Theology Matters

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Dancing on the Suspension Bridge:
The Irrational World of Postmodernism

by David W. Henderson

Understanding Postmodernism

> *I don't know what I believe in. And if I believe - I believe there's some Higher Power, I think. But I don't know. Like right now I'm at a point where I don't know what I believe, but I'm open to everything. So I like to believe in everything, because I don't know what it is I truly believe in.* Twentysomething backpacker in an on-the-street interview in Boston

I had lunch not long ago with Kurt, a neighbor who lives up the street. As we often do when we get together, we got to talking about religious things. This time I asked him, "Kurt, where would you say you get your answers about what is true about spiritual things? Would you say it is from inside you, something you feel, something that makes sense to you? Or would you say it comes from outside you, from the Bible or something like that?"

"Oh, I'd say it's based on what I feel is right. You know, just that sense you have on the inside."

"What do you do," I asked him, "with the fact that what *you* feel is right is different than what somebody else feels is right? How do you deal with that contradiction?"

Kurt shrugged his shoulders. "That's not a problem for me."

"Well how do you deal with the fact that you are deciding for yourself whether there is a God or not, and what He is like? You know I was an atheist for years, and that's exactly what I did. I decided for myself what was true about God . . . and never once thought to ask Him. Do you think God should have some say in this? Have you thought about consulting Him? Say, looking in the Bible and seeing what it says about God?"

Kurt shook his head. "The Bible isn't any guarantee of answers. There are as many different views among Christians as there are among everybody else. Everybody who reads the Bible has a different idea about what it says."

"Well, it sure seems that way," I said. "You hear all kinds of stuff. But among the people who take the Bible seriously, who see it as their final authority and place themselves under it, there is a remarkable degree of consensus, and that has been going all the way back to the years right after Jesus' life and ministry. We all believe the same things: that Jesus was God with us, that He died on the cross to make us right with God, and that the only way we can do that is by turning our lives over to Him and receiving the new life He has for us."

He shook his head again. "I have a real problem with that. A real problem. Always have. Always will. It goes against

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everything in me to hear you say that the only way I can be right with God is through Jesus. I can't handle that. I mean, if someone is sincere in what he believes, who am I to tell him what he believes is wrong? I can't. I can only speak for myself."

"But, Kurt, if one person believes that God is a person and another that God is not, or if one person thinks God is perfectly good, and another that God is the author of good and evil, isn't it possible that, even though they are both sincere about what they believe, one of them is sincerely wrong?"

"Not necessarily."

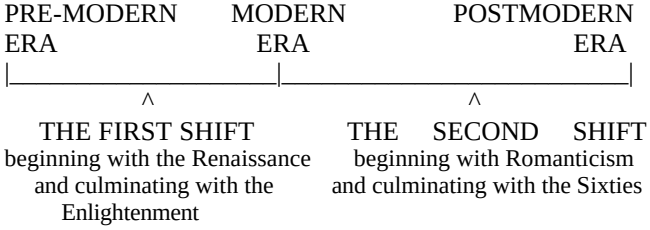
"But something can't be true and not be true at the same time!"

"Maybe in heaven it can."

Now, Kurt is not nuts. He is a delightful guy whose company I greatly enjoy. He's just a product of his skeptical, irrational, plural world. Truth doesn't matter, and neither does contradiction. All that matters is what you personally believe.

This Is Not Your Father's Worldview

Welcome to Postmodernism, the new set of lenses through which we look out onto the world.



Over its long history, western civilization has been shaped by three different major ways of making sense of reality. The first, typically referred to as the Pre-Modern worldview, was the God-centered, biblically-based perspective that generally shaped our culture beginning in the fourth century. In this view God was the defining reality out of which our understanding of Self, others, and the universe spilled. The Self was subject to God, governed by virtue, alongside others in relationships of self-giving and service, and served by creation.

Then began the first shift of worldviews, a lurching transition starting with the Renaissance and culminating during the time known as the Enlightenment. Over that time humanity and the physical world began to loom ever larger, moving more and more into the center of the picture, while God — initially relegated to the fringes — was eventually lopped out of the picture altogether. When the dust settled, we found ourselves looking through new glasses, standing within what came to be known as the Modern worldview. A naturalistic worldview that had no place for the supernatural, the Modern view was dominated by Man and reason: Man, occupied center stage, and reason, emerged as the new authority. Now the Self was alienated from God, governed by principles and ethics, bound together in relationships of mutual benefit with others, and in a position of domination over the physical world.

Then begins the second shift, emerging with the expressiveness of Romanticism and culminating in the anything-goes permissiveness of the Sixties. This time the Modern world was being bumped aside for a new one, the Postmodern World. A rejection of Modernism's excessive optimism, rationality, and materialism, Postmodernism ushers in a world that hums with the supernatural but is absent of God, is filled with opportunity but lacks any inherent meaning, replaces responsibility to others with an ethic of self-fulfillment, and rejects reason while embracing intuition and feelings as its final authority. In the Postmodern view, the Self stands under a sparkling but empty heaven, in the midst of but alienated from others, governed by personal preference and choice, and in subjection to a new surrogate lord, creation.

Like a hippo diving into a bathtub, the arrival of this new worldview has a way of rearranging everything. Nothing is untouched.

Where once God was at the center of the universe, and then Man, now Nothing stands at the center of existence. There are no fixed reference points anywhere, nothing that is unbudging to which we can anchor ourselves. All that remains is the Self, autonomous, free, accountable to no one. The Self, deciding for itself what is true, what is real, what is good. The Self, disconnected, unanchored, adrift.

This chart summarizes the major differences in these world views:

	PRE-MODERN ERA	MODERN ERA	POSTMODERN ERA
worldview	theistic	secular/naturalistic	plural/syncretistic
final authority	Scripture	reason	feelings
life governed by	theology	principles	personal preference
place of God	over all	distant/absent	replaced by spiritualities
place of the self	under God	at the center, under no one	unanchored and dislocated, final arbiter of all things, responsible to no one
place of others	there for the self to serve	there for relationship of mutual benefit	there for the self to use
place of creation	serving the self	under the self	over the self
morality centered on	virtue	ethics	choice

"Whatever," the word tossed around at every turn, captures the spirit of the age better than any other. It sums up our beliefs, our moral standards, and our evaluation of what

makes life worth living. "True pleasure," as a recent TV commercial claims, "is making up your own rules." Whatever.

For so long, the universe seemed to be a steady, certain structure, a solid bit of ground on which we could firmly plant our feet. It was ordered, predictable, sensical. Now, all of a sudden, it seems like a rickety, creaking suspension bridge stretched high over a chasm that looks a long way down. And there is the Self — teetering halfway across the bridge, balanced precariously on a rotting plank, uncertain which way to go, no help in sight, yet laughing at the adventure of it all.

Postmodernism, the worldview of our day, is the philosophy of dancing on the suspension bridge.

The Roots of Rootlessness

How have we so lost our footing? What has led us to this place of uncertainty and uprootedness?

In a series of dark works written in the decades leading up to 1900, Friedrich Nietzsche suggested it was time to rid ourselves once and for all of the idea of God, and of a worldview built around Him. It was time to acknowledge that God was just a convenient myth, a myth that needed to die.

What that leaves is a world with no purpose, no center, no source, no hope. This is nihilism, the view that nothing (that is, nothing that can give meaning or purpose to life) exists. In one of his books, Nietzsche has a madman yelling in the marketplace that God is now dead. "Do we not now wander through an endless Nothingness?" he screams.[1] Without God, life is meaningless.

Nietzsche's philosophy fosters not only a loss of meaning, but also a loss of certainty. Is there objective (certain, impersonal, true-for-everybody) truth? Nietzsche argued that there was no such thing. We can never get beyond our own perspective. There are no facts, only interpretations. This is perspectivism, the idea that while there are many different perspectives we can have of the world, none is objective, and none can be shown to be more valid than any of the others.

