

Why You Should *not* Turn to Religion

Ron Pickell

Sitting in my office, I was engaged in a casual conversation with a friend when Chris entered, introduced himself, and asked very matter of factly if I thought he should turn to religion. I had never really been asked this question before, at least not exactly the way he had just put it. I really had to think about it, because I'm not sure that anyone should turn to religion *per se*, even though my hope is that all will come to receive Jesus as their Saviour.

Chris's question did have a context. He had grown up in a quasi-Christian home, with a mother who occasionally took him to a Methodist church, and a father who was very much a skeptic. Educationally, he had a strong science background. He had become a confirmed skeptic. Two years earlier he had been involved in a tragic motorcycle accident that extensively damaged his brain. Quickness of thought, speech, and body movement were the areas most affected. By now he had recovered about as fully as he could expect to neurologically and linguistically, and was back in school trying to finish his engineering degree. He had been a senior at the time of the crash, but his classwork was now moving at a much slower pace.

Chris had two reasons for seeking me out. The first one related to the accident. He had never really had any kind of strong faith in God before it occurred. From his perspective religion was a sociological phenomenon originating from humanity's need to explain its own existence. Religion held no real answers for the origin of life

or its future. He simply could not acknowledge any rational correlation between science and religion. But since the accident, his values and perspectives on life had been challenged. Considering the seriousness of his accident, Chris was debating in his own mind and with friends why he was alive. Since he *was* alive, why had the accident occurred at all? In other words, if there was a God who allowed him to live—indeed saved his life—then why had He not prevented the whole affair? In his discussions with a friend he was told that these were questions of a religious nature. The friend encouraged him to turn to religion for the answer. Thus Chris's straightforward question.

The second reason involved me as a chaplain. Chris had become a vegetarian because of the animal-rights issue. He had learned that many Seventh-day Adventists are vegetarians. Since this was an issue that was very close to his heart, he determined to talk to someone with similar convictions.

Should Chris turn to religion? Should anyone turn to religion? And what about all the millions of religious devotees who are already immersed in the religious scene? If religion is just the crutch that many interpret it to be, if it is little more than a sucker for those who need encouragement to be good, or a big stick for those who are prone to be bad, then we have to ask the question with which Chris confronted me: Why should anyone concern himself with religion?

Chris and I spent numerous sessions together since that first meeting in my office. Yet even as I write this article I recognize that I

have really not answered his question. We have looked at the proofs of God's existence. We have discussed the question of miracles, the correlation between faith and reason, and the problem of suffering. However, I have to admit that I really have not given him a good reason to "turn to religion."

As I have already implied, I am not sure that recommending generic religion is the right approach. We must not think that any old religion will do; that it doesn't matter what a person believes as long as he or she is a believing person. This would be circular reasoning. We might as well believe in belief. To even admit that we believe implies a belief in something—an idea, a philosophy, an object, or a being. Of course religion has also been to blame for many wars and the cause of much suffering in our world. There is such a thing as bad religion.

But getting back to the real question, I wonder if human beings can even escape religion since so many questions of our existence are religious ones. The meaning of being human and our relationship to one another, to the other living creatures with which we share space on this planet, to the world in which we live and the entire cosmos—all these are addressed in religion. So much of our energy has been invested throughout the disciplines of science, the arts, philosophy, and technology to understand these basic questions. What is humanity? Where did it come from? What is its future? Yet religion is the only discipline that answers these questions with

meaning. Religion helps us determine our purpose. It reminds us that human beings were created for greatness.

Unfortunately, we can't choose the questions that confront us, but I think a better question to ask would be, "Why should I turn to the Bible?" I say this because the Bible gives us something to believe in. We are not asked to believe in belief. That is why I directed Chris to the Bible. The Bible tells us who we are—creatures made in the image of God with an eternal purpose. Creatures who also rebelled from God and are thus imprisoned in a state of insecurity, guilt, and shame. We are beings who try to fake it by self-mastery and over-achievement.

The Bible also reminds us of our destiny. It announces the end of our hopeless despair and the reality of a whole new existence in Jesus Christ. Here the Testaments are brought together as God's goal for humanity is made possible through His Son. Jesus Christ is the end of the old age of darkness, misery, and sin. He also marks the beginning of the new reality of life and wholeness with the dawn of the kingdom of God.

Human beings need religion because by nature we are religious creatures who ask religious questions and need religious answers. However, we need the Bible because we need desperately to hear and understand the gospel of Jesus Christ. Here we learn not so much about what human beings should do as about what God has already done. The Bible records that before the world and humanity were ever formed, God had already planned for its salvation through His Son. In Christ God has predestined human beings to freedom, joy, and complete security.

The more we study the gospel of Jesus Christ the more we realize that God has answered our deepest questions before we ever voiced them. I have to admit that I have often felt intimidated by the many questions that I feel incom-

petent to answer. Yet, I have to say that working with people like Chris and with countless others has taught me that most of us question the existence of God and the need for religion from a much more practical level. Now when I hear individuals debate creation versus evolution I know that the real questions many are asking are very basic: "Is there a Creator God? Can He still make things new?" It doesn't matter too much if God can make a world if He can't make me into a new person. And again when students doubt the reality of Christ's physical resurrection from the dead, the real proof they want is more than historical, more than facts that can be gleaned from a book, whether the book is the Bible or Josephus. No, the real test of Christ's resurrection is met when we experience His resurrection in our own lives. To believe that He lives is as much an existential conviction as a historical one.

This then is why human beings need to turn not to religion in general but to Jesus Christ. The world needs to know that Jesus did something that has altered our history. He has changed our existence for today, not just for the future. He proclaimed that the kingdom of God had come. Jesus provides a way to transcend our present despair as lost creatures on this planet. He also has promised a future escape at His glorious return.

