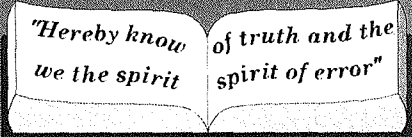


The Discerner



Volume 17, Number 4

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AN INTERDENOMINATIONAL HERESY-EXPOSING QUARTERLY

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EDITORIAL

By William A. BeVier

In this issue of The Discerner we have a continuation of Robert C. Hill's series "Why I Am Not a Bible Student." The title should be an attention "getter." The "Bible Student" referred to is the Bible Student Movement, which is a break off from the Jehovah's Witnesses. This group claims to be the true and orthodox followers of Charles Taze Russell, who have not been corrupted by the ideas of Judge Rutherford and his successors in the Watch Tower.

This is followed by the completion of Brooks Alexander's two-part series linking the Heaven's Gate group to the New Age Movement. He warns there are similar groups to come.

One of the issues being discussed and increasingly practiced today is cremation; this includes Christians. Dr. Roy E. Knuteson, for some time Senior Pastor of Fellowship Bible Church in Fort Collins, Colorado, has written a tract on the subject. With his permission we have reprinted his presentation. Additional copies of the

tract are available from the author (2312 Valley Forge Ave, Ft. Collins, CO 80526).

All of us are aware we are living in a changing world. Almost daily we are reminded of this when we seek to obtain books to stock. Many good books written only a few years ago are no longer available from the publishers, suppliers, or even the authors (when still living). Some of the current authors and publishers seem no longer willing to deal with issues and personalities of a non-biblical nature. Law suits and threats of law suits have caused some to seek to avoid anything which might cause a controversy. For this reason our "new" Catalog is already out-of-date and we have prepared an up-date in this issue of The Discerner.

I want to take this opportunity to thank all those who regularly pray for and contribute financially to this ministry. Without you R.A.S. would not continue. We hear from some of you faithfully each month. May the

Lord bless you. The office still is being staffed by volunteers. We are thankful for them too.

Most of you will receive this issue as we are remembering the First

Advent of Christ. As with the Apostle John, we anticipate the Second Advent (Rev. 22:20). In the meantime, we continue to serve daily (I Cor. 15:58).

CORRECTION

Michael E. Amatucci in his article printed in the Jul-Aug-Sep 1997 Discerner quoted from the New King James Version. He wants it to be known that he now uses only the King James Version.

WHY I AM NOT A BIBLE STUDENT (PART TWO)

By Robert C. Hill, Th.B.

Theological Views of the Bible Students

The Trinity is denied. But, this would be expected. Flowing from this tenet is the denial of the deity of Jesus and the deity and personage of the Holy Spirit. There is also a complete denial of any kind of eternal punishment and an adherence to the belief of a second chance for salvation to those who did not have an opportunity to hear the Gospel in their lifetime. There is also the belief that Jesus' second advent has already happened, and some Bible Students even date that event. "The times of restitution of all things began at the time our Lord returned in the fall of 1874." Accordingly, with His return came the resurrection of the dead saints, "The dead in Christ were resurrected in 1878" (Fort Worth Bible Students, inside cover). In order to maintain this invisible return of our Lord, Russell taught one must have the eyes of faith to discern it as already occurring. And so the circular argument goes that if someone does not believe our Lord's second advent has occurred, then that person does not have the eyes of faith.

The remainder of this article will offer a brief overview of the following doctrinal teachings: the Holy Trinity, Jesus, the Holy Spirit, salvation, hell, the Christ, and the Divine Plan of the Ages. As expected, there is no agree-

ment in each of these areas of belief. Enough will be gleaned in order to present the heretical teachings promulgated under the guise of True Christianity.

Holy Trinity or Pagan Myth?

The doctrine of the Holy Trinity is severely attacked by most cults, and the Bible Students make no exception. Although very monotheistic in belief, they do not allow the Trinitarian position of One God in Three Persons, so that the Father is not the Son and the Son is not the Holy Spirit and the Holy Spirit is not the Father but each holding to all the attributes of God being one in essence or substance yet three in persons. They claim that this doctrine has its roots in pagan mythology and was rejected by the early apostles and the church. In fact, according to the Bible Students, this doctrine "was championed chiefly by the educated converts from Paganism and resisted by ordinary believers" (The Lord our God is one Lord: a Scriptural Evaluation of the Trinity, 2). Of course this is an idea not supported by history despite the attempts of others as well to find such an historical source for proof.