A bizarre and despondent man who bordered on insanity, Nietzsche was written off in his day. But as the world has discovered since, he came up with virtually all the ideas that now shape our post-modern age. A worldview devoid of God, meaning that is created rather than received, and the idea that what is true depends on where you are standing: these are all ideas that are very contemporary and current today.

But Postmodernism does not stop there. Postmodernism is a marriage of Neitzsche's nihilism and perspectivism with three more modern cousins: pluralism, multiculturalism, and deconstructionism.

Deconstructionism is a perspectivist way of looking at literature that took shape in the middle of this century. For the deconstructionist, reality is not only meaningless, it is unknowable. If reality is not knowable, then language does not really tell us anything about what is out there. It cannot. Instead, language is simply a matter of power; it is a way to try to control the chaos of reality by labeling and categorizing it, deciding through our language what is important and what is not. This way of thinking leads to what is called the "reader-response theory of meaning." That is a fancy way of saying this: when you read something that somebody else wrote, you can never know for sure what he or she really meant. Meaning is determined by the reader, not the author. I decide what Jesus meant when He said, "If any one would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me" (Luke 9:23). Nothing is clear. Nothing is certain. Everything is interpretation.

Pluralism and multiculturalism further the aggressive de-bunking of any one way of making sense of the world. Pluralism holds that all belief systems are equally true. Multiculturalism insists that every culture is equally worthwhile. Because everything is a matter of perspective, we are very backward if we insist on teaching Christianity as the only true religion, or the history and literature of the Western world as that most worthy of study. There is no exclusive Truth. There is no superior culture. We need to embrace them all. This leads, of course, to elevating tolerance and acceptance as our most important societal virtues. Since everything is a matter of perspective, who are you to tell me that you are right and I am wrong? We are all equally right, and it is arrogant and judgmental of you to insist otherwise. A Christian staff worker at Stanford encapsulates the challenge: "It's fine to pursue truth as long as you don't find it."[2]

Postmodernism is the affirmation that there are no absolutes

At bedrock, Postmodernism is the affirmation that there are no absolutes. Nothing can be known for sure. Everything is relative. Everything depends on one's perspective. You can see that postmodernism is not so much a new worldview as it is the death of any coherent worldview. Nothing is certain anymore.

I know of no bit of writing that captures the times better than Don DeLillo's novel, *White Noise*. Listen to this conversation between two characters in the book, Jack Gladney and his son Heinrich, as they drive to school in the rain. Heinrich has told his dad that, in spite of what looks like rain on the windshield, the radio said it wasn't going to rain until that night.[3]

His dad is frustrated. "Just because it's on the radio doesn't mean we have to suspend belief in the evidence of our senses."

"Our senses? Our senses are wrong a lot more often that they're right. This has been proved in the laboratory. Don't you know about all those theorems that say nothing is what it seems? There's no past, present or future outside our own mind. The so-called laws of motion are a big hoax. . . ."

"Is it raining," I said, "or isn't it?"

"I wouldn't want to have to say."

"What if someone held a gun to your head . . . a man in a trenchcoat and smoky glasses. He holds a gun to your head and says, 'Is it raining or isn't it? All you have to do is tell the truth and I'll put away my gun and take the next flight out of here.'"

"What truth does he want? Does he want the truth of someone traveling at almost the speed of light in another galaxy? Does he want the truth of someone orbiting around a neutron star? Maybe if these people could see us through a telescope we might look like we were two feet two inches tall and it might be raining yesterday instead of today."

"He's holding a gun to *your* head. He wants your truth."

"What good is my truth? My truth means nothing. What if this guy comes from a planet in a whole different solar system? What we call rain he calls soap. What we call apples he calls rain. So what am I supposed to tell him?"

"His name is Frank J. Smalley and he comes from St. Louis."

"He wants to know if it's raining *now*, at this very minute?"

"Here and now. That's right."

"Is there such a thing as now? 'Now' comes and goes as soon as you say it. How can I say it's raining now if your so-called 'now' becomes 'then' as soon as I say it?"

"You said there was no past, present, or future."

"Only in our verbs. That's the only place we find it."

"Rain is a noun. Is there rain here, in this precise locality, at whatever time within the next two minutes that you choose to respond to the question?"

"If you want to talk about this precise location while you're in a vehicle that's obviously moving, then I think that's the trouble with this discussion."

"Just give me an answer, okay, Heinrich?"

"The best I could do is make a guess."

"Either it's raining or it isn't," I said.

"Exactly. That's my whole point. You'd be guessing. Six of one, half dozen of the other."

"But you *see* it's raining!"

"You see the sun moving across the sky. But is the sun moving across the sky, or is the earth turning? . . . How do I know that what you call rain is really rain? What *is* rain anyway?"

"It's the stuff that falls from the sky and gets you what is called wet."

"I'm not wet. Are you wet?"

Though he wrote a century ago, Nietzsche's words sum up the spirit of the times in an uncanny, unsettling way: "Is there still any up or down? Are we not straying as through an infinite nothing? Do we not feel the breath of empty space? Has it not become colder? Is not night continually closing in on us?"[4]

Postmodernism raises several. . . questions for which it is unable to provide any kind of coherent answers

Fragments of a World Asunder

Postmodernism raises several troubling questions — questions for which it is unable to provide any kind of coherent answers:

Why am I here? If there is any meaning to be found in life, it cannot come from outside of ourselves. There is nothing "out there" to look to. It could only come from within. We are on our own. Meaning is not given, it is created, forged by our own hands.

In the movie *Say Anything*, a movie popular among teens that came out a few years back, one kid explains to another why he is so spontaneous and present-minded. "You get to be thinkin' about how short life is, and how maybe everything has no meaning, because you wake up, and then you're fryin' burgers, and you're like sixty or seventy, and then you check out, you know, and what are you doin', and I just don't need to be thinking about those kinds of things."

A teenager in the movie *River's Edge* expresses it more starkly: "I've got this philosophy. You do s---. Then it's done. Then you die."

The only thing we know for sure is that, some day, we will no longer be. We've lost the point. We've forgotten why we're here.

The alternative rock group Bad Religion captures the prevailing sense of aimlessness in one of their songs:

> If there's a purpose for us all
> It remains a secret to me
> Don't ask me to justify my life[5]

Life begins to feel like a joke whose punch line has been forgotten. It rambles on and on, and then comes to an awkward, halting end. Like a mystery that remains unsolved at the end of the movie, like a suspenseful novel with its last ten pages torn off, our lives lack resolution. Something is missing. Life lacks a theme, a plot, a purpose. It just happens. We have lost that thread that holds all of life together.

Who am I? Another feature of our after-modern world is the confusion of identity we feel. Who am I? Less and less do we have a sense of the unchanging "I." So much emphasis is put on externals: appearances and first impressions. Ads tell us that we are what we wear (or drive, or eat, or have on our face). Cosmetic surgery is available to suck, tuck, trim, and boost us into "a better you." A recent exercise equipment ad says, "A flower is perfect in every way. You, on the other hand, could use some work." With fashions changing monthly, Madonna and Agassi and Rodman remaking themselves weekly, and TV ads changing daily, we are more and more at a loss as to who we really are.

Robert Jay Lifton says that we live what he calls "protean"[6] lives. Like Proteus, the Greek sea god who could change his shape at will from wild boar to dragon to fire to flood, we refashion ourselves continually. We have a continuous flow of being, out of one personality into another, with no obvious connection between them.

Can we be certain about anything? Skepticism and doubt have become a way of life for us. How *do* you know? Isn't it all opinion anyway? I mean, who are you to say that you are right and I am wrong? Or that *anybody* is wrong?

We accept it as a given that two people can believe two radically different things and both be right. We are no longer bound by what is rational, logical or sensical. All we know is that lots of people have lots of different ideas, and somehow everybody is right.

Changes in math and science have fueled our uncertainty. Since the earliest days of modern science, going all the way back to Galileo and his telescope or Newton and his apple, the scientific venture has been built on the idea of a sane, predictable world operating under predictable natural laws.

