's card? Does she scream and run out of the room every time I walk in? That would tell me something, but ultimately I only know her love for me if I am prepared to commit myself into a relationship. That's the only way that I know it for sure. And the Christian faith is somewhat like that.

BPT: You're saying that science is not the only measure of reality.

DW: Absolutely, and again that's the fallacy of the argument of saying, "Once I've got a scientific description of something, that's all I need." That is plainly not the case.

If we ask the question, why is the kettle boiling? Well, you might say because the heat energy is being transferred to the water molecules, which are increasing in their velocity, eventually bubbles are formed and that's why the kettle is boiling. At the same time there is an answer that goes, because you and I want a cup of tea together. One

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answer is about the science, the other answer is about the purpose. If I'm going to understand why that kettle's boiling, I need to know both.

Those who follow the conflict hypothesis are only giving one aspect to what is a multi-faceted reality.

BPT: Lets go back to the cosmology. As an astrophysicist, what big questions that remain fascinate you most?

DW: There are a number. I've talked about the end of the universe, and that's linked to the so-called dark matter question. Stars and planets are only a small percentage, maybe not more than 10 percent of the mass of the total universe. There's a lot of mass in the universe that we know is there because we can see its effect on the gravity. But we don't know what it's made of. That's a reminder about just how little we know, but it's also one of those great fascinating questions of science.

There are many speculations. Some say we have just got our mass wrong. But the main candidates are either what we might call brown dwarfs, which are effectively large planets that never made it to become stars — like Jupiter. Jupiter is a large planet that never became a star. But I think it's unlikely myself. I think the best candidate is some form of exotic particle that as yet we've not discovered. There are searches at the moment for such particles.

Theoretically we can say they exist, but we need to find one. That is difficult because although they exert mass on a large scale, it seems that they don't interact through electrical charge or some other way that we can measure. Another question that intrigues me is the question of extra-terrestrial intelligence.

BPT: Is that a genuinely scientific pursuit?

DW: Yes it is. The search for extra-terrestrial intelligence has been an honest scientific pursuit for many years now. Unfortunately, it has got a bad name because of some enthusiastic but totally unscientific claims.

All we can say for certain at the moment is that the only intelligent life in the galaxy is us. We can't go beyond that until we have had some kind of contact.

BPT: What would it do to your faith if you were a part of a team that did discover little green men living on one of the moons of Jupiter?

DW: It wouldn't be catastrophic to my faith. It would be yet more demonstration of the extravagance and greatness of God. I would

welcome it. That wouldn't mean there wouldn't be difficult questions to work out.

I come back to one of my comments that there's an extravagance to what God does. Why so many stars? Why so many galaxies? Surely if God was just interested in us, one star, one planet, would be enough? But the billions of stars are a reflection of the nature of God.

And the more we discover of that which can be seen... everything seems to be useful. Everything has a place.

BPT: So you have no conflict in your roles of a Christian minister and a theoretical scientist?

DW: No, there's no conflict.

That's not to say there aren't unanswered questions. But in the end someone said to me very early when I became a Christian, if you proclaim Jesus as Lord, then he's got to be Lord of your mind as well as Lord of heart.

You cannot live some kind of Jekyll and Hyde existence between church on Sunday and the real world during work. The same Jesus who's Lord of the worship is also Lord of the workplace. Part of my attempt at Christian discipleship has been to show integrity. I don't think churches are good at helping scientists. Often the language, the illustrations and the concepts we use in worship are more based in the arts world. Scientists often find themselves quite alienated by the church.

I've been fortunate to be a part of churches where science has been valued. It was always made clear to me that to be a scientist was as much of a Christian calling as it was to be a full-time worker for the church, and I try and encourage students to see science as a calling. God has created a universe where science is possible. Jesus is the one that, as Paul said in Colossians, holds the whole universe together. We're only able to do science because of Jesus, and it should be for his glory.

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Learning to Be Like Christ

(Part 2)

By Michael Morrison

The Family of God

If we are going to live with God forever, we will also be living with each other forever. We were designed not for eternal isolation, but for living together and interacting with one another. Life's greatest joys come in our relationships with other people.

Life's greatest hurts come from other people, too. So if eternal life is going to be happy, we need to learn to get along with people without hurting them. The essential ingredient we need here is love. The most important commandment, Jesus said, is to love God, and the second-most-important command is, "Love your neighbour as yourself" (Mark 12:31).