Depending on which Bible Student publication is used, will determine which definition of the Trinity is ascribed to the historic church. Indeed, even C. T. Russell

himself seemed somewhat confused on this matter. Notice Russell's variations of the Trinity definition. In one source he teaches, "The doctrine of the Trinity holds that the Father, the Son and the holy Spirit are one in person, equal in glory and in power, as stated in the Church creeds" (Russell, Studies 5:59). Of course this is not the expression in any of the historic creeds as far as orthodoxy is concerned. The doctrine of the Trinity does not hold that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are one in person, a heretical form of modalism, but rather three in persons, one in substance. The weight of Scripture demands that God is One, of which He is composed of three distinct, coequal coeternal persons of the same substance. Russell's lack of understanding on this doctrine is further demonstrated by another of his statements, "inasmuch as the general thought of Christendom is greatly perplexed by what is known as 'The doctrine of the Trinity'.... They declare in one breath that there is only *one* God (because the Scriptures so positively emphasize this point that it cannot be ignored), yet in the same breath they declare that there are three Gods (because to this theory they are committed by 'traditions of the fathers' handed down from earliest Papacy). But how could there be *three* Gods and yet only *one* God?" (54-55). Here Russell errs by attributing another heresy, tritheism, to the historic view held by the church. In another place Russell did get the definition correct of three Persons in One God, the same in substance, equal in power and glory, yet he wrongly charges, "This view suited well 'the dark ages' which it helped to

produce. The period in which *mysteries* were worshipped...." Continuing with this quotation demonstrates how he manipulated the correct definition into meaning something else, "How could the *three be one in person* in substance? ... Does not every intelligent person know that if God is *one* in person He cannot be *three*? And that if *three* in person there can be only *one* sense in which the three could be one, and that not in person, but in purpose, in mind, in will, in cooperation?" (166). The three are not one in person, but three in person, one in substance. The distinction of persons is not maintained in Russell's understanding as just observed. The truth of the matter is that the church has held onto the Biblical teaching of three persons in one God, not three gods in one person or three persons in one person, both of which is heretical. Russell and the Bible Students are making false charges when using the former types of definitions for articulating the historical view.

Look at what others have stated regarding this sacred doctrine. From the Westminster Confession the orthodox definition of the Holy Trinity is, "In the unity of the Godhead there are three Persons of one substance, power, and eternity: God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Ghost. The Father is of none, neither begotten nor proceeding; the Son is eternally of the Father; the Holy Ghost, eternally proceeding from the Father and the Son. The Moody Handbook of Theology, by Paul Enns, asserts, "While there is one God, there are three eternally distinct and equal persons in the Godhead, existing as

Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Each is distinct from the other, yet the three are united as one God. The term *Trinity* may best express the idea" (649). Another definition taken from the Evangelical Dictionary of Theology, where G. W. Bromiley writes:

The term designating one God in three persons. Although not itself a biblical term, 'The Trinity' has been found a convenient designation for the one God self-revealed in Scripture as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. It signifies that within the one essence of the Godhead we have to distinguish three "persons" who are neither three gods on the one side, nor three parts or modes of God on the other; but coequally and coeternally God. (1112)

What can be gleaned from the correct expression of the Holy Trinity and how is it maintained in Scripture? The correct understanding clearly asserts both oneness and threeness of God: oneness, Deut. 6:4; Mk. 12:29; Isa. 45:5, 6 and threeness, Jn. 6:27; Jn. 1:1; Acts 5:3, 4. The definitions clearly assert the divine attributes of being coeternal and coequal. The terms "person" guards against modalism (one God appearing differently at different times); and "substance, or essence" protects the oneness against tritheism. The undivided essence of God is equally belonging to each person of the Trinity, so we do not have deity as 1/3 for the Father, 1/3 for the Son, and 1/3 for the Holy Spirit. Therefore, to deny the triune Godhead translates into a denial of certain critical aspects for each of the three persons

of the Trinity. Scripture then is wrongly interpreted and thus a faulty foundation is laid for other areas of theology. So much so that the grave consequences of a faulty view of God would even lay doubt on whether Jesus, if not fully God, would be able to offer a sufficient, efficacious propitiation for the world. For the inevitable conclusion if taken to the Arian view held by the Bible Students would be that the saints have been relying on an angel for their complete trust, eternal safeguard and forgiveness of sins. A most untenable position especially in light of the reality of fallen angels as well as people.

Deity of Our Lord Jesus or Created Creature?

Following this rejection of the Holy Trinity comes a complete rejection of the deity of our Lord Jesus. The Bible Students share a long history dating back to Arius regarding this aberrant view. Jesus to them is Michael the archangel. They also teach that Jesus the man was either vaporized into gases or His body is in some grand tomb in heaven. Regarding this matter, Russell wrote, "We know nothing about what became of it [Jesus' body], except that it did not decay or corrupt (Acts 2:27, 31). Whether it was dissolved into gases or whether it is still preserved somewhere as a grand memorial of God's love, of Christ's obedience, and of our redemption, no one knows—nor is such knowledge necessary" (Studies 2:129-130). This statement and belief are still held despite the abundance of Scripture fully revealing what happened to Jesus after His resurrection and certainly His

nature. The teaching by them that in His pre-incarnate state Jesus was an angel fits into their view of the atonement as well. References will be made that an angel could not pay the penalty to release mankind from death so Jesus became a man in order to do so. When Jesus was filled with the Spirit, according to the Russellites, this was His begetting of a new nature which corresponds to the divine nature and was fully manifested when he sacrificed the human nature. Of course, what they teach cannot hold up under the full burden of Scripture Jesus was fully God prior to His becoming a man, fully God while also fully man, and fully God fully man after resurrection. God is the continuity and our assurance that the man Jesus was able to die for the sins of the world having a physical resurrection as proof.

