

October – December 2011

Verticalthought[®]

a magazine of understanding for tomorrow's leaders

**Is
Christmas
a Phony?**

**Paganism in
Christianity**

**Hope, Fear
and the End
of the World**

**Prove
There Is a God
—Even Without
the Bible**

**Is God-Intended
Communication
Disappearing?**

**The Perfect
Support System**

**Lessons From
the Mighty Sequoia**



Like an Eagle

Perched on a branch at the top of a tree on a high, rocky cliff overlooking a river valley, an eagle has a vantage point. These great birds like to maintain a strategic or commanding perspective and comprehensive view of the world around them. Eagles like to see far and wide, so they often launch vertically from their perch and soar at great heights to gain an even higher, wider and moving vantage point.

What's happening in the lives of your young adult peers? What's going on in the final months of 2011? And what lies ahead? How will it affect your family? We all need a strategic and comprehensive perspective on life and world events. And those of us behind *Vertical Thought* strive to help give you that strategic overview in every issue, the current one being no exception.

Consider this proverb: "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is understanding" (Proverbs 9:10). To know that God does exist and is your—and everybody and everything else's—Creator is the premise of all knowledge and wisdom. If we don't understand that fundamental point, then we are lost in an immoral desert!

The striking thing is that the universal knowledge of God as Creator used to be a foregone conclusion in society. Now it's just gone. But you can hold onto it in your life! Weigh and consider the fascinating article by Mario Seiglie, "Prove There Is a God—Even Without the Bible." It will arm you with five solid reasons for faith.

This issue of *Vertical Thought* will take you on an intriguing journey of learning from trees (the giant sequoia), of exploring the surprising unbiblical origins of modern Christianity's holidays, of identifying what's right with marriage (the building block of society) and of finding help through Christ and others

to recover from a serious mistake.

Our "Men and Women of Valor" series this time takes on two great historical ladies whose names start with E—Queen Elizabeth I of England and Esther, the Jewish queen of Persia. The feature on God-intended communication will help you properly harness

the power and solve the problems of connecting with others through smartphones and social networking. And if that's not enough, we also offer you advice on how to maintain hope in the fearsome face of the end of the world!

We all need a strategic and comprehensive perspective on life and world events. *Vertical Thought* strives to give you that strategic overview in every issue.

As we seek to serve your needs and concerns, we welcome you to write to *Vertical Thought*. We want to know the challenges you're facing and how you are dealing with them. We want to hear what you'd like to learn more about.

Jesus Christ has wonderful things in store for today's younger generation in an incredibly wonderful world tomorrow under the rule of what is called the Kingdom of God. We want you and every vertical thinker to keep that big picture—that strategic vantage point—clearly in mind and soar above the negative influences of modern society ... like an eagle.

Vertical Thought

Vertical Thought is a biblically based magazine of understanding for young people aged 12-22. Our name is derived from Colossians 3:1-2, which tells us to think about godly things "which are above, where Christ is." *Vertical Thought* is published quarterly by the United Church of God, an International Association, 555 Technecenter Drive, Milford, OH 45150. © 2011 United Church of God, an International Association. Printed in U.S.A. All rights reserved. Reproduction in any form without written permission is prohibited.

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Paganism In Christianity

Many aspects of traditional Christianity—holidays, practices and doctrines—came not from Christ or the Bible but from ancient pagan religion.

by Frank Dunkle and David Cobb



Celtic Festival



Druidic Winter Solstice



Babylonian Ishtar



Egyptian Osiris

The traditional holidays with their annual rituals are coming: Halloween costumes, Christmas decorations, Easter bunnies. Where did those traditions and practices come from? Celebrated as Christian holidays, shouldn't these occasions be faithful to what the Bible says?

Halloween

Jack-o-lanterns have been around for centuries as part of an ancient Celtic celebration at the start of the winter season. The Druids (a sort of pagan priesthood) believed that at this time of year the barriers between our world and the supernatural weakened and broke down. Expecting the souls of the dead to roam the land, they built large bonfires to frighten them off and slaughtered animals—or even people—to appease the evil spirits. The jack-o-lantern represents a poor soul caught between the two worlds, and some believe it served as a warning meant to ward off bad spirits. Incidentally, pumpkins are not common in Europe, so the original jack-o-lanterns were carved from turnips (*The Encyclopedia of Religion*, 1987, p. 176, “Halloween”).

Carved vegetables, talismans against evil spirits, human sacrifice—these are not in line with the teachings of Jesus Christ. Halloween is still looked to by some as All Hallows' Eve—the night before the Catholic All Saints' Day, a supposedly holy occasion. Yet with all its ties to the

occult and dark forces, Halloween is anything but holy. And it's now shunned by many professing Christians. They see no value in celebrating a holiday that clearly originated from polytheism (the worship of multiple gods) and animism (belief in spiritual forces in inanimate objects). Such

religions have been broadly referred to as pagan in Western societies since the time of the late Roman Empire.

If most of the beliefs and practices associated with Halloween originated in paganism, does the pagan influence end there?

Christmas

The Druids in ancient France and Britain staged a 12-day festival at the time of the winter solstice. They believed it was the high point of an annual battle between an ice giant, representing death, and the sun god, representing life. They built large bonfires to cheer on and assist their champion, the sun. The Druids and other pagan leaders knew, as we do today, that the days always get longer as the calendar progresses through winter toward spring regardless of their seasonal rituals—but still they persisted in them (L.W. Cowie and John Selwyn Gummer, *The Christian Calendar*, 1974, p. 22). Unfortunately, so does much of Christianity today.

What is today thought to be a celebration of the birth of Christ began as the pagan midwinter festival. One unbiblical tradition of this holiday is the use of greenery. Decorating with green plants in late December through the beginning of January was one of the ways Druids “honored and encouraged” the sun god at the time of the winter solstice. Families commonly cut down an evergreen tree to bring into their home, where they decorated and displayed it in a prominent place. In the Middle Ages, this ritual of paganism persisted and was eventually adapted and given a Christian label, as Roman Catholic missionaries worked to convince people to worship the Son of God rather than the sun god. In due course, German immigrants brought the practice of decorating evergreen trees to America, where it has flourished. As you may have already guessed, the “Twelve

Why is much of modern Christian ritual and belief based on pagan practice rather than the Bible? Isn't it enough that people honor God however they want?

Days of Christmas” of the famous carol owe their origin to the pagan festival too (ibid.). (For more on the pagan origins of this holiday, see “*Is Christmas Phony?*” beginning on page 8.)

Easter

Even Easter, which many assume was instituted to celebrate the resurrection of Jesus, is steeped in connections to paganism. The name “Easter” ultimately derives from the name of an ancient Chaldean goddess Astarte, who was known as the “Queen of Heaven.” Her Babylonian name was “Ishtar.” Since most languages pronounce “I” as *ee*, it’s not hard to see how *eesh-tar* and its linguistic variants could eventually become Easter (see *Vine’s Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words*, 1985, New Testament Section, p. 192, “Easter”).

As the goddess of love and fertility, Ishtar’s symbols were—you guessed it—eggs and rabbits! Rabbits can bear several litters of young each year and thus were highly fertile animals familiar to these ancient people. Worshipping Ishtar during an annual spring festival was intended to ask her blessing of fertility on the crops being planted at that time of year. Decorating eggs as a means of worship seems harmless until you consider that the people also practiced ritual sex acts, often with temple prostitutes, to honor the goddess (*Nelson’s New Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, p. 509, “Gods, Pagan”). That doesn’t sound very Christian, yet most Christians continue to associate eggs and bunnies with what they think is the most solemn holiday of the year.

Traditional Christian doctrines

Unfortunately, some of the most basic things believed by most professing Christians derive from ancient paganism rather than from the Bible. The idea that people have immortal souls was first taught in ancient Egypt and Babylon. The Greeks likewise taught that at death the soul would separate from the physical body (*Jewish Encyclopedia*, 1941, Vol. 6, pp. 564, 566, “Immortality of the Soul”). That idea was merged

into Christianity from Greek philosophy. It did not come from inspired Scripture.

The ancient Egyptians developed the concept of going to heaven. In their mythology, the god Osiris was killed but then raised back to life, whereupon he went to a distant heavenly realm. The Egyptians concluded that if he could do this, then human beings could follow (*Lewis Browne, This Believing World*, pp. 83-84). This heavenly reward was a central teaching of several ancient mystery religions—but not the religion of the Hebrews or early Christians.