But the solid, steady Newtonian world was toppled when in 1905 Albert Einstein announced his Theory of Relativity. Space and time are not absolute but relative, stretching and squeezing in unaccountable ways. In certain circumstances, because matter and energy are related, light bends, lengths shorten, space curves, and time slows down. Now there is no fixed point to stand on, nothing solid that we can lay hold of. Everything moves, nothing is sure. In an unsettling way Einstein seemed to confirm the nihilism Nietzsche proclaimed: We were adrift, aimless, wandering, alone, no solid rock on which to firmly plant our feet.

Not much later, in 1920, more studies in the world of atomic physics caused the world even more consternation. In his study of light, Werner Heisenberg found that it is impossible to determine the position and speed of subatomic particles. Measured in one way, light appeared to be made up of electronic particles. But looked at in another way, it was clearly a series of electromagnetic waves. The very act of observing light caused light, it seemed, to change. In the subatomic world of quantum physics, you cannot get an "objective" measure of anything; what is true depends completely on your point of perspective. This is Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle, and it sounds disconcertingly like Nietzsche's perspectivism: there is no objective truth. Perspective is everything. There is nothing we can know with certainty.

Math, like physics, used to be a predictable realm, where two added to two always — without exception — gives you four. But recently, mathematicians have begun to see that math, like science, is not such certain territory. In some areas of theoretical mathematics, results are not certain at all, but instead are unpredictable, haphazard, random. The mathematicians who work in this area call this Chaos Theory, and a new breed of mathematicians called "chaoticians" emerged. But, as with Einstein's relativity and Heisenberg's uncertainty, Chaos Theory crept past its own discipline and captured the imagination of the broader public. Life is out of control. Everything is random chance.

Relativity. Uncertainty. Chaos. What has become of our predictable world? I don't think we're in Kansas any more, Toto.

In his poem "The Second Coming," W. B. Yeats captures the chaotic collapse of reality that we face more and more.

> Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
> Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world.

We have lost all confidence in our world and our ability to make sense of it. There is nothing that glues us to reality anymore. The linchpin has been pulled and misplaced, and everything falls apart. We are not whole, and neither is our world. The confusion is captured on a T-shirt I saw recently: "It's not true I don't believe in anything. I believe I'll have another beer."

The bewilderment shows up too in the song, "If I Ever Lose My Faith In You," by the popular musician Sting. He sings,

> You could say I've lost my faith in science and progress
> You could say I lost my belief in the Holy Church
> You could say I've lost my sense of direction
> Yes, you could say all of this and worse[7]

Is there someplace outside of myself where I can turn for answers? God has been stripped out of the center of the universe, and our world has long been left a spiritual vacuum. But now, after long years of spiritual neglect, we are witnessing today an enormous rebound into

the spiritual, a huge corrective nudge in our trajectory as humans.

We do not live in a machine. We have long since thrown Newton and his mechanical world overboard. This is a haunted house, in the wide-eyed-but-tame, Disneyland sense of the word. This is a magical, mystical, spirit-filled world in which anything can happen. There is fairy dust on everything. Ghosts and goblins, angels and aliens, superstitions and spirit guides, crystals and channels, horoscopes and harmonic convergence, ESP and Elvis are all part of this wonderful world.

This is the day of the Virtual Sacred, the idea that the Spiritual Realm has oozed its way into the ordinary stuff of life, and that we can find sacred connections with the cosmos at every turn. So long thought to be empty of any spiritual dimension, the universe is now believed to be filled with the extra-ordinary (outside the ordinary) the para-normal (alongside the normal), the super-natural (in addition to the natural), the meta-physical (beyond the physical). The paranormal, the occult, astrology, Eastern mysticism, and the New Age movement are all expressions of it.

In one of his novels, author Don DeLillo asks, "When the old God leaves the world, what happens to all the expended faith?" His answer: "When the old God goes, they pray to flies and bottletops."[8]

The enormous popularity of angels today is a direct result of this declawed, sanitized spirituality. Where aliens are the perfect substitute for God in a secular, modern world, angels are the ideal replacement for Him in a spiritual, postmodern one. "For those who choke too easily on God and his rules," writes Newsweek correspondent Nancy Gibbs, "angels are the handy compromise, all fluff and meringue, kind, nonjudgmental."[9]

We are in the middle of a clamoring for spiritual meaning. This generation is rushing the gates of heaven, searching for a connection to something bigger than the ground we stroll upon. But, while it is for God that our souls thirst, God — for many — is not really an option any more. God is the stuff of religion, and this is the day of spirituality. According to Sam Keen, who wrote *Hymns to an Unknown God*, the two ideas could not be more different. Religion is based on revelation from a knowable God, a word that charts a clear map to a known destination and gives authoritative answers to the questions we are asking. Its main virtue is obedience, and when it is boiled down, it is all about authority.

Spirituality, in Keen's mind, is just the opposite. "The quest begins when an individual falls into a spiritual 'black hole' in which everything that was solid vaporizes. Certainties vanish, authorities are questioned, all the usual comforts and assurances of religion fail, and the path disappears."[10] The adventure begins with doubt, not with revelation, and its chief virtue is openness. What matters here is not some external authority but an internal drive, a mystical quest for a taste of the transcendent.

Spirituality flourishes and religion flounders in our day. We want to populate the heavens again . . . but following God is just too much to ask. Too dogmatic. Too exclusive. Too demanding. Too distant and unapproachable. We need something somehow more chummy, comfortable, user-friendly. The old God has a P.R. problem. He needs to loosen his tie, lighten up, get a tan. Let's dispense with the fire and brimstone, lose the rigid rules. It's time for some God Lite: less demanding, makes you feel great.

David Addison on the television show Moonlighting captures the tone of the West's spiritual pursuit. "I'm going to take a moment to contemplate most of the Western religions. I'm looking for something soft on morality, generous with holidays, and with a very short initiation period."

What happens when we are spiritually ravenous, but when God is not an option to meet the hunger of our souls? Made-to-Order Religion — pluralism and syncretism mixed together — is the result. This anything-goes, bring-your-own-god, mix-and-match approach to faith spins out of the bumpersticker concern: "God is too big to fit inside one religion." Rather than submitting ourselves to the truth and discipline of one faith, and opening ourselves to the accusation of narrow-mindedness, we make an eclectic omelette out of a variety of faith traditions, mixing, say, two parts Islamic ritual, one part Zen meditation, a dash of psychic self-defense, and a shake of Native American spirituality into a new religious mix.

More and more people approach spiritual matters in this way. I like how Kenneth Woodward put it in *Newsweek*'s recent series, "The Search of the Sacred: America's Quest for Spiritual Meaning." He said that, in a climate of religious pluralism, "many searching Americans flit from one tradition to the next, tasting now the nectar of this traditional wisdom, now of that. But, like butterflies, they remain mostly up in the air."[11] Whatever.

Responding to Postmodernism

> *What can you say about a society that says that God is dead and Elvis is alive?* Irv Kupcinet

I think the challenge of engaging the Postmodern mind is one of the hardest there is. There are perhaps more obstacles to gaining a hearing for Christianity than there have ever been. The Postmodern mind's irrational, anything-goes, freeform approach to reality is maddening.

At the same time, oddly enough, because of the way meaning has been stripped from life in our world, I think there may be more open doors to hearing and responding to the Gospel than ever before.

Where do we begin? How do we speak to those swaying on the suspension bridge? As I understand it, there are three things we need to do, three roles we need to assume.

Meaning Makers

More than anything else, I believe the most important thing we can communicate to the postmodern world is a coherent and compelling Christian *worldview*. We occupy a world that has largely given up on the idea that there is something that can make sense of life. God is a distant mystery at best and a sick joke at worst. Our rock-solid universe is anything but. And what does life amount to? You do stuff, and then you die.