If we are going to be like Jesus, we need to love people—even people who are hard to love. Jesus set the example for us, coming to die even for the people who hated him. As good parents know, love means a willingness to be inconvenienced, a willingness to set aside our own concerns to attend to the needs of someone else. Love is a lot more than good feelings—it must also include good actions.

Willing to serve

God is good not because he is powerful, but because he is good. He always uses his power to help other people, not to serve himself. We praise people who risk their lives to save others; we do not praise people who had the power but refused to use it. We admire self-sacrifice, not selfishness.

Jesus came to serve, not to lord it over people (Matthew 20:28). He told his disciples they should not be like power-hungry rulers, but should set an example by helping people. "Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant" (verse 26). Jesus shows us what the Father is like (John 14:9)—not just what he was like 2,000 years ago, but what he is like all the time.

True greatness is not in power, but in service. God sets the example; as does Jesus. The meaning of life is not in having authority over others, but in helping people. That is the only way that eternal life is going to be enjoyable for everyone.

Jesus set many examples of service. A special one happened the evening before his crucifixion. He got down and washed the 12 disciples' feet as a lesson in humility and service. "I have set you an example," he said, "that you should do as I have

done for you" (John 13:15). Don't consider yourself too important to kneel down and help somebody. Leaders in the church should be servants.

Paul said we should "serve one another in love" (Galatians 5:13). "Carry each other's burdens," he wrote, "and in this way you will fulfil the law of Christ" (Galatians 6:2). "Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves" (Philippians 2:3).

If we are selfish, we will never be satisfied, but if we serve, we will find it self-rewarding. We are more satisfied when we help than when we take. Jesus told us this because it is so unlike the assumptions that most people make.

"This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another" (1 John 4:10-11). If we want to be like Jesus, if we want to have a meaningful life, then we need to serve others.

Serving in the church

One way that we serve others is by being active participants in a community of believers—a church. No church is perfect, just like no person is perfect, but the church is something that God designed to help us on our journey with Jesus. The church teaches us about Jesus, reminds us of his grace and promises, and gives us opportunities to worship together. The church helps us keep our purpose in focus.

The church also gives us opportunities to exercise patience and forgiveness. We may not like these "opportunities," but they still help us learn to be more like Jesus. Paul reminds us of the example we follow: "Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you" (Colossians 3:13). "Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you" (Ephesians 4:32).

Educators know that we learn by listening, but we learn much more when we participate. Jesus taught his disciples not just in words, and not just in his example, but also by giving them work to do. "He sent them out to preach the kingdom of God and to heal the sick" (Luke 9:2). After his resurrection, he again assigned them work: "You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8). And they learned as they went.

If you want to be like Jesus, get involved in his work. He left it to us, not because we could do a better job than anyone else, but because it is for our good. We will learn more, and be changed more, by getting involved.

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Different talents

Have you ever noticed that different people have different strengths? Believing in Jesus does not eliminate our differences. Being like Christ does not mean that we all have to look alike, dress alike and act alike. In fact, God purposely gives different strengths to different people (1 Corinthians 12:11). We are not to brag about our abilities, nor to wish we had someone else's (verses 14-26). Rather, we are to use our skills "for the common good" (verse 7).

Some people are very talented, but no one has all the talents that society needs. God makes sure that everybody is lacking something, so that we learn to work together. "Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others, faithfully administering God's grace in its various forms" (1 Peter 4:10). The church is a great place to learn to be like Jesus by serving other people.

We are to serve people's physical needs, and also their spiritual needs. One of the biggest spiritual needs that this world has is the message of salvation in Jesus Christ. The church is called to take this message to the world; each believer has a message that can encourage and help many others, and we will become more like Jesus if we become less self-conscious and more willing to share the message.

Why do we share the gospel? It is not a means of getting brownie points with God. It is not a way for us to brag about how good we are. Rather, it is a way to serve others, to help them with one of their most serious needs in life.

People need to know that God loves them, that their lives have meaning and purpose, that there really is hope even when physical life seems pointless. God has good news for them, and we share it because people need it.

Of course, it is deeply satisfying to be used by God to help someone else. Sharing the gospel gives us a tremendous sense of significance, because we are taking part in a work of eternal worth, sharing in the work of God himself. That's part of what it means to be like God, to be like Jesus. God made us in such a way that we would find our deepest satisfactions in doing the work that he himself does. We were made for this!