Even some Christian teachings about Jesus have origins in paganism rather than the Biblical record. Babylonian mythology regarding Ishtar claimed that she had a son named Tammuz. He died each year, but then would be reborn again in the spring. The Babylonian veneration of both the mother and child influenced later versions of Christianity that deified Jesus’ mother Mary as much as Jesus Himself (Sir James Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, 1993, p. 326). This stands in contrast to Scripture, which honors Mary, but reveres no ordinary human being—only Christ.

The Chaldean symbol for Tammuz was the letter *tau*, which appears as a sans-serif “t” and is commonly considered a cross (*Babylonian Mystery Religion*, p. 51; Vine’s, “Cross, Crucify”). While the Bible does indeed teach that Jesus was crucified, there is no record of the shape of the crucifix. At that time, Romans used various forms of upright stakes, some with crossbeams and some without. The Bible gives no indication that the early Church ever used the cross as a religious symbol, but several pagan religions had been doing so for centuries before Christ was born.

How to worship God

Why is much of modern Christian ritual and belief based on ancient pagan practice rather than the Bible? Isn’t it enough that people honor God however they want? Human logic might say that one can do anything to show personal religious faith as long as the intent is to *worship* God. However, God has a much different view.

When He gave the ancient Hebrews instructions about how to worship Him, God also told them very specifically *not* to borrow or copy the practices of pagan cultures around them. He said, “Do not inquire after their gods, saying, ‘How did these nations serve their gods? I will also do likewise.’ You shall not worship the LORD your God in that way” (Deuteronomy 12:30-31). The point of faithfulness is that God defines how He should be worshipped, not man: “Whatever I command you, be careful to observe it; you shall not add to it nor take away from it” (verse 32).

Jesus offered a challenge for us all: “But the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for the Father is seeking such to worship Him” (John 4:23). We live in a world historically deceived about the truth—especially religious truth. But when you do learn the truth, take Christ’s challenge: believe it and follow it. God is seeking you.

Frank Dunkle lives with his wife Sue and son Conner near Portsmouth, Ohio, where he serves as a United Church of God pastor. **David Cobb** attends the Indianapolis, Indiana, congregation of the United Church of God with his wife Mandie and two young children.

The Perfect Support System

Coping with teen pregnancy is hard—premarital sex and children out of wedlock being against the purpose of marriage and family. But there is help to go forward.

by Whitney Creech

What am I going to do? Being pregnant now is not what I planned. What's my family going to say? What about my fiancé? People won't understand ...

Feeling judged and criticized by her neighbors and friends, she seemed very alone. She was young and now the mother of an unborn child.

Her fiancé was a nice guy. He had planned to secretly call off their marriage to save her the shame of open accusation and the consequences that would ensue. As her pregnancy began to show, she decided to visit her older cousin far away from those in her town. She was right. She *was* going to be criticized for conceiving a child out of wedlock.

Recently, teen pregnancies have been publicized by celebrities like Bristol Palin and Jamie Lynn Spears. Some teen moms are now becoming celebrities on the shows *Teen Mom* and *16 and Pregnant* on MTV.

Although the rate of teen pregnancy in America is the lowest in two decades, that's still 39.1 births per 1,000 women. For striking comparison, "according to the United Nations, the rate of teen pregnancy in the United States is nearly nine times higher than in the majority of other developed nations" (Caitlin Hagan, thechart.blogs.cnn.com, April 5, 2011).

It's important to know that, for the human race in general, pregnancy and the sexual relationship that brings it about are reserved by God for marriage alone. But God does forgive, and, with help, unwed mothers can cope, find healing and meet the challenges of parenting.

Facing social stigma, worry and fear

The girl in the particular story we opened with had a very special situation. Her pregnancy was not a result of sex before marriage as it might have appeared. She was Mary, the mother of Jesus Christ. Her pregnancy was in fact a divine miracle!

Yet Mary still had to cope with an unplanned pregnancy at a young age and face the stigma of people thinking she had sinned in having sex before marriage.

Mary's trust in God allowed her to overcome worry and

fear. Her fiancé Joseph believed an angel's assurance that God had intervened, so he proceeded with their marriage. Mary's courage to say, "Let it be to me according to your word," took an incredible amount of faith (Luke 1:38). Both knew that this experience was part of God's master plan. And both submitted to God's will in order to provide Jesus with a loving, stable home.

God and family

God created the family structure with a purpose. In part, He planned for children to be raised by two loving parents so they might learn His ways. "Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and they shall become one flesh" (Genesis 2:24). "And why one? He seeks godly offspring" (Malachi 2:15).

Being joined together in marriage and *then* having a child is what God planned from creation—not for pregnancies to be outside of marriage. His perfect plan and spiritual law is violated when teens (or adults) engage in sexual activity before marriage, resulting in children born to parents who aren't prepared *to be* parents.

Another part of the reason for the human family structure is that it reflects the spiritual family God is building through all of us. The Bible in 1 John 3:1-2 says that we will be called the children of God! With God as our Father and Christ as our Brother, we will all live together in harmony forever as the divine family.

By following God's instructions and waiting to engage in sexual activity after marriage, we allow the God-ordained family structure to be established in our own lives.

The road home

But what happens when you or someone you know has already violated God's law? The healing process has to begin—starting with your or that person's relationship with God. The offender must talk with God through prayer, humbly and remorsefully seeking His forgiveness. This involves recognizing the sin and resolving to not commit that sin again.

There is an amazing story about a woman caught in the act

of adultery during the time of Jesus' ministry (John 8:1-12). Religious leaders brought her before Him to test Him in judgment, the Mosaic Law having called for adulterers to be stoned to death.

Christ said that He did not condemn her, but He also told her, "Go and sin no more" (verse 11). Don't assume that you can never get your relationship with God back on track after sexual sin. God forgives—if we are willing to truly repent.

Counsel and support

Healing also involves getting help from family and friends. Mary had very strong relationships to help her during her unplanned pregnancy that people attributed to sin. She had a loving fiancé who supported her and stood by her side during the birth of Jesus. Her cousin Elizabeth, also with child, shared in her joy (Luke 1:39).

An important aspect of healing in the case of premarital sex involves rectifying the mistake.

What am I going to do? Being pregnant now is not what I planned.

Get good counseling about marrying the other parent of the child—if it is a healthy relationship. Marriage is a part of God's goal for a family that will provide the baby a strong, two-parent home to grow up in.

If you and the other parent do not have a positive relationship, then finding appropriate support to raise the child in a right and godly way is vital. Seek the counsel and help of others to make sure the child has positive relationships that will help him or her to grow strong and faithful.

Understanding God's plan can help you if you've already gotten into a bad situation, and His love and way of life can show you how to live a life of faithfulness and joy. God is the ultimate healer of broken family relationships and wrong decisions. Jesus Christ is your perfect support system because He uniquely and personally understands your situation. Turn to Him, for He will one day bring families back together to fulfill that perfect design for the family of God.



To learn more of what God has to say about love, marriage, sex and raising children, send for or download your free copy of our booklet *Marriage and Family: The Missing Dimension*.

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Impact: Celebrity Single Parents

In 2008, 17 girls at the same high school in Gloucester, Massachusetts, got pregnant around the same time. Some blamed it on a pact between the girls; others blamed it on the rising trend of celebrity single parents (Russell Goldman and Elisa Roupenian, "17 Pregnancies a 'Coincidence,' Says Teen," ABCNews.go.com, June 24, 2008). Whatever the motivation, the impact is extreme on the resulting babies and the fathers who now—married or not, job or not—bear the legal obligation to support the mother and child for years to come.

What does God say about having children outside of marriage and becoming a single parent on a whim?

God condemns sex outside of marriage in his law, whether adultery or premarital sex (Exodus 20:14; Galatians 5:19). He does this for our good and for the health of society. Strong, intact families help produce emotionally healthy and stable people.

Getting pregnant outside marriage by intent (or accident) is irresponsible and sinful. That new little life will have many struggles without the benefit of a mom *and* dad who are deeply in love, committed in marriage and anxiously awaiting his or her arrival to lovingly guide him or her through life.

Celebrity single parents have millions of dollars and a staff of nannies and assistants to help with the day-to-

day realities of parenting. Entertainment magazines and websites are full of images of glamorous movie stars or other media idols having children out of wedlock or adopting cute babies from around the world. Their young lives seem ideal, but no one ever thinks of asking those children if they are really happy. Indeed, no amount of money can buy a happy family—which really comes through living according to laws God has laid down.