Typical of the type of faulty exegesis done by the Bible Students is their analysis of the New Testament Greek text. One example, cited by the Oakland County Bible Students involves the Greek word translated "equal," to which they state:

When Jesus claimed he was the Son, "The Jews sought the more to kill him, because he ... said also that God was his Father, making himself equal with God" (John 5:18, 19). Jesus, first of all, never claimed to be God, but God's Son, and that was enough to infuriate the Jewish leaders of his day. They never assumed he was claiming to be God, but "similar" (Strong's Concordance #2470 for 'equal') to God as His Son. The Pharisees never said Jesus was "equal" to God. The transla-

tors did! In fact, Jesus disclaimed his own authority and rank saying, "The Son can do nothing of himself..." (Oakland County Bible Students' Conge. 2).

Once again the Bible Students have redefined a Greek term according to their theology. The words "equal" and "similar" are not exactly the same in meaning and when dealing with Scripture an interpreter must try to capture the nuance of the Greek word to be translated. In this example the Greek word translated "equal" in the English language versions is *ison* (masculine, singular, accusative of *isos*). Louw & Nida in their lexicon define this word as "pertaining to that which is equal, either in number, size, quality, or characteristic 'equal, equivalent, same.'... 'making himself equal with God' Jn 5:18" (Louw & Nida 1:589). Likewise, in Baur's lexicon the word again is defined as "equal in number, size, quality" (20). In Kittel (article by Stahlin on "isos") John 5:18:

The basis of the charge is not just the emphatic "my Father," but the related teaching of Jesus that He is identical with the divine Law-giver and that His works are the same as God's works. Augustine remarks on this that the Jews understand what the Arians cannot grasp, namely, that Jesus claims to be truly God. Now it is true that Jesus Himself does not make this express claim.... The emphasis is all on the identity of His works. Nevertheless, John accepts the paradox that He is the Son who is both subject to the Father and yet also one with Him (10:30; 1:1). In

other words, He is equal to the Father (cf. Also 10:33, where we have the even stronger accusation)" (Stahlin 3:352).

This article goes on to comment that isos:

...expresses... the equality of dignity, will and nature... [and] thus acquires in the NT a depth and fullness which it never had before. Phil. 2:6 also has the same meaning, "Christ was and is equal to God by nature." This equality is a possession which He can neither renounce nor lose.... But He does not make use of His divine equality by retaining the form of God or of divine existence which He had. On the contrary, He temporarily divested Himself of it, and in place of the form of God, He takes the form of a servant. (353)

Deity of the Holy Spirit or a Force?

The monotheistic belief held by the Bible Students, in order to maintain their model of God, is also placed into a theological corner when it comes to the Third Person of the Holy Trinity, the Holy Spirit. Russell viewed the historic expression in the following manner, "but this subject of the holy Spirit, its office and operation, has been grievously misunderstood by many of the Lord's people for centuries: and only in the light of the rising Sun of Righteousness—in the light of the *parousia* of the Son of Man—is this subject becoming thoroughly clear and reasonable, as it evidently was to the early Church..." (5:165). In his time of writing this subject was gaining more insight due to new light. It must be remembered that according to them, Jesus' second

coming had already occurred in 1874, so a lost truth is now being rediscovered according to Russell and the Bible Students. For Russell and today's Bible Students the "holy Spirit" is a power with a oneness of purpose:

There is consistency in the Scripture teaching that the Father and Son are in full harmony and oneness of purpose and operation, as we have seen And equally consistent is the Scripture teaching respecting the holy Spirit—that it is not another God, but the spirit, influence or power exercised by the one God, our Father, and by his Only Begotten Son—in absolute oneness, therefore, with both of these, who also are at one or in full accord. (5:165)

The Oakland County Bible Students' congregation states that the "holy Spirit" is seen in such terms as the Spirit of God, of liberty, of understanding, of love. It is the oneness of mind, "the disposition or influence of God." When one is "filled with the Holy Spirit [it is] not a person, but the influence of God's mind working in us" (2). The weight of Scripture does not support their theology.

The deity of the Holy Spirit is attested to in Scripture. He was promised by Jesus for His people as another paraclete (cf., Jn. 14:16, 17). The Paraclete is our Helper and Intercessor (cf., Jn. 14:16, 26; 15:26; 16:7; 1 Jn. 2:1). The Spirit can be called correctly the Spirit of God and also the Spirit of Christ (Rom. 8:9). It should be extremely difficult to maintain the teaching that the Spirit is

God's influence, much like a force, as the Bible Students believe. Scripture teaches that the Holy Spirit is a person, and that He is the third person of the Holy Trinity. He is described as a person by various attributes: do not resist the Spirit (Acts 7:51); do not grieve the Holy Spirit (Eph. 4:30); do not quench the Spirit (1 Thess. 5:19); do not insult the Spirit (Heb. 10:29). The Spirit speaks, something a force would have a hard time doing (cf., Acts 1:16; 8:29; 10:19, 20). He also loves (Rom. 15:30). The Spirit sends missionaries (Acts 3:4), He bears witness (Acts 5:32), He prevents missionaries from going into certain areas (Acts 16:7), appoints (Acts 20:28), and He intercedes for us (Rom. 8:26, 7).