Relationships of grace

We are saved by grace, not by our works. God sent Jesus to die for us, and he forgives us, not on the basis of our works, but because of his mercy. Now, if God is like that, and we were born to be like God, what does this say about our relationships with one another? It totally transforms them!

If we follow Jesus, grace needs to fill our families, our friendships and our workplaces. Being like Jesus means that we are not always demanding to get our own way. We are not bragging about ourselves or insulting others. Paul describes the results of God at work in our lives: "The fruit of [God's] Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control" (Galatians 5:22-23).

"Honour one another above yourselves," Paul writes (Romans 12:10). "Live in harmony with one another" (verse 16). "Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love" (Ephesians 4:2).

"Encourage one another and build each other up.... Always try to be kind to each other and to everyone else" (1 Thessalonians 5:11, 15).

Husbands, how would it make a difference in the way you treat your wife? (See Ephesians 5:25.)
Wives, how would it affect you? (See verse 22.)
Those who are employed, how would it affect your work? (See Ephesians 6:5-8.)

We all start out unlike Jesus. We start as sinners, as enemies of God, as selfish, self-seeking people. And yet that is precisely what we need to be saved from, to be rescued from. So there's a lot of changing that needs to happen.

If we are to be like Jesus, our relationships may have to change a lot. It won't be easy, and it won't happen overnight. It takes time, so we need patience with the process, both in ourselves and in others. We need faith that God will finish the work he has started in us.

God has the most fulfilled, most satisfying life possible — and he wants us to enjoy eternal life, too. He wants us to be like he is. God is "compassionate and gracious ... slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin" (Exodus 34:6-7).

Michael Morrison

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Escape From The Planet Of the Pagans

By Greg Albrecht

Are Christians Retreating From or Engaging in the Culture?

John Fischer isn't happy with the current state of Christianity, but not for the reasons you might think.

It's not because Christians are "backsliding." It's not because they are becoming more "worldly." It's because they seem to be fleeing from the world in record numbers.

As evangelical Christians have found themselves increasingly at odds with the world around them, they have formed their own little subculture, where they can avoid temptations to sin and challenges to their faith.

But is this what Christians are called to do? No, says Fischer, a recording artist, musician, author and speaker who has entertained and educated a variety of audiences for over 30 years. Fischer asserts that Christians are called to take their faith into an often, hostile world in his recent book, *Fearless Faith — Living Beyond the Walls of "Safe" Christianity*,

Fischer implores us to embrace the danger of living in a dangerous world. He reminds us that any "safe" Christian subculture we construct is only an illusion. We can only rely on our Saviour to protect us — not any subculture we construct.

It's time for Christians to leave the illusionary safety and comfort of Christian culture and go home — to the world where Christ has given us a job to do.

We agree with John Fischer and share the following excerpts from *Fearless Faith*. We hope his words will challenge you to re-examine your calling and renew your efforts of bringing Christian love and service to a world that needs it. *(The Editors)*

I can still remember when as a small child I fingered a little sculpture my parents used to keep on a shelf over the kitchen sink. It was of three monkeys. One had his hands over his eyes; one had his hands over his ears; and one had his hands over his mouth. "See no evil; hear no evil; speak no evil" was the message it conveyed. This thinking was very popular among Christians at the time, and it helped justify our separation from the world, which took on the form of cultural abstinence (no movies, clubs or theatres) and

behavioural taboos (no dancing, card playing or makeup).

We were to keep ourselves separate from the world in order to be fully committed Christians. Scriptural sayings such as "come out from among them, and be ye separate and touch not the unclean thing" (2 Corinthians 6:17, KJV) and "abstain from all appearance of evil" (1 Thess.5: 22, KJV) were constantly being employed to justify a separatist lifestyle. Little did I know that these verses were being quoted out of context and that the three little monkeys were speaking for Confucius and not the Bible.

In fact, Jesus taught that it was not what goes into someone that defiles them, but what comes out, because what comes out comes from a heart that is deceitful and desperately wicked. I believe now that the power of these pharisaical controls is hard to resist.

We will always gravitate to an easily defined external spirituality rather than to a more ambiguous, internal judgment that makes us all personally responsible for our own decisions and conclusions. I still feel this struggle today. I still squirm when a Christian college student responds to a talk I give on personal responsibility in cultural matters by the inevitable question: "But where do you draw the line?"