God expects us to behave responsibly and respectfully toward Him by obeying His law. In doing so, we will behave responsibly toward other people. Keep this in mind when sorting through the trends that surface in our society. If it breaks God's law, no matter how popular it might be, it's still wrong.

—Amanda Stiver



Is Christmas a Phony?

by Dan Dowd

Very shortly, the world will once again enter the Christmas season. Though primarily considered a Christian holiday, Christmas is increasingly big business and is celebrated by many who are not Christians. It generates billions of dollars in retail sales worldwide. But is this a holiday that Christians, or anyone else, should observe?

The origins of Christmas are many, with quite a number of its traditions actually predating the birth of Jesus Christ. Most of the origins are troubling from a Christian perspective. Let's note a few and, with this in mind, consider a principle Jesus Himself gave.

Roman connection

The date of December 25th probably originated with the ancient "birthday" of the pagan sun god Mithra, based on the idea of the rebirth of the sun during the winter solstice

period. Originally a Persian deity related to the Semitic sun god Shamash, Mithra became popularly worshipped throughout the Roman Empire, where he was called in Latin *Deus Sol Invictus Mithras* (the unconquered sun god Mithras). The Romans combined the worship of this deity with a midwinter celebration of the god Saturn

known as the Saturnalia, which began a few days before December 25th. The festival was characterized by gift-giving, feasting and singing, as well as downright debauchery, as the priests of Saturn carried wreaths of evergreen boughs in procession throughout Roman temples.

Mistletoe is bad for you

Kissing under the mistletoe is a holdover from the drunken revelry and debauchery associated with celebrating the death of the old sun and the birth of the new sun

Warner Schmidt, Wikimedia

Many Christmas customs can be traced back to the ancient worship of false gods. So should we decorate the tree and join in the seasonal festivities to honor the birth of Christ—or reject the holiday as a massive fraud?



(Charles Panati, *Extraordinary Origins of Everyday Things*, 1989—among other sources).

What Jesus has to say

In the Gospel accounts, there is no record of the date of Christ's birth. There are hints at the time of year He was born (not midwinter!), but nowhere in the New Testament does the early Church celebrate a day for the birth of Christ. Instead true followers of Jesus Christ are told—commanded, in fact—to

at the winter solstice. The Celts in pre-Christian England used the plant in religious custom around the second century B.C. The Druids (the learned class of the Celts) celebrated the start of winter by gathering the mistletoe that grew on sacred oaks and burning it as a sacrifice to their gods. If enemies chanced to meet under a tree that bore mistletoe, they were required to lay down their arms and forget their differences for a day. During the Roman feasts of Saturnalia and *Natalis Solis Invicti* (the birth of the unconquered sun), observers bound mistletoe sprigs into boughs and festively draped the garlands throughout their homes.

Christmas tree's roots

The custom of the Christmas tree is claimed by some to have begun in Germany, in the first half of the 700s. An early story relates how the British missionary monk St. Boniface was then preaching a sermon on the birth of Christ to a tribe of Germanic Druids. To convince the idolaters that the oak tree was not sacred, the so-called "Apostle of Germany" felled one on the spot. Toppling, it crushed every shrub in its path except for a small fir sapling. Legend has it that Boniface, attempting to win converts, interpreted the fir's survival as a miracle, concluding, "Let this be called the tree of the Christ Child." Subsequent Christmases in Germany were celebrated by planting fir saplings. However, this story seems a convenient way to explain away the use of evergreen trees in traditional Christian worship. We noted the Saturnalia's use of evergreens. And other historians place the origin of venerating such trees thousands of years ago in ancient Babylon, Egypt and elsewhere. Indeed, the Bible even mentions the use of green trees as pagan symbols of ancient worship and forbids their use in the worship of God (Deuteronomy 16:21; Jeremiah 17:2).

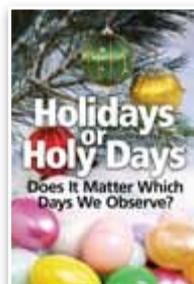
Yule log burning

As a symbol of the sun, the Yule log comes from pre-Christian times. Yule means "wheel" for the "wheel of the year"—the annual cycle with its rebirth at the winter solstice. Fires during the solstice were an important pagan practice to encourage the waning sun back to life—hence burning the Yule log. Even today, many still call this the Yuletide season

remember Passover, the day of His death (1 Corinthians 11:23-26). It was not until A.D. 337, under Roman Emperor Constantine, that these pagan customs were converted into the "Christian" holiday of Christmas.

Many know the origins of Christmas traditions and yet justify observing the holiday by saying that the original meanings of these customs are not important now that they're part of such a wonderful family time that's fun for the children. Of course, God is in favor of family time and fun—but only in accordance with His laws. Worship celebrations should follow the weekly and annual days that God chose and on which He expects us to worship Him. Tagging a pagan holiday or tradition with a Christian label is spiritually unacceptable to God the Father and Jesus Christ. Anytime the worship of God is diluted with pagan religious customs, it is no longer pure.

Consider Jesus' citing of the words He had inspired in the prophet Isaiah: "These people draw near to Me with their mouth, and honor Me with their lips, but their heart is far from Me. And in vain they worship Me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men" (Matthew 15:8-9; see Isaiah 29:13). We can easily apply this to the holiday of Christmas. Instead of being a true celebration of the coming of our Savior, it is actually based on and is still wrapped in pagan symbolism. It merely *masquerades* as a Christian celebration. As Jesus' words make clear, Christmas is phony.



To see more about the blending of pagan worship with Christianity, be sure to read "Paganism in Christianity," beginning on page 4. And for a greater discussion and review of the Christmas holiday and other traditional Christian observances, we recommend that you read our booklet *Holidays or Holy Days: Does It Matter Which Days We Observe?*

There you will also find details about the festivals God *does* want us to observe.

Dan Dowd is the assistant managing editor of *Vertical Thought* and a pastor of United Church of God congregations in Wisconsin.



Hope, Fear & the End of the World

by Randy Stiver

“I cannot describe it; I don’t remember that tumult quite clearly, but I do know that all day long I was in the grip of fear. My parents tried everything to calm me, but it didn’t help. I felt nothing, nothing but fear; I could neither eat nor sleep—fear clawed at my mind and body and shook me.” These are words that Anne Frank wrote on March 25, 1944 (as translated into English).

What do you fear? Anne Frank during her early teen years wrote about very serious fears. Her Jewish family had been in hiding in Amsterdam, in the Netherlands, for two years, and her world was coming to an end. The Nazi Gestapo (secret police) would soon capture the Frank family. Anne, her sister Margot and her mother would die in German concentration camps about a year later. Only her father would survive the death camps. After World War II he recovered and published Anne’s famous diary.

You and I have something in common with Anne Frank. Our world is coming to an end also. This is rather old news. Jesus Christ foretold the end of this age many centuries ago: “For then there will be great tribulation, such as has not been since the beginning of the world until this time, no, nor ever shall be” (Matthew 24:21). He prophesied an unprecedented time of trouble.

Obviously, facing the end of our world as we know it is a lot to cope with. So how can we best balance fear and hope?

Think about important things

As a teacher of teens and young adults, I read faces—body language—and listen to discussions. Some young people seem unaware of

anything outside their immediate presence. It’s as if they never noticed the deadly earthquakes, devastating floods, tornado epidemics, Middle Eastern revolutions, serious international tensions and economies crumbling worldwide in just the past year of 2011 alone!

However, I’m counting on you to be a vertical thinker—one who watches what happens in the world and thinks about what on earth God is doing. Have you felt any fear and concern about the unprecedented danger of our time in history? Are you wondering if there’s going to be a future for you to build a career, to meet the love of your life and then to marry and start a family? In troubled times, fear is inevitable—but I hope you also have hope!

Sometimes we need to be sobered. After all Jesus said: “These things I have spoken to you, that in Me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation; but be of

Why can't there be world peace? Poets and singers throughout history have voiced our inner desires for an age of justice and harmony. All we get is war and fear. What we want is truth and hope!

good cheer, I have overcome the world” (John 16:33). While watching and thinking about world events, maintain a positive attitude—the “good cheer” Jesus spoke of.

What on earth is God doing?

God created everything—including the human race. Every person since the creation of Adam and Eve up to now is their direct descendant, as “He has made from one blood every nation of men to dwell on all the face of the earth, and has determined their preappointed times and the boundaries of their dwellings” (Acts 17:26).