But even as we say it, it rubs us wrong. Deep within every one of us resides the belief that life ought to be coherent and meaningful, as well as the desire to live a life that reflects that. The greatest gift we can give to this world adrift is a sense of meaning. Listen to the wonderful way Donald Posterski puts this: "We need to become Christian *meaning-makers*. Meaning-makers are people who make sense of life, people who make sense of God, people whose lives ring with clarity in the midst of contemporary ambiguity, people who have integrity, people who reside in today's world revealing with their living and their lips that Jesus' death is the source of vital life."[12]

That means affirming, among other things, these truths:

• It is not necessary for us to grope for a sense of identity, endlessly remaking ourselves like chameleons in a box of crayons. Our identity is woven into our fabric as created beings, and can not be found outside of the One who made us. We are no more self-made than a sculpture by Rodin. We are God's unique handiwork. His word says that we were "knit together" by Him, "fearfully and wonderfully made" (Psalm 139:13-14). We are derivative, so our understanding of who we are and how valuable we are spin out from God, from the fact of His having made us.

• Nor is it necessary for us to grope for meaning, purpose, or hope in life. Meaning is inherent in the world, because God made the world *on purpose*. This is a world swimming with the intentions of God, from the formation of the very first molecule to the very latest creation of a new baby girl. Every corner of creation and all of human history conspire to fulfill God's intentions. And we are invited to join in, to discover and become part of the purpose of all creation. "For He chose us in Him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in His sight. In love He predestined us to be adopted as His children through Jesus Christ, in accordance with His pleasure and will" (Ephesians 1:4-5). It is the existence of God that gives meaning to the universe, and that meaning spills over into purpose for each of us individually. "He died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for Him who died for them and was raised again" (II Corinthians 5:15).

God invites us to be way-pointers in a world adrift

God invites us to be meaning-makers in a meaningless world: to make sense of what makes no sense, to piece together what seems long ago to have fallen apart, to show the way where there is no way to be found. God invites us to be way-pointers in a world adrift.

Truth Tellers

Perhaps the obstacle that looms larger than any other in our efforts to be meaning-makers is the Postmodern rejection of the idea of Truth. In a world of perspectivism, when you have your truth and I have mine, what's to be said?

I have found that when someone insists that it is not possible to know anything for sure about religious things, it can be helpful to probe that a bit: "Where are you getting that idea? I may have missed something, but it sounds as if you just said that the only thing we can know with certainty about religious things is that we cannot know anything for certain about religious things." Why is Truth not even an *option*?

I have also found it helpful to point out the big, glaring mistake that lies behind pluralism. That is the leap that so many make from the *fact* of diversity — there are many, many different faith options, all sincerely held by thousands of people — to the *belief* in pluralism — everybody's faith is equally valid and true.

Let me give you an example of what I mean. If you were to ask a class of first graders what four plus four equals, and get seven different answers, would that mean that *all* of them were true in their own way because each one of those kids was sincere in his belief that his answer was right? Or that *none* of them was true, because each person's answer was shaped by his own unique perspective and background and life experiences and probably does not have much to do with what is objectively real? Do you see the leap? It just does not make sense to jump from the *fact* that there is more than one answer to the *belief* that they all (or none) are right.

Let me use a different example to take this idea a little farther. I am sure you are aware that there has been a revival in recent months of the debate about whether there is life on Mars. Now, if I asked you whether there was life on Mars, I am sure you would have an opinion. Say for the sake of the argument that you say no. You do not believe there is life on Mars. Now say I asked somebody else, and she said she believed that, yes, there was life on Mars.

Now, I am sure you are both sincere in your beliefs. But if you say no and she says yes, one of you is sincerely wrong. It is as simple as that. Sincerity does not determine truth. Reality does. Truth is whatever corresponds with reality. There either is life on Mars or there is not.

Now, the same is true in the realm of spiritual things. There either is a personal God, or there is not. Jesus either was God-with-us, or He was not. Either I will live past death or I will not. Either the tomb was empty, or it was not. When it comes to reality, the answer can never be "all of the above."

So how do we decide which beliefs are true, and which ones are false? How do we know?

I think most of us answer that question by consulting one source of authority: ourselves. We rely for our answers on our feelings, our reason, our life experience — ourselves. But using ourselves as the final authority, as natural as that is, has some real problems. Let me come back to the Martian example. I can tell you that I feel deeply in my heart that there is no life on Mars. Or that I have thought long and hard about it, and that I believe it is unreasonable to think that life exists on Mars. Or I could tell you that my personal experience — seeing as how I have never met a Martian personally — suggests that there is not life on Mars.

But if I am relying solely on myself as the authority, I am not any closer to knowing whether there actually is life on Mars or not. My feeling it does not make it so, and neither does my thinking it. And if you and I disagree, all we are disagreeing about is uninformed opinions. You do not know, and neither do I.

See the parallel with matters of the faith? There may or not be a God, but my personal opinion does not tell me much. While reason, feelings, and experience may *confirm* for me what is true, they can never — with matters of the faith — *tell* me. Looking only to myself to decide if there are little green men running around on that far red planet does not get me very far towards the truth. It is also a lousy way to decide if there is a God, and what He is like, and what He might have of us.

Well, how *do* I know then? How do I find out what is true, what reality is like in this area? The only option, it seems to me, is to look to some source of information *outside* of ourselves to try to get some answers. If I want to know if there are Martians, I can't just stick my feet up on my desk and ask myself how I feel about it. I need to don my spacesuit and go there. Short of that, all I have is opinion — opinion that may have nothing to do with reality.

The problem, of course, is that that is not an option. United does not run flights there yet. Well, the same is true of matters of the faith. We cannot hop in a shuttle, program in H-E-A-V-E-N, and go get the definitive proof we are looking for.

So what *can* I do to find out as best I can what reality is like, if it is not an option for me to find out first-hand? If I want to know if there are Martians, I can set up radio telescopes and listen for signals, or compare close-up pictures taken over a period of time to see if there are any changes that might suggest life, or do statistical analyses that could determine the probability of there being life forms on Mars. Somehow I need to do the best I can to get information about what reality is like.

In just the same way, if I want to know if there is a God, then I need to try to find some sort of outside evidence that would support or contradict the idea. Seems to me there might be three or four places we could look. Does the world reflect an artist's design and skill? Are there places in history where it seems possible that God has impacted the course of human or natural affairs? Do we have any evidence to suggest that God has made an effort to communicate with us? And is there anything to suggest God may have come and revealed himself to us directly?

I find it interesting that, when you move past opinion and feelings and reasoned thinking and you begin to poke around for outside evidence, you do not have to look very far. Does the world reflect an artist's design and skill? Cosmologists and physical scientists confirm what Paul writes in Romans: "Since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities — his eternal power and divine nature — have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made" (Romans 1:20).

Are there places in history where it seems possible that God has impacted the course of human or natural affairs? As one example among many, the resurrection of Jesus, well attested historically, has never been given an adequate natural explanation — or anything even close. According to Paul, more than five hundred people were eyewitnesses of the event, most of whom were still alive when he wrote his first letter to the Corinthians (I Corinthians 15:4-5).

Do we have any evidence to suggest that God has made an effort to communicate with us? That is exactly what the Bible claims to be, the Word of God — the work of a Divine hand and not merely the reflections of human authors. "All Scripture is God-breathed," writes Paul to Timothy (II Timothy 3:16). The remarkable consistency of its message despite its having been penned over more than a thousand years, its amazing historical accuracy, confirmed daily by archeological findings, and the undeniable way that the wisdom of the Scripture squares with our life experience all give us reason to take Paul's claim quite seriously.

And is there anything to suggest God may have come and revealed himself to us directly? In fact, there is an enormous amount of evidence to suggest just that. "In the beginning was the Word . . . and the Word was God . . . and the Word became flesh and made His dwelling among us" (John 1:1 and 1:14).

As Christians we lack definitive proof that God exists and that He has spoken to us in the Bible. But we have some mighty convincing reasons to take both possibilities quite seriously. James Sire, in his excellent book, *Why Should Anyone Believe Anything At All?*, digs into all this far more deeply than I can here. But let me share with you his conclusion. In the end he suggests that, barring certainty, the best way to decide if something is true is to ask this: Does it give the *best explanation* for the way things are, and for the tough issues of life? In other words, does it fit with all the data, and does it give a better account of the world, ourselves, and others, than any other explanation?[13]

Sire argues — and I believe deeply that he is right — that orthodox, biblical Christianity fits the bill better than any other option. Jesus announces, "I am the way, the *truth*, and the life" (John 14:6).