Note well the Holy Spirit has attributes which only God can have: He is eternal (Heb. 9:14); Omniscient (all-knowing, 1 Cor. 2:10); Omnipotent (all-powerful, Lk. 1:35); Omnipresent (everywhere present, Ps. 139:7-10). He is identified as Lord (2 Cor. 3:17). The Holy Spirit is associated with Jesus (Jn. 1:32; 3:5; 7:39) and as a person distinct from the Father and the Son (Jn. 14:16, 17, 26; 15:26; 16:7-15). Some of the Spirit's works are seen in creation (Ps. 104:30), the inspiration of Scripture (2 Pet. 1:21), and He raises the dead, most notably Jesus, as well as indwells the believer (Rom. 8:11).

There are also passages which have the Holy Spirit in association with the other persons of the Trinity: In the baptismal formula (Mt. 28:19), also in the beautiful benediction found in Corinthians (2 Cor. 13:14). There are numerous places in Scripture which relate to the Holy

Spirit's words and works attributed to God (cf., Isa. 6:9; Acts 28:25; Acts 5:4; 1 Pet. 1:2). One look in any concordance at the word Spirit and it is very forceful regarding the Spirit as something more than just a force or will of God.

Salvation Once, Twice...?

Some of the Bible Students' writing regarding the subject of salvation sounds evangelical to a point; however, there is more than enough written to reject the gospel message taught by Russell and believed in by the Bible Students. The Russellites believe that the death of Jesus was a ransom paid for the sin of Adam. They, therefore, deny a substitutionary propitiation for the individual. Instead, Jesus made the proper sacrifice, accepted by God, as the perfect man, thus canceling out the death warrant given the race from Adam. It is only the sins that come from Adam that are atoned for. He did not die for any sin a new creature commits. However, Russell taught that very few would come under this banner due to the fact that our weakness was inherited from Adam. That Jesus paid the price for all will be credited in the Millennium when those who have died without hearing this gospel of the ransom will rise from their graves and have a chance after death to be saved into eternity. This price paid is now considered a deposit and credit and will be applied at the end of the age as it harmonizes with Russell's "Divine Plan of the Ages." There is no indication in Scripture for a second chance. In fact, the Bible clearly teaches that man is appointed to die once and then comes judgment (Heb. 9:27).

Nevertheless, said Russell, at the end of the age Jesus will apply His sacrifice for the sins of the world. God will accept it and the world in turn will be given to Jesus. Mankind will then be subject to Him and in due time the merits of His ransom will be applied. However, Russell taught that in the meantime, those of the church who consecrate themselves will have some of the merits of Jesus' sacrifice applied now in the church age. This will make the sacrifices of the church members acceptable to the Father. Once this is accepted, the person is considered dead to the world and a new creature.

There will be a time, in the yet future, when everyone who had not heard of Jesus will arise from the grave and gain the knowledge necessary. They must make a decision to consecrate themselves and, if so, will live. If they at that time reject the provision Jesus has made, they will then die the second death. There is no eternal awareness, but this death will be like sleep lasting for eternity. That all must come to a knowledge of the Lord and that He gave Himself a ransom for all meant, according to Russell, that for those who did not hear, then they must resurrect with another chance to accept the ransom and become consecrated. It is a repentant recognition, knowing one cannot reconcile oneself to a holy God. This is also a time for the lost to accept Jesus as personal Savior, after the grave.

During the current time all who are consecrated must maintain a devotion to do the will of God. The Bible Students state that this consecration means to take up the cross

daily and follow Christ. It is a denial of one's own will, while accepting the will of God. Those who do this in this lifetime will be rewarded with a heavenly body at the resurrection. This is the elect class also known as the "Christ" and referred to by the Bible Students as the "Messianic class." They are the 144,000 in Revelation. These are the ones who will have the heavenly bodies at the resurrection. Of course Scripture does not designate a two-type of body class of people. In fact, it states that we shall be like Him when He appears (1 Jn. 3:2); no distinction of bodies for all eternity. The Bible also states that to die physically is to be present with the Lord (Phil. 1:23).

The Bible Students, however, teach that another class of people, those raised in the Millennium, will not be interested in spiritual things in the first life, so at most they will have earthly bodies. These are to be raised as human beings. The Millennium will be a time of trial, a second chance lasting a thousand years to hear the gospel and accept its provisions for eternal salvation. The Russellites teach a salvation by grace but it is never done against one's will. Also, the person must cooperate with God by what would be known as works.

Russell believed in a universal opportunity for salvation. He would say he did not believe in universalism, but that all would have a chance to hear the gospel. From the time of Jesus till the Millennium, those who consecrate themselves will obtain a heavenly body, all others an earthly one. Those who reject the gospel after hearing it will be judged and

sentenced to the second death—annihilation.