God taught mankind how to live—to love Him and to love each other. That teaching is God’s law. It alone shows what is right and what is wrong. All society must be governed by law to provide order and safety. To their own hurt, virtually no tribes or nations (including ancient Israel) have chosen to be governed by God’s law for any length of time. Sadly, humanity has lived in violation of divine law throughout history. The world lives in sin because “sin is the transgression of the law” (1 John 3:4, King James Version).

Like crime under human laws, sin carries a serious penalty for individual perpetrators—death (Romans 6:23). However, changing your thinking and behavior and having faith to accept the sacrificial death of Jesus Christ in your place leads to life!

But God is also judging the *nations*—including yours and mine. When divine judgment comes, it means punishment for the nations’ violations of divine law. That’s an important part of what God is doing on earth. He is upholding justice and administering needed—albeit painful—chastening on not just an individual but a national and global scale. And this is ultimately part of a greater purpose.

This generation

Jesus said, “This generation shall not pass, till all these things be fulfilled” (Matthew 24:34, KJV). All indications are that He was speaking of those alive today. Many factors point to the present generation being the “hinge generation,” wherein many will endure the end of this age and thrill to the dawning of a new world when Christ will rule the nations in love and peace for 1,000 years—plus forever!

That incredible millennial age offers the opportunity for this generation (as it did for all past ones too) to *follow*



“I see the world gradually being turned into a wilderness. I hear the ever-approaching thunder, which will destroy us too. I can feel the sufferings of millions and yet, if I look up into the heavens, I think that it will all come right.”

Christ now and help Him *lead* in the future when the nations “shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore” (Isaiah 2:4).

He's not called our Savior for no reason

No one manufactures an app for your cell phone that can magically “make the world a better place.” Conditions are getting worse. Although Jesus foretold the demise of civilization as we know it, He also prophesied His personal return and divine intervention to save mankind. He is indeed our Savior.

First, He will cut short the days of trouble from running their course to stop the human race from complete self-annihilation: “And unless those days were shortened, no flesh would be saved; but for the elect’s sake those days will be shortened” (Matthew 24:22). Some will survive—and He will resurrect the others at a later time. As Savior, Jesus Christ leaves behind no one truly willing to follow Him.

Second, He offers His own sacrifice to pay the penalty of sin for *all* people who ever lived! Thus Jesus is our spiritual Savior, opening for us the door into eternal life in the Kingdom of God. Of course, we’re responsible for what we know—and now you and I both *know*.

In the end, hope trumps fear

Despite the dark days that will eventually come, there is great cause for hope.

The fact that some—which can include us—will survive society’s violent collapse brings hope. That God’s plan brings the rest of the dead back to life in the future provides hope. That you have immediate access to God through Christ brings hope. That there is much good you can do today, right now, and that you have a spectacular future ahead—after the terrible troubles—brings hope!

You and I *really do* have something in common with Anne Frank. She wrote in her diary on July 15, 1944: “I see the world gradually being turned into a wilderness. I hear the ever-approaching thunder, which will destroy us too. I can feel the sufferings of millions and yet, if I look up into the heavens, I think that it will all come right.” And it will.

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PROVE THERE IS A GOD— Even Without the Bible

There are logical reasons to accept the existence of a divine Creator apart from establishing the authenticity of Scripture.

by Mario Seiglie

Proving the existence of God is the beginning of having faith in God, so it is one of the most important goals to establish in our lives. It answers whether we are alone or not as a human race and whether or not our existence has purpose.

Can we logically prove the existence of God without going to the Bible? If by “God” we mean a Creator of the universe, then the answer is certainly yes. (Specifically identifying this Creator as the Judeo-Christian God of the Bible, however, does require proving and accepting the Bible to be true—a topic for another time.)

By considering certain aspects of the natural world around us, we can arrive at the commonsense conclusion that there is a powerful, all-wise Creator who made it all.

Let’s explore five key proofs of God’s existence with clear illustrations to back them up. To make it easier to remember, we’ll use the acronym GODLY.

G for Genetics

The molecular information of genes instructs cells in how to function and reproduce. The study of genetics has revolutionized our understanding of living things and how they operate.

Key illustration: DNA. Containing the 3-billion-letter code



Dioxyribonucleic Acid—DNA

inside our cells (of four recurring letters, or chemicals actually, the names of which start with these letters), it’s a virtual library of instruction manuals for assembling and operating all the cells of the body.

A few years ago, one of the world’s most famous atheists, Professor Anthony Flew, came to the conclusion that God exists based on DNA evidence.

“What I think the DNA material has done,” he wrote, “is that it has shown, by the almost unbelievable complexity of the arrangements which are needed to produce [life], that intelligence must have been involved in getting these extraordinarily diverse elements to work together.

“It’s the enormous complexity of the number of elements and the enormous subtlety of the ways they work together. The meeting of these two parts at the right time by chance is

simply minute. It is all a matter of the enormous complexity by which the results were achieved, which looked to me like the work of intelligence” (*There Is a God*, 2007, p. 75).

In his book *The Case for a Creator*, former atheist Lee Strobel writes: “The six-feet of DNA coiled inside every one of our body’s one-hundred trillion cells contains a four-letter chemical alphabet that spells out precise assembly instructions for all the proteins from which our bodies are made. Cambridge-educated Stephen Meyer demonstrated that no hypothesis has come close to explaining how information got into biological matter by naturalistic means” (2004, p. 282).

So there is no logical explanation as to how this incredibly extensive, exquisite code inside the cell could exist without a supremely intelligent Being having designed it. Microsoft founder Bill Gates noted, “DNA is like a software program, only much more complex than anything we’ve ever devised” (*The Road Ahead*, 1996, p. 228).

It is absurd to think that *nobody* designed such a complex code—that it is simply a result of time, chance and mutation.

O for Origin

If things have an origin, they first needed *an originator*. The greatest question in philosophy is: Why does *something* exist instead of *nothing*? Philosophers don’t really have an adequate answer. But there is a principle in nature that points to the answer—everything with a beginning *has a cause*, and there are no known exceptions to this rule.

Key illustration: the universe. Physics and astronomy have



The Universe

established that it had a beginning. For instance, it can be shown that the universe is presently expanding outward from an initial point. So if everything with a beginning has a cause, and if the universe has a beginning, then it must

also have a cause that created it—the First Cause.

Moreover, everything that is caused to exist is brought about by something superior to itself. Therefore, *something* greater than the universe must have brought it into existence. This is a strong proof that a Creator exists.

D for Design

Everything that has a specific and complex design has a *designer*. For instance, a building is designed by an architect.

No amount of time, chance and unthinking natural processes can produce a building. In a similar way, we see the exquisite designs of things around us.

On Mt. Rushmore in the Black Hills of South Dakota, we see the complex and specific design of the faces of four American presidents carved into the rock. Wind and erosion can produce predictable designs on some mountains, but not obvious, well-known human faces.

History tells us that Gutzon Borglum carved the faces on Mt. Rushmore, but even if there were no record of these being sculpted, we would still know that *someone* designed them and made them. Likewise, the natural realm itself shows evidence of design.

Key illustration: the earth. The fact that so many of the planet's features had to be just right for complex life to exist



indicates that a designer was at work. The combination and interworking of such features are far too complex for them to be the product of mere chance.

For instance, for the earth to have life, it had to be

just the right size—8,000 miles in diameter. If it were 9,500 miles in diameter, scientists have concluded it would *double* the weight of the air. Then there would be so much oxygen turning into water that it would cover the entire earth. None of the continents would have appeared, so there would be no land-based life—including us.

The earth is just the right distance from the sun—93 million miles. If it were just 5 percent farther out from the sun, the earth would be too cold and mostly covered with ice. But if it were just a bit closer to the sun, it would be unbearably hot and the polar ice caps would melt, flooding the coasts.

The earth also needs the right rotational speed. If it were just a little faster, the earth would not be warmed enough, freezing much of the surface. But if it were slower, the heat would be oppressive.

It also needs just the right atmosphere—78 percent nitrogen and 21 percent oxygen, the precise amounts to sustain complex life. The earth also has the correct tilt—23.5 degrees—allowing us to have the four seasons and twice as much arable soil as a different tilt angle would provide.

Even the moon is precisely the right size and distance from the earth for the tides to move the oceans around, keeping them clean and aerated. (To find more examples, read the book *The Privileged Planet* by Guillermo Gonzalez and Jay Richards, 2004.)

L for Laws

Where did the laws of the universe come from? They're not matter or energy, but they govern how both operate. There is no intrinsic reason for the laws of nature to exist. In fact, these laws had to be created and in place when matter and

energy appeared, or there would be total chaos. The laws of the universe require that a lawgiver calibrated them and set them into effect.