Faith Sharers

Our postmodern world is skittish about people pushing their faith, skeptical about the Bible, and downright cynical towards claims to exclusive answers. We face tough challenges when we engage our postmodern world. How do we communicate the Gospel, how do we share our faith, in this unintelligible world?

I think it is time to reconsider the traditional way we've approached evangelism. The old Gospel two-step — single somebody out and hit him with the gospel — does not fly. People today are skeptical of easy answers, protective of their privacy, and intolerant of aggressive "religious types," regardless of what brand of religion they may be pushing.

How do we gain a hearing, then? In a pluralist, perspectivist world in which all authority is suspect and nothing can be known for sure, I believe it involves seven things:

1) *Build strong friendships*. Begin by making genuine friendships with nonChristians. In today's guarded climate, no relationship means no hearing. It is only within the context of an authentic friendship that we will win the right to be heard. Our friendships cannot be acquaintances-for-Christ, but genuine friendships with nonChristians marked by the same vulnerability and availability and honesty that marks our other friendships. We cannot let Gospel-sharing opportunities drive the friendship, or our friends go from feeling like friends to feeling like projects in a big hurry. I think people today, skittish as they are, can sniff a person with an agenda from a thousand yards away. We need to broaden the way we think about what it means to share Christ to include our lives and not just our words. That leads to the second idea.

2) *Live an attractive life*. Live a compelling life in front of your friends. Most people around us live lives that look like MTV: a bunch of garbled images all glommed together with no sense of connection, no thread that holds them together. So when you come along with an existence that seems to have a center, when you live a coherent and meaningful life in front of your friends, that forces them to stop and take notice. What makes your life hang together in a world that is falling apart? In an era of chaos and uncertainty, a connected life stands out like a candle in a power outage. Just the other day a friend said to my wife and me, "If it is God who makes you the way you are, I want to know Him."

3) *Ask good questions*. Ask thoughtful questions and listen carefully to the answers. Good evangelism begins with good ears. As I have often said to my congregation, if you have ten minutes to share the gospel with someone, spend the first nine asking questions and listening. Only then can we speak words on target.

Gently and patiently take time to probe around. What does this person believe about God? Is God present, absent, dead? Where does the emptiness of her life apart from Christ show itself? In broken relationships, teetering esteem, a sense of purposelessness? What kinds of spiritual issues has she wrestled with? What happens when we die, why we are here, how to know God? Come to know the heart and history of your friend. The better you do, the more ready you will be to speak when the time is right.

4) *Tell about your experience.* Talk openly and honestly about your experience of Christ. Feet get fidgety when a tract gets pulled out or a Bible flipped open. Religious dogma gets shot down in a moment. But nobody can deny your experience, not even the most ardent New Ager or the most stubborn Scientologist. In fact, many in these days of spiritual searching will be quite open to hearing about our spiritual experiences. In a world where truth is nothing and experience is everything, our "testimony," our describing in fresh and up-to-date ways the difference Jesus has made in our lives, is one of the most important tools we have to reach people for Christ today. I call this "first-person evangelism," a non-threatening and indirect way to present our friends with the truth of the Gospel.

The effectiveness of our sharing is doubled when we are able, in the course of our story, to include a short summary of the content of the Gospel as it was first explained to us. For example: "So John asked me if anybody had ever explained to me why Jesus died on the cross. No, nobody ever had. So what he explained to me was that, because we've chosen to turn our backs on God . . ." and so on. Skeptical and skittish people who will derail in an instant any "second-person" efforts to share the Gospel with them ("*You* need to accept Christ today because . . .") will listen intently to a first-person anecdotal approach ("I came to realize that I needed to accept Christ because . . ."). When others walk in the footprint of our experience, they not only put their feet where ours once were. Their hearts walk the same path, their ears hear the same words of Truth, and it is possible that their souls will make the same step of faith.

5) *Work hard to establish common ground*. Take some time to tune in to our culture. Listen to the top three radio stations in your community, watch the TV shows with the highest ratings, catch Siskel and Ebert's favorite movies, or read a best seller. You might also think about having someone in your congregation tape the top 10 music videos on MTV at the end of the year, and take some time to watch them.

Why? There is probably no better way to keep your finger on the pulse of our ever-changing culture than to flip on the radio or TV. And if you listen in on the cultural pipelines long enough, you may find that a TV show or current song provides just the right quote or anecdote to bring your point to life. Those familiar points of reference establish common ground between us and our listeners, which cannot help but build trust.

6) *Keep coming back to Jesus.* The most important question that a person can answer in life is "Who is this Jesus, and what does that mean for me?" As you talk with people about the faith, as you proclaim God's word from the pulpit, keep circling back to this central question. Christianity is really just about this one thing.

There is no accounting for this man who turned water into White Zin, turned a squall into a quiet sunset, turned a corpse back into man, and turned the world upside down with his words and deeds. What are we to make of him? Who *is* this Jesus?

The more we can keep our conversation focused on this amazing man from Galilee the more effective our evangelism will be. There are many other important issues for us to work through eventually in our conversations with others — the role of the church, the nature of God, how faith and science intersect, the problem of evil, the environment — but we will be most effective when we begin with Jesus, and work out to those other questions from that central starting point.

7) *Encourage your friend to read the Bible*. Invite your friends to get their noses into the Bible, and find out for themselves. Let the Bible convince them of its own authority. Traditionally, we might spend quite a bit of time explaining to people why the Bible is worth taking seriously before we ever opened its pages. My experience tells me that that is harder and harder to do. For the person who occupies the modern thought world, there are so many reasons to be distrustful of the Bible's authority that we may never convince them of anything — and never get the cover opened. But what would happen if we were simply to ask, "Would you be willing to look with me at what the Bible says about Jesus? We've talked about him a lot but we haven't taken any time to look at the firsthand accounts of what he said and did. You game?" Or you could say, "I understand you are skeptical about Christianity, but before you reject it, it might make sense to find out what you're saying you don't believe. How about if we read part of the gospel accounts together?"

So we begin here, with his or her (or our) experience. It would be nice to begin our evangelistic conversations with the existence of God as a given, or the Word of God as our accepted final authority, but we can't. Our world has moved on, and more and more traditional presentations of the Gospel get returned to the sender unopened. We can't afford to send our mail to where the world used to be. We have to speak to where the world is today.

A Cool Drink For A Thirsty World

Do not be misled by the casual gruffness of our world. Underneath the indifference and cynicism of our culture is a parched soul gasping for life. The words of the Bible have never been more relevant, more timely, or more needed.

Let me give you two quick glimpses that let you see past the rough exterior of our world and into its heart.

Born in 1961, Douglas Coupland is considered by many to be the mouthpiece of the upcoming Baby Bust generation. He voices its dark humor, its not-very-subtle cynicism, and its bottom-line brusqueness. But he also expresses something of its heart. Listen to this remarkably candid passage with which he ends his book, *Life After God:*

> Now — here is my secret: I tell it to you with an openness of heart that I doubt I shall ever achieve again, so I pray that you are in a quiet room as you hear these words. My secret is that I need God — that I am sick and can no longer make it alone. I need God to help me give, because I no longer seem to be capable of giving; to help me be kind, as I no longer seem capable of kindness; to help me love; as I am beyond being able to love.[14]

Now listen to some of the words to one of last year's big hit songs. "One of Us" led Joan Osborn to two Grammy award nominations, and was performed live in front of more than a billion TV viewers during the 1996 Grammys:

> If God had a name, what would it be
> And would you call it to His face
> If you were faced with Him in all His glory
> What would you ask him if you had just one question?
>
> If God had a face, what would it look like
> And would you want to see
> If seeing meant that you would
> have to believe in things like heaven
> And in Jesus and the saints and all of the prophets?
>
> What if God was one of us?
> Just a slob like one of us?
> Just a stranger among us
> Trying to make his way home?
>
> Trying to make his way home
> Back up to heaven all alone
> Nobody calling on the phone
> Except for the Pope maybe in Rome
>
> What if God was one of us? . . . [15]

As it wobbles on the suspension bridge, the world about us reaches out for something stable, something solid, on which to lay hold. We have the privilege of leading this generation to the place where its feet can be firmly planted . . . on the Rock.