Hell in the Afterlife

Russell rejected any kind of theology which proposed a conscious eternal retribution for the lost. His understanding of God was such that he could never accept a loving God issuing forth such judgments against mankind. The idea of a hell with fire and torment for the condemned became instrumental in his early years to question and ultimately reject much of historic Christianity. For Russell and his followers, the whole notion of torment after death for the lost was a fabrication made up by the church to keep its members fearful and under control. Russell stated: "As knowledge increases and superstitions fade, this monstrous view of the divine arrangements and character is losing its force; and thinking people cannot but reject the Legend" (What Say the Scriptures About Hell 2). Their main teaching is one known as "soul sleep" where the body is more or less in a state of sleep at death, and the final judgment would only entail the annihilation of the body, therefore, no suffering for the lost.

The Bible Students adhere to Russell's view in that the main problem is one of translation. A lack of understanding involving the Greek and Hebrew words behind the English translation of "hell," as notably found in the King James Version of Russell's day, was faulty. Russell adds:

Guided by the Lord's providence to a realization that the Bible has been slandered, as well as its

divine Author, and that, rightly understood, it teaches nothing on this subject, derogatory to God's character nor to an intelligent reason, we have attempted in this booklet [What Say the Scriptures About Hell] to lay bare the Scripture teaching on this subject, that thereby faith in God and His Word may be reestablished, on a better, a reasonable foundation. (2)

Many of the books and booklets published by the numerous Bible Students' congregations cover the same arguments and are in complete agreement with each other. The whole rejection of reprobation is hinged on the translation of the Hebrew word "sheol" and the Greek words "hades, gehenna, tartaroo," and taking a literal understanding of the word "death" to mean oblivion. For example, the Bible Students consider Romans 6:23 (wages of sin is death, free gift is life); Genesis 2:17 (you shall surely die); Genesis 3:19 (you will return to dust); John 3:16 (should not perish); and Matthew 10:28 (destroy both body and soul), in a most restrictive way. They will point out that these verses demonstrate a lost opportunity to live again brought about by sin. They contend that no hint of reprobation is mentioned. Of course there is agreement that mankind does die, however, in the context of these verses it can be said that what is in view is the natural physical death of the body and not the soul. For the soul can only be destroyed by God.

When analyzing the Old Testament Hebrew word "sheol" the Bible Students follow Russell by

using the King James Version (KJV) of the Bible for doing their summations. In the KJV "sheol" is translated hell some 31 times. The various publications do not qualify the fact that today many translations are available which do not use the word "hell" in the Old Testament instead opting for the correct word "sheol." Even today's New King James Version renders the word "sheol" in place of the KJV's "hell" in the Old Testament. However, the Bible Students must rely on this usage of hell to maintain what they refer to as

their "torment theory" regarding the dead. Thus, they will place this theory on every word rendered "hell" by the KJV in the hopes of nullifying any belief concerning an eternal reprobation. However, they err when they interject their theology of soul sleep and annihilationism into the passages which contain the word "sheol" in the Old Testament, as will be seen.

TO BE CONTINUED

VOLUNTEERING FOR OBLIVION (PART TWO)

THE NEW AGE PATH TO HEAVEN'S GATE

By Brooks Alexander

Bypassing "Mind-Control"

The first of those two key elements is the New Age worldview itself. Balch and Taylor concluded that the New Age worldview softens the subject up for influence because it makes the concept of "truth" subjective and relative.

There is an oft repeated expression in metaphysical circles: "There are many paths to the top of the mountain." That statement expresses two of the seeker's overriding concerns – openness and growth. Seekers believe the quest for truth is a highly individual process. One of the UFO people expressed the value of openness this way: "It looks to me like we're all trying to find the way. But what works for me, what's a test for me, may not mean (expletive) to you."

The long climb to the top of the mountain is usually a zigzag course, as the seeker tries one path after another on the way up, always open to new ideas and alternatives. The metaphysical subculture is characterized by sampling and exploration. To stop is to stop growing, to stagnate. (*Ibid.*, p. 21)

The second key element – the adoption of a "seeker" identity – was

pivotal to joining the cult because it made the process of commitment seem logical, familiar and easy. Balch and Taylor point out that:

Members of the UFO group not only define themselves as seekers, but most of them believe that their current involvement is a logical extension of that role. Unlike Jesus Freaks who talk about their lives before accepting Christ in totally negative terms, the UFO people tend to look favorably on their pasts. One member told us that she had first "experienced God" on an LSD trip, and that experience had prepared her for the message brought by the Two. Many others also emphasized the continuity in their lives: "This information clarified everything we had been into before. It's like the next logical step." (*Ibid.*, p. 22).

C. S. Lewis warned in *The Abolition of Man* that making truth subjective finally means defining truth by our appetites – our spiritual appetites as well as our physical ones. If everyone defines their own truth, then everyone will find their deepest "truth" where their deepest hungers lie.