Key illustration: gravity. Without this force that causes mass



to attract other objects, life could not exist. And the intensity of all the forces must be in precise ratios to one another.

The famous physicist Stephen Hawking stated: "The universe and the laws of physics

seem to have been specifically designed for us. If any of about 40 physical qualities had more than slightly different values, life as we know it could not exist: Either atoms would not be stable, or they wouldn't combine into molecules, or the stars wouldn't form the heavier elements, or the universe would collapse before life could develop, and so on" (*Austin American-Statesman*, October 19, 1997).

Who caused mass to affect its surroundings as it does to the degree that it does? Who made the other laws that must have been exquisitely designed and calibrated to work in total harmony? The logical answer: It must be an utterly supreme and all-powerful Intelligence.

Y for Yield

What does believing in God yield? Answer: positive results, especially in the long run!

Key illustration: answered prayer. If there were no God, then prayers for supernatural intervention would never be answered. Yet there are so many examples of answered prayer



all around us—of miraculous interventions that defy physical explanation. There are simply vast numbers of witnesses of this phenomenon, including this author. This should strengthen our faith in the fact that God exists

and that He cares about what happens to us.

Thus, proving that God exists is not a matter of *blind* faith—but of *well-reasoned* faith justified by hard evidence. For the evidence that there is a God is overwhelming!

Remember these five key "GODLY" concepts and accompanying five illustrations to prove God's existence *even without* the use of the Bible!

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Is God-Intended Commu



If God wanted you to constantly use a cell phone, He would have had you born with one glued to your ear. If He wanted you to be on Twitter all the time, He would have “tweeted” you by now. Is our electronic media producing what God intended for communication, or not?

by Scott Hoefker

“**O**h how awful—like, how did you survive?!” one young adult expressed to me recently, “How did you communicate?” All I told him was that when I was in high school, Facebook, YouTube, MySpace, Twitter, instant messaging and cell phones didn’t exist.

But he had a good question. How did anybody survive without social networking?

While throttling forward in your life, trying to keep up with everything, do you ever feel like you’d just like to sit down with maybe a glass of iced tea or a latte and *just talk to someone*—to connect with a live, breathing, speaking, in-the-flesh human being? If you do, you’re not alone—and what you want is what God intended.

How helpful is electronic communication?

Research and studies show that although we “think” we’re communicating more effectively through all our electronic gadgets and programs, we may not actually be.

During counseling sessions in my practice, I’ve clearly stated that, while in session, *all* portable electronic devices must be turned off. Why? Because otherwise there is a constant barrage of texts, e-mails and calls that “just have to” be answered or read—interfering with clear communication in the sessions.

Consequently, many today explain, “My husband and I”—or “My child and I,” or “My friend and I”—“just don’t communicate anymore. There is always an interruption of some kind just when we really start to talk.” Some clients explain that they have trouble communicating with God because, as they state in terms like this: “I’ve never really understood what it means to talk to anyone face to face, much less to talk to God!”

A business owner told me this story: “I receive an inquiry from my website contact page. Then I follow up with an estimate via e-mail, receive approval, complete the job, send an invoice and receive payment—without ever having to even see or speak to the customer.” How good is that—or how bad?

iStockphoto

Communication Disappearing?



E-mail and texting have no body language, nor do they convey the tone of voice that you experience in a face-to-face conversation.

How God communicates

God is very real, and we human beings He created are very real too. But the businessman's and counseling clients' experiences made me stop to consider. Is our electronic media stealing the deep communication God intended for us?

Throughout the Bible, we see examples where people interacted with God personally. Abraham, the father of the faithful, talked personally with God (Genesis 17:1, 22). Jacob, the grandson of Abraham, talked with God face to face (Genesis 32:20). Moses, who led Israel out of Egypt, spoke with God "face to face, as a man speaks to his friend" (Exodus 33:11).

Much later when the apostle John desired to be with his brothers and sisters in Christ, he wrote, "I hope to visit and talk things over with you personally. Then we will be completely filled with joy" (2 John 12, God's Word Translation). God desires the same with us. It's good to know that when we pray we're personally talking to Him and that He is listening.

Technological failure to communicate deeply

So just how is interpersonal communication today being weakened by technology?

There are certain benefits to electronic media and social networking. Most of us use them on a daily basis, me included. However, research has long shown that the majority (55 percent) of our communication is nonverbal. Nonverbal communication—or body language—includes facial expression, gestures, eye contact and posture. Another 38 percent of communication is vocal tone, while only 7 percent is the actual meaning of the words.

E-mail and texting have no body language, nor do they convey the tone of voice you experience in a face-to-face conversation. Texting, we find out, is effectively robbing today's younger generation of proper writing and spelling skills. Even advertising on some billboards now reflects the texting jargon.

Challenges may be caused by the use of texting and Facebook chat due to the rate by which questions are asked and topics are changed. Rapidly asking question after question is great for trying to learn a lot of different things about a person, but there are often never any deep conversations, especially since SMS-type messages only allow 160 characters.

How many times have you been affected by or involved in a serious communication breakdown that was able to be resolved by talking face to face?

Healthy communication how-tos

Young people often experience social detachment while engrossing themselves in electronic media. Sadly, parents sometimes give a handheld game to a child and state, "Now, go play somewhere, and be quiet. We'll talk later." Then, after "later" comes without any meaningful communication, one or the other at some point remarks, "We never talk, and this happens all the time!"

Psychologists and counselors through the ages have discussed the need we all have for interaction and communication to remain healthy. God made human beings with the deep need to communicate not only with Him as their Creator but with each other. So, how then can you build the habit of healthy communication with and without electronic media?

1. Make a conscious effort every day to have a real-life, face-to-face conversation with someone.
2. Step away from or turn off your device and talk with the person directly.
3. Don't "check in" on Facebook or other social media sites for one whole day—and see if the world has stopped.
4. Look for opportunities to reconnect with friends or colleagues in a face-to-face setting at a meal or over tea or coffee.
5. Realize that we all can have solid, God-based friendships with other people without ever using any social electronic media.

Remember, there is a time and place for texting or status updates. But every day is the time and many are the places for healthy face-to-face conversations. Talk to people and enjoy the body language, tone of voice *and* the meaning of their words—as God intended.

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What's Right With Marriage

More and more voices in society attempt to run down marriage, claiming it's out of date and seeking to change its definition. But there's still much to be said for this relationship God instituted when He first made man and woman.

by Scott Hoefker

It was 27 years ago that I promised my wife-to-be, before God and witnesses, “I do.” I committed my life to her, and she committed hers to me. What’s happened in the cosmos since then?

Societal shifts now propose that not only was the ceremony we went through back then archaic, but that marriage itself is soon to be nonessential to society as a whole. Marriage has become almost a dirty word to a growing number in our culture today.

The fact of the matter, though, is that many aspects of marriage *positively* affect society as a whole. So let’s ask: What’s *right* with marriage?

Details in the wedding ceremony

In wedding ceremonies we’ve probably heard words like these:

“Surely there can be no greater human joy than to have a happy marriage, filled with giving and sharing. There is no deeper relationship among human beings than that achieved by a husband and wife in marriage.

“Marriage is a natural union but a divine institution, ordained of God. It was established by the Creator God at creation and derives its authority from the divine laws of God, immutable and unchangeable.

“Men and women were created with the marvelous potential of eternal life in the family of God. And as a loving Father, God gave us the institution of marriage and the blessing of a family, in which we might learn to love one another as He loves us.

“In Genesis 2:24 [King James Version] we read, “Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh.”

Note the part where a man shall be united with his *wife*, not merely “relationship partner” or “significant other.” It is this husband-wife union forming a right, harmonious relationship that produces, based on the God-given laws set in motion from the creation of human beings, happiness, peace, joy and other blessings.

Marriage—the great stabilizer

The wedding ceremony continues with instructions about marriage and concludes with the marriage vows. Both bride and groom take these vows, answering affirmatively to a question like this:

“Do you then [name of one in the couple] faithfully promise and covenant with God, in the presence of these witnesses, to take

[name of the other in the couple] to be your lawful wedded wife/husband—in sickness and in health, in good times and in difficult times, for as long as you both shall live?”

As God intended, marriage provides stability for the family. It gives children an opportunity to see both parents. It offers a greater possibility for success in life, as afforded by support within a family structure. It thunders loudly to your own family and your community that you are committed to each other and to God to make life work.