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Gothic Films: What They Tell Us

by Paul Leggett

The twentieth century is being called one of the bloodiest and most horrific periods in history. As the century comes to a close more and more is being written about the catastrophic realities of two world wars, the Holocaust, the Soviet Union, Communist China and the continuing crises of the so-called Third World. The devastating record continues into the present decade with Bosnia, Rwanda, the Sudan and the Middle East not to mention the violence and, with the example of Oklahoma City, the emergence of home grown terrorism in the United States as well. The realities of violence and inhuman behavior are the subjects of increasing concern among politicians, educators and philosophers. Satan himself is becoming a focus of academic interest in some of our most elite universities (see for example Elaine Pagels' *The Origin of Satan* and Andrew Delbanco's *The Death of Satan: How Americans have lost the sense of Evil*). These are part of an increasing discussion in which secular humanism and traditional liberalism have long ceased to have any significant influence. The list of irrational cruelty has simply grown too long.

As evangelical Christians who have traditionally held to a biblical sense of sin and human depravity, the present discussion about violence and even evil itself should be an obvious occasion for our offering some interpretation and indeed some hope. After all, we more than anyone else should not be surprised at the bloody face of the modern world. We know that "people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil" (John 3:19 NRSV). At the same time we need to speak to the specific context of our present culture. The gospel message must always be directed to the concrete realities of the Jerusalem or Samaria in which we live. It is well, always, to ask where is the gospel already starting to penetrate our culture? One of the few signs of the continuing impact of the Word of God on our secular, post-modern, and now increasingly pagan world, may be found in our century's enduring fascination with the classic horror film.

One of the few signs of the continuing impact of the Word of God on our secular, post-modern, and now increasingly pagan world, may be found in our century's enduring fascination with the classic horror film

Inescapably film, along with television and video, represents one of the major cultural expressions of the twentieth century and one which evangelical Christians have still not totally appreciated. Yet, if we are to overcome the pervasive "scandal of the evangelical mind" we need to come to terms with the social significance of film as perhaps the most pervasive and important art form of our time. I can imagine someone agreeing to the importance of film in general, but the *horror film?* Aren't horror films with their often attendant sex and violence a major example of the problem with violence and indeed evil? Horror films truly are symptoms of the problem, but, like the diagnosis of pervasive illness, they can provide us

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with important information which, while not particularly pleasant, may nonetheless be true. My concern is not ultimately with horror films in general but rather with *classic* or more precisely *Gothic horror films.* The fact is that the Gothic horror tradition comes out of a profoundly Christian context.

The origin of the Gothic horror tale goes back to the eighteenth century which, not coincidentally, witnessed the birth of the modern era. The Modern period is easily traced to the movement called the Enlightenment in European history. The Enlightenment witnessed the birth of secularism and liberalism. This was unmistakably a new era in human history and culture. It embraced a basic faith in the goodness of human nature and a confidence in human reason and science as the gateway to all truth. The major thinkers of the Enlightenment include David Hume, Voltaire, Immanuel Kant, Johann von Goethe, Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin (admittedly all white males but that in itself says something about the period).

The most influential figure in eighteenth century Europe may well have been Jean Jacques Rousseau who both embraced and critiqued aspects of the Enlightenment. Rousseau is notable for his absolute denial of the Christian doctrine of sin and his belief in the essential goodness and perfectibility of human beings in their "natural," i.e. uncivilized state. Rousseau denied even the possibility of divine revelation, espousing instead a general "civil religion" emphasizing sentiment and morality rather than doctrines or creeds. Rousseau insisted he believed in God but his was essentially a god who was identified with nature itself. According to Karl Barth, Rousseau, among other things, is the true father of theological liberalism.

One of Rousseau's disciples was an English writer and political theorist named William Godwin. Godwin embraced many of Rousseau's views, including his confidence in the innate reasonableness and perfectibility of human nature. Godwin's wife was the early feminist Mary Wollstonecraft. More importantly, his daughter was Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin, future mistress to the poet Lord Byron, eventually second wife to Percy Shelley and author of the most famous of all Gothic horror novels, *Frankenstein*.

The Gothic novel appears in England during the Enlightenment and is notable for challenging most of its assumptions. The characters in Gothic novels were often clearly sinful figures who suffered for their rebellion against a very real supernatural God. Confidence in human rationality and goodness in the Gothic novel was presented as an illusion which invited disaster. Very few of the Gothic novels of the eighteenth century (e.g. *The Castle of Otranto*, *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, *The Monk*) are known and read today. These works are important primarily as precursors to Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*.

Mary Shelley wrote *Frankenstein* when she was barely nineteen years old. The theme of the book essentially contradicts the views of her father and other Enlightenment thinkers. It is tempting to see Mary's work as a young feminist protest against the ideals of a group of middle aged men. There have indeed been several studies of Mary Shelley from a feminist perspective. Nevertheless, *Frankenstein* is particularly striking as a novel with clear theological and philosophical implications. The book's protagonist, Victor Frankenstein, is a young scientist who believes he can create a perfect man. The result is a knowledgeable but tormented creature whose murderous frustration finally destroys Frankenstein and all those close to him. The subtitle of the book is *The Modern Prometheus.* The implication is clear. Frankenstein, like Prometheus and of course Adam, has rebelled against heaven. The novel also includes several references to Milton's *Paradise Lost.*

Frankenstein, like Lucifer, has committed the ultimate blasphemy. He has rebelled against God by usurping God's place and he pays the terrible price for his sin. All the essential themes of the Enlightenment, the basic goodness and perfectibility of human beings, the trust in science, the identification of god with the natural order, are severely questioned in *Frankenstein.* The novel *Frankenstein* is far more than a horror tale. It is an allegory about the spiritual dangers of unlimited confidence in human reason, goodness and science. It is hard to imagine a single work of fiction which more completely predicts the coming crises of the twentieth century.

The influence of *Frankenstein* in our century has been more evident in film than in literature. The story has been filmed in some form in every decade of the twentieth century beginning with the 1910 version by Thomas Edison and continuing through Kenneth Branaugh's 1994 version. What is even more notable is the way the filming of *Frankenstein* coincides with motion picture versions of four other nineteenth century Gothic novels. In a fifteen year period of the late Victorian era in Britain, 1886-1901, four immensely popular influential novels were written with strong Gothic themes. These include Robert Louis Stevenson's *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde,* Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Bram Stoker's *Dracula* and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's *The Hound of the Baskervilles.* What is striking about these four British Gothic tales is that they appear at a time when Enlightenment assumptions about modernity are largely unquestioned.

At the dawn of the present century, optimistic beliefs in human goodness and perfectibility along with widely held views about the benefits of science and technology were virtual assumptions. Prominent evangelicals of this period such as Benjamin Warfield in America, James Orr in Scotland, Abraham Kuyper in the Netherlands, Martin Kähler in Germany and C.H. Spurgeon in England were clearly going against the tide with their orthodox views of sin and salvation by grace alone. Yet, this was the same world view reflected in these Gothic novels. Stevenson's *Jekyll and Hyde* and Wilde's *Dorian Gray* strongly questioned the dominant view of the essential goodness and perfectibility of human nature. *Dracula* explicitly challenged a rational view of reality that denied the supernatural and, indeed, placed a strong emphasis on the power of the cross to defeat the forces of evil. These three novels, like *Frankenstein,* used explicit biblical and theological imagery in telling their stories. *The Hound of*

the Baskervilles, the most famous of Doyle's Sherlock Holmes stories, likewise combines an atmosphere of intense human cruelty with an emphasis on the supernatural. Despite the story's rational ending, it is the one occasion when Holmes, the master of deductive logic, admits he is perhaps being asked to take on "the Father of Evil himself."