A separate world is an easier world. It places more responsibility on others to come up with what is acceptable and what is not. It's also a safer world.

We want to be safe in a safer world; God wants us safe in an unsafe world. We want to protect ourselves by removing ourselves from danger; God wants to protect us in the middle of danger.

This retreat from the world turns into a sort of cultural catch-22. The more we remove ourselves from the world, the worse the world gets in the absence of a Christian influence and the stronger the argument becomes to stay away from the world.

If we were training our children to understand and critically examine the world's popular art, literature, music and film instead of limiting them to safe Christian versions of these things, we might have a different world waiting for us in the next generation. But it may not be too late for us to rethink our approach.

We all need to think through why we are here and what our faith is for. By its very nature, faith is dangerous. The world is now marketing us to ourselves — a kind of cultural cannibalism — and picking up the profits along the way.

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Christians are not dumb, but if there is inadequate support for a higher level of critical thinking among the Christian community, what's to keep us from getting dumb and dumber about our faith?

I bet there are a lot of people who would be Christians if they didn't have to become a Christian to be one.

The world now sees Christians primarily as moralists who are out to reform society and take away the rights of unbelievers.

As popular culture grows more blatantly decadent, we undoubtedly will see this justification for contemporary Christian institutions and products becoming more and more commonplace — the building of a Christian subculture, not as a message-bearer to the world, but as a safe haven from it. In the last few years we have been experiencing a general exodus of Christians from the world's culture and institutions to a safer alternative Christian culture sporting its own growing market and infrastructure.

I have been speaking regularly in Christian colleges across the country for more than 20 years and have noticed this trend manifested in the attitudes and habits of current students. It was not even five years ago that Christian colleges were struggling for new admissions. Not so now. Children who have been in school during the popular Christian school and home school boom of the '80s and '90s are now reaching college age.

It stands to reason that parents who have used the Christian school to protect their kids from the world would look to the Christian college as their last bastion. As a result, Christian colleges have never enjoyed such success. Many have to turn away qualified students because of limited space and resources. Every college I've visited in the last few years has a building expansion program in place, already fully funded or close to it. Other institutions, that ten years ago were on their last leg, are now thriving.

Many of the students I meet in these colleges listen to nothing but Christian music. These are the same kids that struggle with some of the required college-level reading, as well as with social and scientific theories they need to learn for a liberal arts degree. Their former schools steered clear of controversial literature and modern theories due to the questionable content, language and unbiblical philosophies they contain. And yet even Christian colleges realize that a transition to the wider world is imminent and that these cultural realities must be faced — better sooner than later — while the support of a Christian environment can guide the deconstruction and reconstruction of faith that is necessary for personal ownership.

I consistently find the students of these colleges to be far more conservative in their cultural views than their teachers. Faculty members tell me they worry greatly over their students' ability to carry a zealous, but untested faith into the larger, unforgiving culture. Would that there were a Christian world these students could graduate into, but, alas, there is not.

As Christians in the world, we are to be focused on people in the world and their need. This is not a time to be focused on ourselves — even on our holiness. Jesus is our example in this. Certainly no one was more holy than he was — the true Son of God who embodied all the fullness of his Father (Colossians 1:19) — and yet we also see him fully enmeshed in a sinful, worldly society.

As a friend of sinners, you can believe Jesus got an earful and an eyeful. You don't hang out with sinners without seeing and hearing about their sin. Of course, this will bother you — it must have bothered Jesus — but you simply figure out a way to get over it because this isn't about you. A case could be made that this was, in fact, the attitude of Jesus, who gave up his right to be God and took on the form of a servant because this wasn't about him. It was about us (Philippians 2:5-8).

Remember Lot? He was Abraham's nephew who lived in Sodom, that sinful place from whence we got our word "sodomy." He was the one whose wife was turned into a pillar of salt when she looked back at the burning city as the rest of her family escaped God's wrath upon Sodom.

Poor Lot. We rarely give the guy a fair shake — probably because he went into a deep depression after losing his home and his wife and drank himself into doing some pretty stupid things. And yet, in the New Testament we find out that "living among them day after day, [Lot] was tormented in his righteous soul by the lawless deeds he saw and heard" (2 Peter 2:8).