The curse of anti-marriage philosophy

Several decades ago the common contrary-to-marriage term was LTA (living together arrangement). Many experimented with this idea only to find that “things didn’t work out as planned” or “things were not as expected.” Their lives and their children’s lives were destabilized and unhappy.

Today, unmarried young adults face the temptation of “hooking up,” or just living together. The implication is that a person can simply walk away if the other person doesn’t meet expectations. While that may seem like a simple fix, the emotional instability, heartache and pain typically related to the breakup conclusively does damage that will last for a lifetime.

Self-proclaimed guardians of our social norms have labeled marriage subversive, unnecessary and harmful. Yet one young adult expressed during counseling, “I wish my parents would have just stayed committed to being married... I felt as if I as their child did not really matter

to them when they gave up on making their marriage work.” In spite of anti-marriage denouncements, a chaotic home that is a fatherless or motherless arena has been proven to have a negative effect on children and youth in school. The effort required to make a marriage work provides many lasting benefits.

God Himself declares in the Bible that marriage is a good thing: “He who finds a wife [or she who finds a husband] finds a good thing, and obtains favor from the LORD” (Proverbs 18:22). Further, as we saw in Genesis 2:24, God designed marriage to be an intimate relationship between one man and one woman—and it is to be in covenant with Him (see Malachi 2:13-16; Matthew 19:4-6).

It's all about commitment

Well-known psychologist and author about marriage John Gottman insightfully wrote:

“That’s one of the great things about love: When people really love and they make a commitment, they become enormously vulnerable and enormously powerful—because they care so much and it connects them to the world in such a big way.

“That’s the amazing thing about all of these benefits: They are conferred by commitment. The commitment is like falling over backward and translates into making you a mensch [a person of integrity and honor] and a concerned human being—somebody who is involved in the community of mankind.”

Peter Cook, as the impressive clergyman with the funny voice in the film *The Princess Bride*, said it so well: “Marriage. Marriage is what brings us together today. Love, true love ... so treasure your loves forever.”

What's right with this institution?

Commitment is right. Lifelong, true love between a husband and wife is right. Family love and family stability is right. And especially, personal and marital dedication to God and His way of living is right.

You can begin to make your future marriage right by reading in the Bible what God wants your future marriage and all marriages to be. But first focus on the future wife or husband God wants you to be.

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“Friends With Benefits” What’s the Problem?

As is now fairly well-known, the expression “friends with benefits” refers to the relationship where a guy and girl who are friends socialize, share companionship at times and have regular sex with “no strings attached”—no acknowledged committed relationship. They mutually agree to not let their emotions get entangled with sex and actively seek relationships with others while still maintaining that arrangement (Diana Appleyard, “Friends with Benefits: The Relationships Where Male and Female Friends Have ‘No Strings’ Sex ... But It’s Seldom That Simple,” *Daily Mail*, July 28, 2011).

Another societal trend, more involved than “friends with benefits” yet not as tied down as cohabiting or living together, is the “stayover” relationship, where a young adult couple in a sexual relationship will stay at one partner’s house for four or five days and then switch, so as to avoid commitment (Shreya Badola, “Friends With Benefits, Live-in Give Way to New Trend—Stayover Relationships,” *Daily News and Analysis India*, August 29, 2011).

These experimental relationships are popularly assumed to be commonsense alternatives to marriage, but are they really?

Can a man and a woman have sex and be completely emotionally unattached? As a rule, no, they cannot. Particularly for women, sex carries a huge emotional load and a complicated release of hormones. Likewise for a man, maintaining such a

frivolous attitude toward a sexual relationship with a woman is not what God intended.

This very clearly breaks the law of God, namely the Seventh Commandment to not commit adultery (Exodus 20:14), which in the broad sense includes all sex outside of God-ordained marriage. These trends therefore endanger the eternal salvation of those who participate in them unless they truly repent, establish a right relationship with God and change their behavior.

Such relationships potentially destroy the ability of two people to understand and realize a true, committed marriage relationship. The emotional baggage they take on (a sense of betrayal, continuous jealousy, emotional upheaval) can affect all of their future relationships.

What’s the solution? Follow God in obeying His commands, treating others and yourself with respect. Reserve sex exclusively for committed, godly marriage—rejecting “friends with benefits,” “stayover” and cohabiting relationships.

—Amanda Stiver



One a queen by marriage and the other by birth, one forced by circumstance into a lonely royal marriage and the other forced to a lonely life without marriage: Consider two famous women of valor from long-separated eras of history.

Let me introduce you to Queen Esther of Persia, who lived nearly 2,500 years ago, and Queen Elizabeth I of England, who lived about 400 years ago. The choices they made affect us to this very day and show the powerful impact of leadership based in conviction, courage and wisdom.

WOMEN OF VALOR:

Queen Esther & Queen Elizabeth I

Biblical and later history offer lessons of convicted, courageous and wise leadership.

by Amanda Stiver

Life at court

Esther was a young Jewish girl of the Israelite tribe of Benjamin, an orphan raised by her older cousin Mordecai in Persia. When the Persian emperor Ahasuerus (Xerxes) sought a new queen, Esther was among those selected to be presented before him. After many months of preparation, he chose her as one of his wives and as the new queen.

King Ahasuerus' court lacked no shortage of intrigue. Mordecai, who was appointed to a position of responsibility at the palace gate, intercepted a plot to assassinate the king, and those behind it were executed.

Afterward another terrible plot arose. The king appointed a new prime minister, Haman the Agagite. When Mordecai refused a command to bow down before this man, Haman became furious and convinced the king to issue a decree calling for the annihilation of Mordecai's people, the Jews (evidently without telling the king the identity of the people or that this had anything to do with Mordecai).

Esther's choice

To thwart Haman's evil plot to exterminate her people, Queen Esther had to make a decision. To reveal the dastardly intentions of Haman, would she go against court protocols and restrictions forbidding even her as queen to approach the king uninvited? This was no small matter. If the king did not respond with acceptance when she entered the palace inner court, Esther would quickly be put to death.

Mordecai sent a grave message to Esther. He told her that if she did not go before the king, deliverance would come to the Jews from elsewhere while she would perish. So Esther determined that, after leading a three-day fast, she would act.

Despite the danger, she humbly went before the king, and he received her. At length, he learned from her the truth about Haman's plot. As a result, Haman was hung on the gallows he had ordered built for Mordecai, and the Jews were allowed by new royal decree to defend themselves.

Likewise, God expects us to courageously step forward in faith to follow Him. In the end it is always far better to obey God than to fear what man can do.

Schemes and plots

In the time of Elizabeth I, court intrigue formed a tangled web. Religious disputes added to the complications. Her father, King Henry VIII, had broken with the Roman Catholic pope to divorce his first wife Catherine of Aragon, a Spanish princess, and established the Protestant Church of England with himself as the head.

Several years after Henry died, his and Catherine's daughter Mary, Elizabeth's older half-sister, became queen. A Catholic who married a Catholic prince of Spain, Queen Mary wished to see the English Protestant Reformation overturned. She was often called "Bloody Mary" for the many executions of religious dissenters she endorsed.

Having been raised a Protestant, Elizabeth was constantly under suspicion of treason, her life at risk. She was imprisoned in the Tower of London, where royals and other important people were executed, under the accusation that she might plot to depose her sister. Only when Mary was finally persuaded of her innocence was Elizabeth released.

Elizabeth's choice

Both Esther and Elizabeth had to act against the conventions and expectations of their circumstances. Elizabeth's challenge, however, came not in the confines of marriage but in choosing not to marry.

The rulers of Europe expected her, as a princess and later as queen, to take a prince, king or other powerful man as her husband. This was the precedent, and other powerful nations, among them Spain and France, hoped to effectively annex England by such a marriage.

Once again, Elizabeth, a Protestant Christian, faced a religious battle. Spain and France were at the time ruled by Roman Catholic kings who, being subject to the pope, wished to use a royal marriage to force England back under the umbrella of Catholicism.

To protect the relative religious freedom of her kingdom, Elizabeth chose to forgo marriage to a foreign sovereign or prince. Likewise, she also chose to forgo marriage to any of a number of powerful English aristocrats whose ambition was to rule England through a royal wife.

Royal wisdom and wise counsel

It takes courage and wisdom to remain confident and faithful despite the schemes of conniving people. Both Queen Esther and Queen Elizabeth used wisdom and caution to navigate webs of intrigue and plots that surrounded them.