If one hungers for submission to directive human authority (a distor-

tion of our natural hunger for God) – and if one has bought into the metaphysical worldview, with its implicit “enlightened master” power-games – then one will approach any claim of supernatural power with a credulous curiosity. The New Age worldview makes any assertion of spiritual authority potentially believable, and any demonstration of spiritual power self-authenticating. Those who were captivated by “Bo” and “Peep’s” charisma (and later Applewhite’s power alone) came prepared ahead of time to find higher guidance because they had been conditioned by their New Age beliefs to expect it.

Balch and Taylor dropped out of the group after seven weeks of “participant-observation.” But their exposure to the realities of life in the cult enabled them to draw some important conclusions.

(We have argued that the members of the UFO group do not undergo a serious rupture of identity when they walk out the doors of their lives. Instead the process is a logical extension of members’ previous life situations. Rather than the rejection of one social identity for another, becoming a member of the UFO group is a reaffirmation of one’s social identity as a seeker.... Whenever one identity grows naturally out of another causing little disruption in the lives of those involved, the term “conversion” is inappropriate. (*Ibid.*, p. 27).

Those who decided to follow “Bo” and “Peep” found the transition from “seeker” to “believer” logical and easy. It was just another stage in the ongo-

ing process of “spiritual growth.” In other words, the ability of “the Two” to draw people into their delusion was due in part to the previous influence of New Age thinking in those people’s lives.

An unsettling picture emerges: identity as a New Age “seeker” replaces aggressive mind-control as a way of preparing people to surrender to charismatic authority. New Age “seekers” come already equipped with the mental malleability that those procedures are designed to produce. New Agers don’t need to be conditioned by pressure-cooker techniques to accept the leader’s authority – they have been, as it were, pre-conditioned. New Age influence allows for the ultimate streamlining of cultic conversion. Most of the hard work of mental softening up has been done ahead of time. For New Agers, charisma is enough, because they have already been prepared to accept it.

Rationality and Superstition

That brings us to the second study, published some four years later. William Sims Bainbridge and Rodney Stark, both respected secular scholars, set out to study the conflict between rationality and superstition in society. As rationalists, they were concerned about what they saw as a rising wave of irrational thinking and behavior. In their words, “Rationality seems assaulted on the one side by the ancient myths of traditional religion and on the other by pseudoscience and novel occultisms.”

When Bainbridge and Stark began their study, they assumed that conservative Christianity’s anti-evolution bias and the New Age’s pro-

superstition bias were both part of a larger pattern of burgeoning irrationality. But they soon discovered otherwise. In fact they discovered – to their surprise – that conservative Christian faith is a *specific antidote* to belief in “pseudoscience and novel occultisms.” They discovered, in their own words, that “strong religion prevents occultism.” (Bainbridge and Stark. 1980; p. 27).

It is significant that their study was published in *The Skeptical Inquirer*, a leading voice of secular opinion in America. Bainbridge and Stark spoke as secularists, to secularists – but they uncovered a pattern that secular people find difficult to acknowledge. The authors seem chagrined by their own findings, and reach what they regard as a rather gloomy conclusion: “We find that our society is faced not with a choice between rationality and mysticism, but, at best, with a choice of which style of supernaturalism science must endure.” (*Ibid.*, p. 18).

Bainbridge and Stark never went so far as to say that they would rather “endure” Christianity than the New Age, but it is clear that they were unexpectedly impressed by Christianity’s effectiveness as a vaccine against nonsense, and unexpectedly appalled by the openness of irreligious people to the same kind of nonsense that Christianity shuns.

Traditional religion is not simply the enemy of rationality and science, but it plays an ambivalent role. True, fundamentalists show high levels of rejection of evolution. But they also reject a wide range of occult or pseudoscientific ideas that may threaten the

progress of human culture. *Persons with no religious affiliation are often the first to toy with novel or exotic supernatural notions and are not the secular rationalists we might want to think them.* Cults flourish precisely where the conventional churches are the weakest. (*Ibid.*, p. 30; emphasis added).

Against the Grain

To their credit, Bainbridge and Stark let their information lead them to discomfiting conclusions. In fact they end up confronting, head-on, one of the most enduring myths of the secular mind-set – the idea that the Christian religion is a major source of irrationality in our society, and that society as a whole would become more rational and stable if we could somehow purge the influence of Christianity from it.

Not so, say these scholars. In fact, very nearly the opposite is true. Bainbridge and Stark conclude that:

...“born agains” are much less likely than others to accept radical cults and pseudoscientific beliefs... (while) the group with no religious affiliation is receptive to these unscientific notions. *Those who hope that a decline in traditional religion would inaugurate a new Age of Reason ought to think again....* Our questionnaire research suggests that strong religion prevents occultism. Therefore we would expect to find that interest in deviant cults and in the paranormal was greatest where the churches are weakest – in the Pacific region. In fact, this is the

case.... *Apparently when Christianity loses its grip on large numbers of people, deviant religious alternatives arise and get hold of some of the unchurched. (Ibid., pp. 26-28; emphasis added).*

Early Christian apologists made the point that the spiritual darkness of occult and obscene religions that flourished in ancient Rome had been pushed by the light of the gospel to the fringes of society. One of the talking points of Christianity in all periods of history is that it has kept that darkness at its fringes. Modern Christian apologists have warned that the decline of Christianity's influence in our times means that the fringes are retreating inward, bringing the darkness that lies behind them to the center of society (Guinness, 1973; pp. 276-314).