Lot had a righteous soul? You'd never guess that from reading the Old Testament account. You would think he would have been pretty happy about escaping Sodom and having God torch the place. Instead, he wanted God to spare the city. Yes, Lot was bothered by the evil around him, but this wasn't about him. This was about a city full of sinners, some of whom were his friends.

If it seems hard to imagine some of the people of Sodom being Lot's friends, we need look no further than the friends of Jesus. This is not about becoming insensitive to sin; it's about overcoming what bothers us about sin because we care about sinners.

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The way I see it, there are only two ways to look at this. We can condemn the world and hope God gets us out of here before it burns, or we can take the more dangerous route and stick it out here and learn to love sinners — seeing in them our own ability to forgive and loving them unconditionally, the way we are loved by God through Christ.

I believe that if we members of the Christian subculture were to spend half the time and money we spend supporting our subculture and use that time and money to pay more attention to our unsaved neighbours, we would reach a whole lot more unbelievers than we are reaching now.

It's time to break up the party and send everybody home. Time to scatter and make our way out into the places in the world where our faith makes a difference. Time to break out of our own Christian media commune into other media communes via great writing, great journalism, and wonderful movies, creative new TV shows, popular songs, stimulating university professorships and believable politicians — professional people of all kinds who happen to be Christian, though our faith may not be the first thing people know about us.

Our address is here, in the world. Though it is temporary, with respect to eternity, for now it is where we live. It is our neighbourhood, our housing development, our apartment complex, our workplace.

It is the place where our Christianity rubs up against the real world. It is the place where you can't deal in Christian words because no one knows what they mean. It is the place where you have to deal in meanings and experiences and connect with shared human needs. You can't simply be a smiling Christian painter. You must be a painter who can put his faith in human terms to connect in a meaningful way with those unfamiliar with Christian words and phrases.

This world is where the lost are, and the heart of Jesus has always been with the lost. Just listening to his stories of the lost coin (Luke 15:8-10), the lost sheep (Luke 15:4-7) and the lost son (Luke 15:11-31) should make evident the heart of God. The kingdom of God has always been in the business of finding the lost.

The Christian subculture, on the contrary, seems more interested in taking the found and turning them into a business enterprise. In other words, while the shepherd is out trying to find that one lost sheep, a Christian cottage industry has set up a booming business in the sheep corral, marketing to the other ninety and nine. It's my hunch that the shepherd isn't coming back to the corral anytime soon, except to drop off a few newfound sheep and go back out for more.

We need to get back into the world where the lost are. The world is our address. We don't live on Christian Street anymore. We never did. There is no such address. It is only a way of thinking that makes us believe we are more Christian if we separate ourselves from the world. But we are to be as Christ in the world, and the world needs Christ. This is no time to sequester ourselves in a subculture.

God is already out in the world, and he has his people there, too, although many of these people are difficult to recognize as Christians because their faith is not worn on their sleeves.

I am reminded of Elijah lamenting to God about being the only prophet and all that, and I can imagine God telling him, "Relax, Elijah. What you don't know is, I have 4,000 people who have not bowed their knee to any idol."

Now where do you suppose God was keeping those folks? And why didn't Elijah know about them? If we only knew who God has out there, I think we would all be surprised. These believers have a faith based on the inner realities and beliefs that transform one's character and are made evident in a natural, gradual way. Real Christians in the world tend to be quieter on the surface, but are more powerful over the long haul.

The concept that God is already out in the world is a challenge to some of our cherished justifications for a Christian subculture. It also explains why our Christian witness is often so ineffective.

If God is here (in my subculture) and not over there (in the world), then I do not have to concern myself with God when I'm in the world. It's expected that he is not going to be there. This is very convenient for the lazy believer. I have to think of God only when I'm involved in Christian things, and what's more, I have a subculture to do some of my thinking for me.

This all changes if God is present in the world. We don't get to write the world off. The world is not as god-forsaken as we'd like to imagine. If God is in the world, then I have to be a Christian all the time. I am not excused from thinking about him and finding him in the course of my life in the world.

It's the difference between being a part-time and a full-time Christian.

Is Christian materialism better than secular materialism? What would Jesus do about all this Christian stuff? I'm not sure, but I bet he wouldn't wear a bracelet that asks that question.

(Fearless Faith — Living Beyond the Walls of "Safe" Christianity, by John Fischer, published by Harvest House, is available at your local Christian bookstore).

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**If you would like to discuss with us any information
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