Esther relied on the council of Mordecai and of the harem eunuch Hegai. The latter gave her advice about how to please the king and how to take care of herself, while Mordecai reminded Esther to be true to her faith and her people. Esther also looked to God's guidance

God expects us to courageously step forward in faith to follow Him. In the end it is far better to obey God than to fear what man can do.

through fasting.

Similarly, Queen Elizabeth sought wise council from her advisor William Cecil, Baron Burghley. She also recognized the existence and power of God, the primary step to true wisdom. Lastly, she relied on the advice of a Latin saying, *Video et taceo* ("I see and keep silent"). It is wise to observe circumstances carefully before speaking, to see the whole picture before acting.

Queen for a day

These two ladies lived momentous lives. Imagine wearing the crowns of each of these great queens on their days of greatest challenge. What lessons of conviction, courage and wisdom might we learn from their varied histories?

Would you bravely traverse the sticky corridors of intrigue by carefully choosing your words wisely and remaining true to your convictions? Would you take your life in your hands and go before King Ahasuerus? Facing religious persecution, would you be willing to challenge the executioner?

Esther was brave not just for herself but for all the Jewish people. Her courage directly contributed to their national deliverance. The book bearing her name in the Bible powerfully inspires us to faithfulness.

Queen Elizabeth's determined choice to remain unmarried foiled political interlopers and foreign powers desiring to force England back into the Catholic fold. That decision allowed religious freedom to flourish in England, setting the stage for her successor, King James I, to produce his monumental English translation of the Bible—the King James Version, which transformed English life and culture.

Just as these great queens, we too can search for sound mentors to guide us into good sense and right principles. Today, we seek the path of truth from the Scriptures, the wisest counsel. Then, when circumstance demands it, we can observe carefully, choose our words wisely and stand up for what is right.

We must fear God, not other people, to truly be people of valor.

Amanda Stiver is a *Vertical Thought* staff member and a freelance writer and editor in Cincinnati, Ohio.

Lessons From the Mighty Sequoia

Some fascinating details about these wonders of nature provide striking spiritual lessons.

by Dan Dowd

I love trees, but these were more like TREES! This past summer, my family and I took the opportunity to walk among the giant sequoias in King's Canyon National Park in California. While pondering these phenomenal trees, which are a truly magnificent part of God's creation, I thought of a number of spiritual lessons.

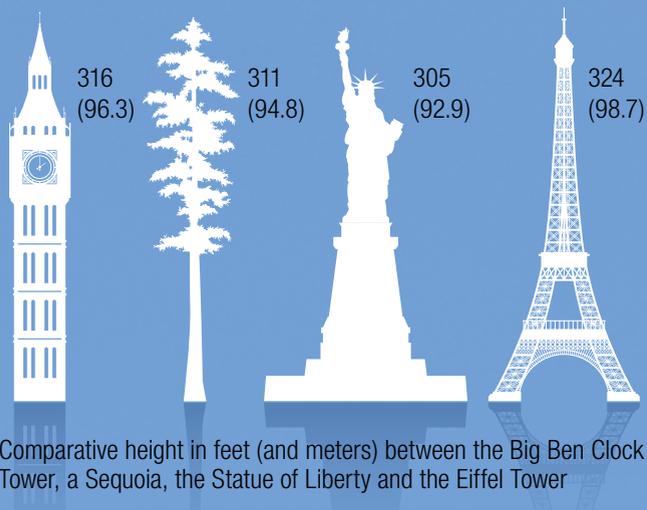
But first, consider these key facts regarding the sequoias:

- The scientific name for the sequoia is *Sequoiadendron giganteum*—the giant sequoia—and they are related to the better-known redwoods.
- Sequoias grow naturally only on the western slope of the Sierra Nevada mountain range, most often between elevations of 5,000 and 7,000 feet. They grow up to two feet in height per year until they reach 200 to 300 feet high—then, like people, they grow outward in girth.
- The average base of a sequoia can be as much as 40 feet in diameter—and a few reach more than 100 feet in diameter.
- The thick, spongy bark can be as much as 31 inches thick.
- Its branches can be up to eight feet in diameter (many of these branches being thicker and longer than an average tree) and can have more than 11,000 cones, ideally dispersing more than 300,000 seeds per year.
- The oldest living sequoia is a tree named the General Sherman in Sequoia National Park (adjacent to King's Canyon). It is more than 275 feet high, has a base diameter of 102 feet, weighs approximately 2.7 million pounds and is estimated to be more than 2,200 years old.
- The giant sequoias are the largest trees measured by total volume (redwoods are taller and the bristlecone pines are older) and are the largest living things on the planet. They can weigh 4,000 tons (eight million pounds) and can have a volume of 30,000 to 50,000 cubic feet (20 Olympic-size swimming pools of water).

Let's now look at some powerful life-lessons we can learn from the mighty sequoia.

Fire is necessary for the sequoia to reproduce.

While the sequoia is massive when fully grown, the cone it produces is only the size of a



Comparative height in feet (and meters) between the Big Ben Clock Tower, a Sequoia, the Statue of Liberty and the Eiffel Tower

chicken egg, with seeds smaller than oat flakes (a lesson in itself—compare Matthew 13:31-32). The cone can hang on the tree for years, green and unopened. Even if it falls to the ground it remains unopened until it dries out—and this is where the fire comes in.

When the National Park Service took over the care of King’s Canyon Park in the 1800s, they worked hard to prevent forest fires. It was more than 100 years before they discovered they were actually working *against* the sequoia, because the sequoia needs fire for the cone to open and the seeds to germinate.

Fire is a purifying process even in forests. What looks like a trial for the sequoia is in reality the process they need for future growth. What about you? What fiery trials have you gone through (or are going through) that God is using for your future growth?

The apostle Peter wrote, “Beloved, do not think it strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened to you; but rejoice to the extent that you partake of Christ’s sufferings, that when His glory is revealed, you may also be glad with exceeding joy” (1 Peter 4:12-13).

Fire clears the underbrush so newly germinated seeds can grow.

Since the sequoia can withstand fire that consumes most other trees, it is left standing after the fire is extinguished. As a result, the ground around it is not only cleared for its seeds to germinate, but the ground has also been fertilized with the ashes of those other burned trees and underbrush. The seeds can only grow successfully in full sunlight, free from overshadowing vegetation.

During that fiery process, the sequoia itself is protected. The thick, spongy bark shields it from the tremendous heat of forest fires. In fact, the bark contains tannic acid, a fire retardant used in modern fire extinguishers.

Commonly referred to as the “faith chapter,” Hebrews 11 records the stories of many faithful followers of God. Most of them did not have easy lives and faced various faith-testing situations. They are historical examples of people who, like we must today, stood fast in true faith toward God to extinguish those fiery flames (verse 34)—like the mighty sequoia in the natural realm. Faith carries you through the fires of life and helps you grow.

Sequoias don’t die of old age—they die from falling down.

The sequoia is so resistant to pests and fire that their most common cause of death is simply falling down. For a tree so massive, how can this be? The answer is that the roots of sequoias only go 6 to 20 feet into the ground, and a sufficient windstorm can topple them, particularly if there is a buildup of ice and snow on the branches.

But sequoias don’t typically grow alone. They grow in groves. Even though their roots may only grow 20 feet deep, those roots spread out to cover a wide area—intertwining with other sequoias. Combined together, their roots help them to withstand the winds.

True followers of Jesus Christ need to be well-grounded and rooted deep in God and His Word—and also stand together against the devil and his negative spiritual influence in this world. In advance of Peter’s denial of Him the night He was arrested, Jesus told Peter, “When you have returned to Me, strengthen your brethren” (Luke 22:32).

We are stronger when we are rooted in the foundation of God the Father and Jesus Christ, standing together with others of like mind.

Sequoias can die from fire—if the fire gets through their protective bark.

The mighty sequoias are unique with their fire-resistant bark, but if there is an opening in the bark or if fire is too close to the roots, then the fire can get inside or underneath the bark. Once fire gets past the bark there is nothing to stop it. The fire won’t consume the tree immediately, as there are still the tannins that resist fire, but the fire will smolder, essentially slow-burning the tree from the inside out.

When explorers first found the sequoia, they couldn’t believe the size of these incredible trees. They found many massive trunks on the ground, and many of these trunks were hollow. They often used those hollow trunks for shelter and storage—some being large enough for men and horses to stand up in! There are still some trees like this on the ground, and if you walk through them you can see evidence of the fire that consumed the inside.

Negative, emotional and evil spiritual fire for a Christian—or anyone—is dangerous if we allow it to take hold. A Bible proverb speaks of this danger: “Can a man take fire to his bosom, and his clothes not be burned?” (Proverbs 6:27).