Prominent evangelicals of this period. . . were clearly going against the tide with their orthodox views of sin and salvation by grace alone. Yet this was the same world view reflected in these Gothic novels.

What is especially intriguing about these classic Gothic novels is that they have been filmed as a group on no less than five separate occasions in the twentieth century. The first cycle takes place in Germany beginning just before the advent of the First World War and continuing through the upheavals of the 1920's. While *Frankenstein* is not filmed by name during this period, the story *Der Golem* which is strongly similar (a Jewish rabbi brings a statuette to life which quickly takes on a destructive life of its own) appears twice on the German screen, once in 1914 and again in 1920. Including *Der Golem* then, all five English Gothic classics are filmed in Germany in less than a decade, from 1914 to 1922. Film scholars such as Siegfried Kracauer and Lotte Eisner have noted that these films and others with similar Gothic themes (such as the highly influential *Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*) prefigure many of the social and political themes of Nazism. That is to say, the classic Gothic horror films serve as a prophetic warning about the direction in which a given society or nation is headed. These films do this at the same time that they also critique the dominant Enlightenment assumptions of the twentieth century.

We see the same prophetic impact of the filming of these stories at other critical points in the century. Hollywood's classic Gothic horror cycle begins in 1931 at the onset of the Depression and continues until the end of World War II. Save for a brief hiatus during a short lived optimistic period in the years 1937-38, Gothic horror films are produced yearly with every major studio in Hollywood taking part. *Frankenstein* and *Dracula* are filmed not once but several times including numerous sequels. *Jekyll and Hyde* is filmed twice. *Dorian Gray* and *The Hound of the Baskervilles* are each filmed once. Many other horror films are made during this period, some of them such as *Phantom of the Opera* and various Wereworlf stories are clearly Gothic in style and subject matter (supernatural, anti-rational, anti-scientific). Others range from science fiction (several films based on the work of H.G. Wells) to routine or not so routine thrillers involving everything from circus freaks to loose adaptations of Edgar Allan Poe. Yet, as in Germany two decades earlier, the five Gothic classics set the tone and direction for the fantasy and horror films of the period.

Ultimately these five British Gothic horror classics constitute an ongoing warning about the cultural assumptions of modernity and contemporary life. Like an unpopular but vigilant prophet, they return to sound a warning at the specific moments in the twentieth century signaling the onset of a cultural crisis. The fact that these Gothic classics would continue to be filmed by key artists in the film and television world has certainly not seemed obvious at times. Following World War II Gothic horror degenerated into the likes of *Abbott and Costello Meet Frankenstein* and *Abbott and Costello Meet Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde.* By the 1950's the consensus was that *Frankenstein, Dracula* and *The Hound of the Baskervilles* were old fashioned and passè. Screen terror was geared to atomic age monsters and outer space. The Victorian character of the classic stories dated them inevitably for a new generation who no longer remembered the nineteenth century and, certainly in the popular culture world of Marilyn Monroe and Elvis Presley, cared little for it. This all changed in the year 1957.

Following Germany and the United States, the Gothic Horror cycle next surfaced in Great Britain. A small English production company called Hammer Studios created a cinematic sensation with *The Curse of Frankenstein* in 1957. This was quickly followed by *Horror of Dracula, The Hound of the Baskervilles, The Two Faces of Dr. Jekyll* as well as a host of other familiar Gothic subjects such as *The Mummy, The Curse of the Werewolf* and *The Phantom of the Opera.* The cycle was principally the work of one crucial director, Terence Fisher. Fisher was the most overtly Christian director to work in the Gothic tradition. Since his death in 1980 his reputation has grown enormously in film circles, yet, he remains largely unknown to most Christians. The Gothic Horror cycle of the late 1950's soon spread to Italy and the United States. *The Picture of Dorian Gray* was the one major Gothic story not filmed by Fisher and its appearance in 1970 suffered as a result.

In retrospect it is not difficult to see the emerging cultural crises which this third Gothic cycle was signaling. The year 1957 was the beginning of the space age and an intensifying of the cold war as the Russian sputnik satellite was launched. The reigning artistic and philosophic view of the period was no longer the confidence of the Enlightenment but rather the quasi-despair of Existentialism. It is striking in this atmosphere that the spiritual allegories of the Gothic classics with their firm convictions of human sin and metaphysical reality found such large audiences. At the same time it should perhaps not be surprising that in this dawning post-modern, post-Christian era a depiction of spiritual truth using biblical symbols was welcome.

The Gothic cycle next appears on American television in the years 1968 - 73. In the short space of six years all five Gothic classics appear on television including two versions of *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (one a musical!). It is not difficult to identify the cultural crisis of this period. This is

the era of Viet Nam war protests, the assassinations of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Robert Kennedy, the shootings at Kent State University and the Watergate scandal. However, following 1973 it seems that the Gothic classics disappear from popular culture. In 1973 a new kind of horror film, *The Exorcist*, becomes enormously popular. While *The Exorcist* seems to share some superficial similarities with the Gothic tradition such as a belief in the supernatural and an anti-scientific bias, the film's dominant emphasis on the demonic and its power is quite different. Evil invariably is defeated in the Gothic tradition either by Christian heroes or it destroys itself in the face of some stronger moral and supernatural order. *The Exorcist* inaugurates a different sort of horror film without a sense of cosmic order and the confidence that evil will surely be defeated.

The period from 1973 to the late 1980's is a time of growing secularism and, indeed, paganism in the West. Enlightenment assumptions are coming under attack from post-modernists, feminists, deconstructionists and others. The spiritual convictions of the classic Gothic horror films seem not only dated but downright quaint in the wake of "splatter films" with their demented psychotics and gore-filled special effects (*The Texas Chainsaw Massacre, Halloween, Nightmare on Elm Street, Friday the Thirteenth*). The most popular horror fiction writer of this period, Stephen King, draws generally on some Gothic themes in novels like *Salem's Lot* and *The Shining*. Yet, these stories and the films they inspire, like Anne Rice's *Interview with the Vampire*, belong to an essentially different world than that found in the classic Gothic novels.

By the end of the 1980's it is once again taken as axiomatic that the old fashioned Gothic stories belong to the dated past. Frankenstein's creature and Count Dracula have presumably been displaced by more modern horror characters like *Nightmare on Elm Street's* Freddy Krueger and *Halloween's* Michael, to say nothing of *Clive Barker's* grisly Pinhead. However, in 1988 Anthony Perkins appeared in yet another version of *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* under the title *The Edge of Sanity.* The following year, Robert Englund, after five appearances as Freddy Krueger in the *Nightmare on Elm Street* series, starred in a new version of *The Phantom of the Opera.* That same year Granada Television, in the wake of its successful Sherlock Holmes series, produced an elaborate two hour version of *The Hound of the Baskervilles.* Within a short time the 1990's saw no less than three versions of *Frankenstein* including Kenneth Branaugh's intelligent and underrated *Mary Shelley's Frankenstein. Dracula* also reappeared in a major production in 1992 followed soon by new version of the Werewolf *(Wolf)* and H.G. Welles' *Island of Dr. Moreau.* A new adaptation of *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* appears in 1996 as *Mary Reilley* which attempts to tell the story from the standpoint of one of Dr. Jekyll's servants. Clearly the past ten years have witnessed yet another revival of the Gothic horror classics. Presumably, we will soon hear of a new remake of *The Picture of Dorian Gray.*

The prophetic character of this latest cycle is already plain to see. The end of the 1980's saw the collapse of Soviet Communism, the dismantling of the Berlin Wall and the end of the Cold War. To read the editorials of 1989 and 1990 is to encounter optimistic predictions about the end of the twentieth century. The dread specter of nuclear annihilation is no more. Yet the 1990's have been anything but the fulfillment of these visions of peace and prosperity. Instead, we have seen the Persian Gulf War, the war in Bosnia, major conflicts in Africa, as well, as economic instability and concerns about violence and safety in the United States. The Gothic Horror cycle once again serves as a weather vane predicting a period of social upheaval, and raising the issue of Christian spiritual values in a world that keeps trying to get away from these values.