Modern secular thinkers don't take such warnings seriously, of course, because they assume that Christian commentary in general is either self-serving, ignorant or deluded. Yet when two dedicated secularists tell them the same thing – point for point – and back it up with statistics, they are virtually ignored. The follow-up issue of the *Skeptical Inquirer* recorded just one (1) letter to the editor in response to the landmark research by Bainbridge and Stark .

Readers apparently weren't ready to deal with the implications of the article. Accepting its conclusions at face value would require more of a change in self-image than the average person is ready to undertake. A sense of shared disdain for

Christianity, in fact, is one of the most satisfying and identifying things about being a self-conscious secularist. That deeply rooted prejudice can't be changed without destabilizing the sense of personal identity that goes along with it – a prospect that is simply too daunting for most people to deal with.

A Wake-Up Call

Almost two decades ago, Bainbridge and Stark warned us that the decrease of Christian influence in society mean the increase of dangerous nonsense. But their message fell on deafened ears. Now we are paying the price of our denial. Seventeen years before the tragedy of Heaven's Gate, two secular seers told us what would happen – and they told us why. They concluded their study with this ominous warning:

Therefore, a further decline in the influence of conventional religion may not inaugurate a scientific Age of Reason but might instead open the floodgates for a bizarre new Age of Superstition. (Ibid., p. 30; emphasis added).

The influence of “conventional religion” did in fact continue to decline. And the results that Bainbridge and Stark projected did in fact begin to happen. They warned in 1980 that “the floodgates for a bizarre new Age of Superstition” *might* be opened. We can say in 1997 that those floodgates have been opened. Unfortunately, Heaven's Gate is only an extreme example of an increasingly pervasive mentality. Our New-Age-influenced population is ripe for charismatic picking on every level – religious, political and otherwise.

Bainbridge and Stark showed us that secularism prepares the ground for New Age thinking. Balch and Taylor showed us how New Age thinking prepares the ground for charismatic manipulation. Heaven's Gate showed us that the combined effects of those factors can be horrific to behold. If our four scholars are on the mark – or close to it – then there is surely more and worse to come. The New Age has indeed arrived. Or perhaps the Old Age has rearrived. Whatever you call it, something has arrived, and its presence is unwholesome.

We have passed a milestone. Heaven's Gate represents a new level in the "searing" of the collective conscience (see 1 Timothy 4:2). Things are different now, and it is time for Christians to take the challenge of that change seriously. It is time to get ready for what lies ahead of us. As the Christian influence in society continues to erode, the standards of society continue to implode. The "fringes" are collapsing inward, and the shadows they have kept at bay are moving in behind them toward the center.

Resources

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IS CREMATION CHRISTIAN?

By Roy E. Knuteson, Ph.D.

Is cremation Christian? Many apparently think so since it has gained such wide acceptance in recent years even among professing Christians. The ministers of America are strangely silent on the subject and very few church attendees have ever heard a sermon on the subject, much less studied the matter themselves.

Historically, cremation was considered a pagan method of disposing of the human body. Today, however, human reasoning, cultural acceptance, and economic factors determine what is right and what is wrong when it comes to funeral procedures, rather than the Word of God.

The Revelation on Cremation

For committed Christians, the issue is: "What does the Bible say about cremation?" Our faith is grounded in the Judeo-Christian ethic which means that we must consider what the Old and New Testaments say on this important subject, which will eventually affect every person. (Hebrews 9:27).

The Old Testament

Is there scriptural allowance for cremation in the Old Testament? The answer is "No!" The universal law and practice of God's people Israel was to bury the body, not burn it.

Take Abraham, for example. As the "Father of the Faithful," he chose to purchase a plot of ground for 400 shekels of silver as a place for burying his wife Sarah (Genesis 23:14). Why did he do that? Because it was the scriptural way to care for the dead. Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob were all buried, as were the more than two million Israelites who died in the desert.

The Old Testament forbade the Jews from following the customs of their pagan neighbors, and specifically ordered them to bury dead bodies (Deut. 21:23). When Moses died, God buried him in Moab (Deut. 34:6). Since that is God's method, should it not be ours? The Jewish commentary on the Law (The Mishna) denounced cremation as "an idolatrous practice."

The only case of a body being burned in Israel is recorded in Joshua 7:15. Achan and his family were stoned to death, and their bodies were ordered to be burned because of their horrible sin of rebellion against a holy God. Burning a body was a demonstration of God's "fierce anger" in Bible days (Joshua 7:26). Should our remains be disgraced in this same way?

Amos 2 records the unpardonable sin of Moab, which was the burning of the bones of Edom's king (v. 1). The result of that sin of cremation in the

8th century BC was a God-sent "fire upon Moab." Burning has always been a demonstration of God's wrath. It is therefore not a fitting practice at biblical funerals.