Becoming offended, being offensive or harboring hatred, anger or wrong desire is like a slow-burning fire that can consume us from the inside and cut us off from Jesus Christ and His people.

God has “concealed” many wonderful spiritual truths and lessons in His creation for you to seek and find (see Proverbs 25:2). It was truly awe-inspiring to stand in the presence of those giant trees. As we ponder God’s creation, let’s remember the spiritual lessons we can draw from it—including the lessons from the mighty sequoia.

Dan Dowd is the assistant managing editor of *Vertical Thought* and a pastor of United Church of God congregations in Wisconsin.

Getting Lost ... With a GPS?

A recent poll in Britain indicates that 52 percent of drivers ages 18 to 24 used Global Positioning System (GPS) satellite navigation, while only 28 percent of those over 65 used a GPS. The older drivers, however, were more likely to carry an atlas, and that, coupled with traditional navigation skills, helped them while driving to avoid getting lost as often than their younger, GPS-only counterparts (David Millward, "Sat Nav Loses More Motorists Than Maps," Telegraph.co.uk, July 14, 2011).

What can these statistics teach us? Knowing how to use GPS is beneficial, but relying on the technology alone is unwise. Be aware of where you are while you are driving; pay attention to landmarks and street signs. If you do use a GPS, make sure you have a map with you as well, and know how to read it. Keep your GPS updated with the most recent information. A GPS with a few old-fashioned navigation skills can be a great combination.



83%

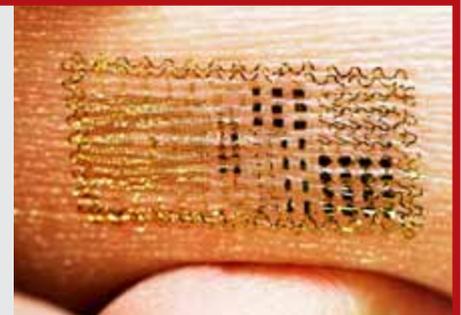
**Segment of Americans
who own a cell phone.**

Aaron Smith, "Americans and Their Cell Phones," Pew Internet and American Life Project at PewInternet.org, Aug. 15, 2011

Tiny Technology

Scientists at Northwestern University in Illinois, along with a team of international researchers, have developed an electronic skin tattoo, called an epidermal electronic system (EES), that temporarily sticks to skin and could potentially be used to monitor health conditions, to interact with computer games or for covert operations.

The device could replace electrodes for monitoring brain, heart and muscles. It picks up sub-vocal communication for use in the world of espionage and gaming. It requires



minimal power and can fuel itself from built-in solar collectors or electromagnetic radiation in the air. Thinner than a human hair, it can stick to skin with adhesive ("Electronic Skin Tattoo Has Medical, Gaming, Spy Uses," Breitbart.com, Aug. 11, 2011).

"Manorexia"—New Threat

Anorexia among men is a growing concern to health officials according to new statistics from the United Kingdom. A 66 percent increase in hospitalizations of men for eating disorders in the past 10 years has experts worried that the endless emphasis on muscles and on model and celebrity physiques is contributing to the problem.

Over-exercising is a significant marker of eating disorders in men, along with limiting food consumption and even purging. Physicians fear that it may be more difficult for men to get help because of the perception that eating disorders are a disease of teenage girls ("Manorexia' on the Rise," DailyMail.co.uk, July 13, 2011).

Rusty Wheat: New Fungus Threatens Crops

New specially designed wheat varieties are in the works to combat a deadly fungus that could potentially threaten the world wheat crop. The strain Ug99 stem rust, originally identified in Uganda in 1999, is carried by wind and has traveled beyond East Africa, reaching down to southern Africa so far. Experts fear it is only a matter of time before it hits the Indian subcontinent, Australia and the Americas.

Researchers, such as those of the Durable Rust Resistance in Wheat team at Cornell University, are optimistic that they can develop a wheat variety that will thwart the rust and be productive. Varieties under testing at the



International Maize and Wheat Improvement Center in Mexico have shown resistance to Ug99, yellow and leaf rust. They also boost yields. However, it will take time and money to produce and disburse the new seeds on a wide scale ("Scientists: 'Super' Wheat to Boost Food Security," Minnesota.cbslocal.com, June 10, 2011).



Stone Chest From the Time of Christ Authenticated

Researchers at Bar-Ilan and Tel Aviv universities have authenticated an ossuary chest belonging to a daughter of the Caiaphas family, hereditary

high priests in Jerusalem during the time of Christ. Used for secondary bone burial after the body had decomposed, it had been plundered by antiquities thieves.

An Aramaic inscription on the chest dates to the time of the Second Temple and reads "Miriam Daughter of Yeshua Son of Caiaphas, Priests of Ma'aziah from Beth Imri." The inscription confirms a detail of New Testament history—that the Caiaphas family did in fact exist, one member of which would have, as high priest, presided over the trial of Jesus Christ, as the New Testament states. It also confirms that the Israelite priesthood's Ma'aziah course, established by King David 1,000 years before Christ, was still active in Christ's day and that the Caiaphas family was part of it (Michelle Morris, "2,000-Year-Old Ossuary Authentic, Say Researchers," *The Jerusalem Post*, June 29, 2011).

Another ossuary found back in 1990 was inscribed with the name "Joseph, son of Caiaphas"—another member of the family.

These details of history are fascinating, and the new find once again highlights the very accurate account of the past outlined in the biblical record.

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A Dog's Life



A Florida University team has proven that dogs have a sense of human body language. Domesticated dogs were tested as well as undomesticated wolves. Both types of animals were allowed to beg for food from an attentive person and an inattentive person. Both species knew how to beg, suggesting that begging, and thereby reading the behavior of the human being most likely to supply a treat, is a natural trait of canines, not just a learned trait of domesticated animals (Richard Alleyne, "Dogs Can Instinctively Sense a Friendly Face," *Telegraph.co.uk*, June 10, 2011).

God designed His creation with the ability to adapt to various environments and situations. Dogs can learn, as can other animals, and develop a unique relationship with human beings.

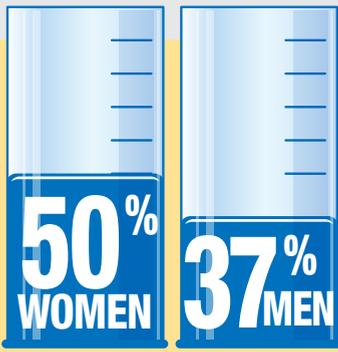
Diamonds in Space?

Scientists have located a planet circling a small pulsar star not far from our galaxy. Based on its density and carbon content, experts presume that it is crystalline and would, essentially, be made of diamond. Its small orbit, such that it could fit inside our sun, suggests that it's a remnant of a much larger star that lost its outer layers (Ben Hirschler, "Astronomers Discover Planet Made of Diamond," *Reuters*, Aug. 25, 2011).



While scientists can postulate the origins and materials of the universe, we can know its Creator: "When I consider Your heavens, the work of Your fingers, the moon and the stars, which You have ordained, what is man that You are mindful of him, and the son of man that you visit him?" (Psalm 8:3-4).

For more information on how to prove God's existence and learn more about how His creation was formed, please read our free booklets *Life's Ultimate Question: Does God Exist?* and *Creation or Evolution: Does It Really Matter What You Believe?* at www.ucg.org/booklets/.



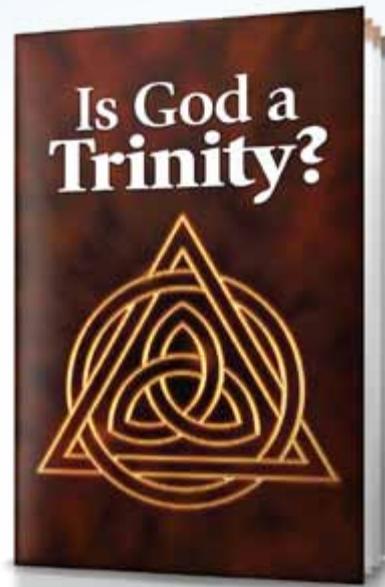
The percentage of American women and men who see the value of a college education.

Wendy Wang and Kim Parker, "Women See Value and Benefits of College; Men Lag on Both Fronts, Survey Finds," *Pew Research Center at PewSocialTrends.org*, Aug. 17, 2011

The Holy Spirit is a power, not a person ...

- ... So why do so many professing Christians believe in the Trinity?
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