Christianity is not just pie in the sky by and by—it is a present reality. Heaven and hell are too far off in the future for most of us. In thinking this way we are in danger of misunderstanding the teachings of the New Testament—and the whole Bible, for that matter. Jesus taught that the world was already a place of torment and pain. His healing ministry and His death on the cross were a rescue operation from a hell that individuals were already experiencing. His salvation was a present blessing that broke into the here and now of this old world system

of death and despair. This is how Galatians 1:4 has to be understood, where the Apostle Paul reminds us that "Jesus gave himself for our sins to deliver us from this present evil age."

This of course does not deny a future judgment or blessing that depends on our own decision for or against Jesus. There is still more to come. But the real good news in the message of Christ is the recognition that His salvation for us begins now. The powers of sin, condemnation, and death that have ruled in this world have already been defeated. Jesus' own resurrection is the assurance that the Prince of this world has been cast out.

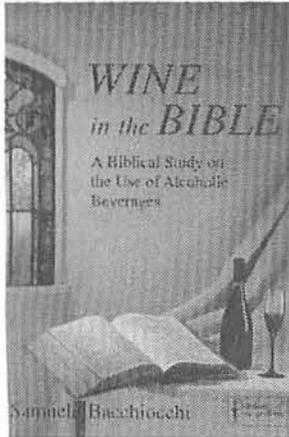
The breaking in of God's kingdom by Jesus Christ, and all Christ accomplished through His suffering and death make a difference in the here and now, not just for the future. In Jesus Christ the future is the present, for the kingdom has already begun. This implies a difference in the way we live our lives, in the kind of careers we choose. It determines the kind of person we will marry and how we raise our children. It affects every aspect of our existence. It influences the way we spend our money, our time, and the kind of values we live by. As citizens of His kingdom we are members of a whole new economy. Our ethics will be the ethics of the kingdom as recorded in the Sermon on the Mount, and our highest ideal will be to love one another as He loved us.

I had a student tell me one time that he would probably not even concern himself with religion at all if he didn't have to face a coming judgment. Unfortunately, I don't think he is alone. Often I hear people express the same attitudes. But what is more depressing is to live our lives in fear of the future as though our belief in Jesus has no immediate bearing on our day-to-day existence. Salvation is more than an insurance policy for the

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call from the field" relates to global strategy and *who* is making decisions on global strategy. This series of books should be widely promoted; it provides stimulating, necessary, quality material on missions.

Kay Clayton (M.A., University of Texas at Arlington) has served as missionary in the Philippines, taught cross-cultural communication and sociology, and presently works as a medical social worker in Fort Worth, Texas.



Wine in the Bible: A Biblical Study on the Use of Alcoholic Beverages, by Samuele Bacchiocchi (Berrien Springs, Michigan: Biblical Perspectives, 1989; 307 pp., \$12.95 paperback).

Reviewed by Roy Gane.

Dr. Bacchiocchi of Andrews University, best known for his

search on the doctrine of the Sabbath, challenges the commonly accepted view that a moderate use of alcoholic beverages is condoned by the Bible. The Old Testament, the sayings and example of Jesus, and the teachings and practice of the apostolic church all point clearly in the direction of total abstinence from intoxicants. Ellen White's position agrees with the biblical evidence.

It is often assumed that the Greek and Hebrew words translated "wine" necessarily denote an intoxicating beverage. Bacchiocchi demonstrates con-

vincingly that these words refer to the juice of the grape, whether fermented or unfermented. Where "wine" is viewed positively in the Bible, the context indicates that the beverage is unfermented. Fermented wine, on the other hand, is spoken of negatively.

Another misconception is that the ancients could not preserve unfermented grape juice. Ancient sources reveal not only success, but also considerable sophistication in the technology of juice preservation. Information regarding the processing of grape products is of significant value in the analysis of some stories and sayings of Jesus in which "wine" appears.

Bacchiocchi's textual interpretation is of unassailable integrity, demonstrating a solid grasp of word usage, grammar, language structure, context, limitations of evidence, and the role of secondary sources. Conclusions with regard to some passages, such as Deuteronomy 14:26, Luke 5:37-39 and Acts 2:13, are fresh and startling.

Not content with producing a theoretical discussion for a scholarly audience, the author states his case in plain language. He emphasizes the immediate moral and social relevance of his study to the modern attitudes about alcohol. Several items contribute to the popular readability of the book: A brief preview of the book's content, bold-type subject headings, fullness of expression (at times to the point of redundancy) and recapitulation of important ideas. The book should be read by everyone concerned about intoxicants and interested in the scriptural teaching on the subject.

Roy Gane (M.A., University of California, Berkeley) is finishing a Ph.D. in biblical Hebrew language and literature and teaching a course in biblical Hebrew texts at the University of California, Berkeley.

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future with premiums we must pay now and a policy that can be redeemed only at death.

What I really want to say to Chris is that in looking into religion he is headed in the right direction, but his real discovery will not begin until he realizes that God has already turned to him in Jesus Christ. My desire for him and all of us is that we know that and experience it in the very depths of our being. I pray that we all see that in reality it is God who has been searching for us. In Jesus Christ God's search is over. We have been found by His beloved

Son. God's mission to this earth was successful. He accomplished what he set out to do. In Jesus Christ we are the recipients of God's grace now while we await all that will be ours in the future. What a wonderful way to live each day—and what a glorious hope for tomorrow!

Ron Pickell (M.Div., Andrews University) is Adventist chaplain on the campus of the University of Tennessee at Knoxville, and director of Terrace House—an Adventist student center.

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