The New Testament

In New Testament times the only bodies that were burned were those of criminals. The place of cremation was the garbage dump in the Valley of Hinnon which was located just outside the walls of the Holy City. There, in ancient times, human sacrifices were offered (2 Chron. 33:6) and the continuous burning of rubbish illustrated for the Jewish people unending judgment upon the wicked. Jesus used the word "Gehenna" as a picture of Hell, where "the worm does not die and the fire is not quenched" (Mark 9:48). Burning was the symbol of shame and disgrace, hardly the proper imagery for a Christian funeral. Jesus said that the dead should be buried, not burned (Matt. 8:22).

Our Lord's own body was carefully placed in a tomb. He was "buried," the Scripture says. Our identification with Christ in His death is said to be a "burial" (Romans 6:4). Believer' baptism graphically pictures that spiritual relationship. Cremation therefore, is a violation and a distortion of that scriptural object lesson. It must not be done.

Every funeral in the New Testament included a burial, even for such persons as Annanias and Sapphira, and Judas! (Matt. 27:7-10). It is therefore a statement of gross ignorance for any Christian to say: "There is nothing in the Bible that forbids cremation."

The Origins of Cremation

According to the historical records, the idea of reducing a dead body to ashes originated in heathen lands. The Romans, who also invented a crucifixion kind of death, were among the first to practice this abhorrent custom. The Hindus in India have always burned their dead and then sprinkled the ashes on the Ganges River. Since they believe in re-incarnation they want to dispose of the body quickly so that the next incarnation can take place. Should Christians emulate the Hindus? Interestingly, Christians in India believe that cremation is as pagan as idol worship, and therefore always bury their dead.

Cremation came to America via the uncivilized and non-Christian peoples of the Middle Ages. These same pagans bored out the eyes of Christians, tore out their tongues, burned them at the stake, and fed them to the lions.

The first crematorium in America was built in Washington, Pennsylvania in 1876 by some very ungodly and atheistic men. The Roman Catholic Church responded very quickly to the spreading of this evil practice by banning it in 1886. Long before that date however, Christian pastors spoke out against this practice and condemned this pagan way of disposing of a Christian's body.

It is therefore a rather recent development in our country, and sadly, it has now been adopted by many Christians as just another way to get rid of a dead body. Some Christians respond to this revelation

by saying: "We know that cremation doesn't cause anyone to by-pass the judgment as some believe, and therefore it doesn't matter how we dispose of a loved one's body." Oh, yes it does!

For a person to request cremation for themselves or another person is to go against the Bible and all of sacred history. Burial is the only biblical method as we await the resurrection, and no amount of reasoning about burial space, the sanitation of this method, and the high costs of funerals can change that. The question of cremation is not debatable, for God has spoken the final word.

The Word of God is very clear on this subject, both by direct statements and spiritual examples. As Christians we are not permitted to do with our bodies as we please. Indeed, we are challenged to exalt Jesus Christ in our bodies, "whether by life or by death." (Phil. 2:20).

Cremation Conclusions

1. Cremation is of heathen origin and therefore is unscriptural and non-Christian. Any practice, regardless of its nature, that is contrary to God's Holy Word is to be shunned by all conscientious believers.
2. Cremation removes the healing process that takes place naturally through a Christian burial. Usually, the four pounds of charred remains are sprinkled, in Hindu fashion, on some streams of water, or scattered by airplane to the four winds. Some people divide the ashes among the relatives so that each may have a part of their loved one's remains. Others just leave the ashes with

the mortician who will probably throw them in the city dump. When this happens, there is no committal of the body to the ground, no sacred place where the body is buried, and no place of remembrance in future years.

3. There is something absolutely horrifying about the cremation process itself. The body is placed in a gas oven heated to 3,000 degrees where it is burned to a crisp, and reduced to ashes. Can you imagine yourself being responsible for the cremation of the body of your mother or father, or a mate or your child? Understand, there is no loving concern as an unknown mortuary worker pushes the body into the flames and afterward crushes the remaining bones with a mallet before placing them in an urn. How different from a Christian burial, which is so beautifully illustrated by the burial of Jesus and others in the Bible.
4. Cremation dishonors the redeemed body of a Christian and is the cheapest, legal way to avoid a sacred responsibility. It is a barbaric act that is unscriptural and therefore unwarranted.

Based on the foregoing conclusions, I refuse to officiate at a funeral where the body is cremated. Believing this method to be non-Christian, I have resolved to officiate only at Christian burials and you ought to insist upon the same, both for yourself and your loved ones.

"Have nothing to do with the fruitless deeds of darkness, but rather expose them." Ephesians 5:11.

THIS 'N THAT

This is bits of information for you to read — and act on.

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Witnessing to Jehovah's Witnesses & Mormons by A. Budvarson & F. Swarwick - p. 20

Babylon Mystery Religion by R. Woodrow - p. 33 (This book is replaced by Babylon Connection - same author.)

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