There is no comparable movement in cinema history to match the recurring nature of the Gothic Horror cycle. It has persisted from the silent era to the present day. Unlike so many other screen thrillers which have often degenerated into cheap grade B productions, the five Gothic horror classics have always commanded the attention of the leading directors and actors of a given period (granted many of the sequels of the classics themselves have often ended up as low grade budget films). The present Gothic cycle has likewise received the attention of such major directors as Francis Ford Coppola, Mike Nichols and Kenneth Branaugh, as well as, mainstream film stars like Robert DeNiro, Jack Nicholson, Winona Ryder, Anthony Hopkins, Michelle Pfeiffer and Julia Roberts. The current Gothic emphasis has varied widely in quality and in its use of Christian symbolism.

The Gothic Horror cycle in both its criticism of the Enlightenment assumptions and its strong presentations of an essentially Christian moral and spiritual world view has been an often unappreciated ally of the evangelical causes. It is not too late to appreciate this film tradition. Through cable and video all the Gothic Horror cycles are available for viewing. Terence Fisher's work is receiving growing attention and more and more of his films are available on video. A number of recent books, some of them quite academic in nature, are studying these films in greater detail. One of these authors, Bruce Lanier Wright, concludes his study by noting the nihilism of many horror films (as well as other examples of popular culture) and then adds,

> The Gothic position, by contrast, is that good and evil do exist, and that men's actions carry a moral weight; that our choices count. And if our actions have some importance, maybe we do, too.

The Gothic Horror film cycle has been an effective chronicler of the crises of the twentieth century. It has done this by recalling again and again the fundamental biblical themes of sin and redemption, of God's sovereignty and human pride. This is a tradition that we as evangelicals should not only study but indeed celebrate. In the closing words of Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, "Now God be thanked that all has not been in vain!" Amen.

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CHAPTER 13

of THE GOSPEL OF MARK

(chapter 14 will follow in the next issue)

Observe the text to understand the author's meaning:

Read 13:1-2. Jesus' teaching to the multitudes and responding to the religious leaders is over. He now spends his last hours with his disciples. This chapter now deals with teachings about the signs of the end.

What are the disciples saying about the temple?
Do you see this as men who perhaps are making their first trip to Jerusalem and are in awe of the temple? What is Jesus' response? Why does Jesus say this about the temple? What do we know about the temple from chapter 11? Is there an analogy with the fig tree? And the vineyard? Explain?

Read 13:3-32. Who is Jesus talking with here?
Where is he? What is the question that the disciples ask?
What do they mean by "these things?"Who will claim to be the messiah? What will relations be between nations?

What will the state of the natural world be? What will be the attitude of earthly rulers and church leaders to the followers of Jesus? What will relations be between family members?

The disciples were asking when Jesus the Messiah, King will ascend to his throne. When will Israel be restored to its former glory? When will they reign with Christ? Instead what is Christ's answer?

Will the disciples find help and support from governments, the church, family members? Will Christians be persecuted more than non-believers? Where will the disciples give testimony to Jesus Christ?

Are there places later in the NT where you recall these things happening?

What is the disciple's attitude to be? Notice in vs 5, they are not to be mislead; vs 7 they are not to be frightened; vs 11 they are not to be anxious.

In spite of all that is going on, and will go on, does chaos reign? Who is still in control of human affairs and the natural world?

Read Daniel 9:27, 11:31-35, 12:8-12 to see where the term "Abomination of Desolation" is used in the OT. How is this an encouragement to the disciples?

Do vs 14-19 recall to you another time of judgment in the OT when a city was destroyed for their wickedness and the survivors were told not to even look back?

False teachings which will be prevalent at the end times are not given, but the one central issue from which all others stem is given--there will false Messiahs. In vs 20-22 what are the characteristics of the false Christs?
Who will be saved?

Read 13:33-37. How many times in these 5 verses is the phrase "keep on the alert," or a phrase similar to it, used?
What are they to be on the alert for? Who is coming?
What will conditions be like before he comes?
Will there be imposters?

Interpret the Text:

1. Do you see this chapter as an encouragement to the disciples? How? As a warning? How?

2. Calvin suggests that people will be so desperate for redemption, they will believe anyone who claims to offer salvation. Is that a problem today? Where and how are people looking today for salvation? Has this been throughout human history--part of our fallen condition? What is the protection against false Messiah's who offer false notions of salvation?

3. Why do you think the day of Christ's coming is hidden from us?

4. This is a glimpse of the "end of the story" what happens to the elect? evil? who will rule?
How is this an encouragement to the disciples and to us?

BIBLE STUDY NOTES

Mark 13:1-2. Calvin says that the temple took 10,000 workmen 8 years to build. It was no doubt an impressive structure. But this structure built with human hands, not eternal and with no power to save, blinds the disciples and others to the living God among them.

Mark 13:3-32. Calvin writes, "The teaching of the Gospel will never win the world's favor and applause." Why?

In vs 8, Jesus describes these cataclysmic events as "birth pangs." This devastation will lead to new life. Interestingly, in Exodus 12:2, when God described the passover, he changed the calendar and made this Israel's birthday. The plagues which were also cataclysmic events were the birth pangs of the redeemed people, a new kingdom. Now too, Jesus speaks of the birth pangs which precede the birth of a new kingdom.

Calvin suggests that people are so eager for redemption(no wonder!) they will believe imposters who promise it.

News from Around the World

LAST SPRING, PITTSBURGH THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY invited Re-Imagining Speaker Delores Williams to deliver its commencement address. Continuing to give Re-Imagining speakers a forum, the Seminary invited Re-Imagininng speaker, ELCA pastor Barbara Lundblad, to deliver its annual Schaff Lectures in March 1997. Lundblad has been an outspoken advocate of the ordination of gay and lesbian persons in the ELCA.

At the celebration of ELCA's 25th Anniversary of the ordination of women in the summer of 1995, The *Lutheran Commentator* reported speaker Lundblad told the group, "Feminists and womanists have really dared to hear that collective gasping of women who cannot bear the easy explanation that Jesus had to die for our salvation."

THE NETWORK OF PRESBYTERIAN WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP will provide a Hospitality Suite in the Seelbach Hotel for those attending the July Churchwide Gathering of Presbyterian Women in Louisville. According to the NPWL press release, "In the past, a number of women have voiced concern that The Gathering does not consistently provide for the expression of alternative points of view. While NPWL is not interested in determining the program for The Gathering, it does believe that it is important to provide space for these women to debrief and discuss issues of common concern, to encourage one another, and to pray."

IN RESPONSE TO PRESBYTERIANS PRO-LIFE'S request for exhibit space at the Presbyterian Women's Churchwide Gathering, Carol Hylkema, Arrangements Committee chair, told PPL that the newly adopted PW policy read, "When there are church related organizations that have diametrically opposed positions, space may be offered to both groups with the understanding that if one group declines, the other will not be allowed to exhibit." The new PW Policy denies PPL exhibit space unless the PHEWA group, Presbyterians Affirming Reproductive Options (PARO), chooses to set up an exhibit. Terry Schlossberg, executive director of PPL, wrote to Hylkema, "It seems clear that the policy adopted by the CCT[Churchwide Coordinating Team] is intended to use exhibits as a means of controlling or excluding a perspective which is considered by G.A. policy to be a legitimate and welcomed viewpoint in the church." Meanwhile, a workshop is planned for the Gathering called, "Abortion is a Theological Issue." PPL has not been given an opportunity to participate in leading the workshop.

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The Rev. Dr. Kari McClellan is President of Presbyterians for Faith, Family and Ministry (PFFM). Rev. Susan Cyre is Executive Director and editor of *Theology Matters.* The Board of Directors of PFFM includes eight clergy and two lay people, six women and four 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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