

“If you want to better understand the foundations of your faith, deepen the theological root systems of what you believe, and find out how to apply the key teachings of God’s Word to your everyday life and problems, this monumental work needs to be in your library. I have thousands of books in my library, and most of them just sit on the shelf, but this is a resource I’ll be using on a regular basis. If you buy this book, I can promise you that it won’t just sit on your shelf!”

—DR. GARY OLIVER, ThM, PhD,  
executive director, The Center for Relationship Enrichment;  
professor of psychology and practical theology, John Brown University;  
author of *Mad About Us*

“Many dictionaries of theology are overly dense, terse, and a bit stuffy, all of which severely limit their usefulness. So, within the genre of theological dictionaries, the *Dictionary of Everyday Theology and Culture* is a burst of fresh air. The entries are well chosen, are written in an accessible manner, and would serve as helpful supplements to more detailed teaching. I dare say that the careful study of this book alone would provide a decent theological education.”

—STEVE L. PORTER, PhD, professor of theology and philosophy,  
Institute for Spiritual Formation, Talbot School of Theology/Biola University;  
managing editor, *Journal for Spiritual Formation and Soul Care*

“Finally we have a book on theology that you don’t have to be a brain surgeon to understand. I love the clarity of presentation of deep theological concepts and the practical guidelines on how to implement the great truths of the faith in your daily life.”

—GARY D. VANDERARK, MD, professor of neurosurgery,  
University of Colorado, Denver

“For those who have ever asked ‘So what?’ after reading a theological tome, this resource provides welcome relief. The collection of insightful summaries from esteemed scholars explains key Christian doctrines with a view to our historic faith and then applies those truths in the context of our current world. *Dictionary of Everyday Theology and Culture* is a treasure trove of sound doctrine and practical insight into daily application. I look forward to using it regularly.”

—RICK CORNISH, DMin, president, Teaching Truth International;  
author of *5 Minute Theologian*, *5 Minute Apologist*, and *5 Minute Church Historian*

“Many of the issues we face today are so complex that Christians often despair of ever knowing how to respond. This resource provides thoughtful Christians a solid start in what Scripture teaches, the church has affirmed, and conscientious disciples should keep in mind as they frame their own answers. The entries covered are accessible yet substantial. Anyone wanting to understand the core concepts of his or her faith (baptism, atonement, prayer) or the pressing issues of this day (abortion, racism, relativism) could easily build on the foundation offered here. A rich resource for any bookshelf.”

—DR. JOHN ANDERSON, DMin, pastor,  
Trinity Presbyterian Church, Arvada, Colorado

THE NAVIGATORS REFERENCE LIBRARY

DICTIONARY OF EVERYDAY  
THEOLOGY  
AND CULTURE

BRUCE DEMAREST AND KEITH J. MATTHEWS,  
GENERAL EDITORS

NAVPRESS 



NavPress is the publishing ministry of The Navigators, an international Christian organization and leader in personal spiritual development. NavPress is committed to helping people grow spiritually and enjoy lives of meaning and hope through personal and group resources that are biblically rooted, culturally relevant, and highly practical.

**For a free catalog go to [www.NavPress.com](http://www.NavPress.com)**

**or call 1.800.366.7788 in the United States or 1.800.839.4769 in Canada.**

© 2010 by The Navigators

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced in any form without written permission from NavPress, P.O. Box 35001, Colorado Springs, CO 80935. [www.navpress.com](http://www.navpress.com)

NAVPRESS and the NAVPRESS logo are registered trademarks of NavPress. Absence of ® in connection with marks of NavPress or other parties does not indicate an absence of registration of those marks.

ISBN-13: 978-1-61521-192-9

Cover design by Arvid Wallen

Cover illustration by Shutterstock

Unless otherwise identified, all Scripture quotations in this publication are taken from the *Holy Bible, New International Version*® (NIV®). Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved. Other versions used include: the New American Standard Bible® (NASB), Copyright © 1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1995 by The Lockman Foundation. Used by permission; *THE MESSAGE* (MSG). Copyright © 1993, 1994, 1995, 1996, 2000, 2001, 2002. Used by permission of NavPress Publishing Group; the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), copyright © 1989, by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA, used by permission, all rights reserved; the *Holy Bible, New Living Translation* (NLT), copyright © 1996, 2004. Used by permission of Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., Wheaton, Illinois 60189. All rights reserved; the Holy Bible, *Today's New International® Version* (TNIV®). Copyright © 2001, 2005 by International Bible Society®. Used by permission of International Bible Society. All rights reserved worldwide; and the King James Version (KJV).

---

#### Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

The dictionary of everyday theology and culture / Bruce Demarest and Keith J. Matthews, general editors.

p. cm. -- (The Navigators reference library)

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 978-1-60006-192-9

1. Christianity and culture--Dictionaries. 2. Christian ethics--Dictionaries. 3. Theology, Doctrinal--Popular works--Dictionaries. 4. Christian life--Dictionaries. I. Demarest, Bruce A. II. Matthews, Keith J.

BR115.C8D535 2009

261.03--dc22

2009037815

Printed in the United States of America

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 / 13 12 11 10

Sample from *Dictionary of Everyday Theology and Culture* / ISBN 978-1-60006-192-9

Copyright © 2010 NavPress Publishing. All rights reserved. To order copies of this resource, come back to [www.navpress.com](http://www.navpress.com).

## INTRODUCTION

*Dictionary of Everyday Theology and Culture* is an easy-to-use book about theology and culture for ordinary people living in the everyday world. In particular, it's a practical guide to Christian theology and to key social and cultural issues in the contemporary world. The focus of the *Dictionary* is practical: understanding core Christian truths that provide the framework of the Christian worldview and applying these truths to the task of everyday life and service as followers of Jesus.

The word *theology* means reflection or discourse about God and his relationship to the world. Because we build our faith on correct understanding about God, theology also means knowing God, loving him, and serving his kingdom in our needy world. The ultimate end of theology is to reflect and extend the glory of God in every dimension of life.

The term theology doesn't appear in Scripture. However, the word doctrine—a near synonym—is found several times in the New Testament. The apostle Paul commanded us as Christians to uphold “sound doctrine” (1 Timothy 1:10; Titus 1:9; 2:1) and to renounce every appearance of false doctrine (1 Timothy 1:3). Paul urged the critical importance of holding fast to faithful doctrine with the command, “Watch your life and doctrine closely” (1 Timothy 4:16).

Each article in the *Dictionary* is divided into two main parts: “Everyday Definition” and “Everyday Application.” Approximately equal attention is given to defining the meaning of each term and to applying the meaning of the term to our lives and service in the world.

Because we must first gain a clear understanding of a doctrine or a cultural issue before living out its implications as good servants in daily practice, the Everyday Definition attempts to explain each term in nontechnical, everyday language. If we want to be solidly grounded in the faith, to develop spiritually, and to serve effectively, we need clear understanding of core Christian truths. A sound theology—drawn primarily from authoritative Scripture, as well as from the reflections of trusted Christians from both church history and the current church—is basic to every aspect of our lives as Christian disciples.

Of course, Scripture realistically asserts that this side of heaven “we

know in part” (1 Corinthians 13:9) and we “see only a reflection as in a mirror” (verse 12, TNIV). So while thorough and detailed, the Everyday Definitions in the *Dictionary* remain inherently incomplete. We will only attain certain and complete knowledge on all points of doctrine in the life to come when, ushered into Christ’s presence (1 Corinthians 13:12), we will see all things clearly.

Theology isn’t simply an intellectual exercise of reflecting on God’s existence and works. Unfortunately, in some periods of church history, theology morphed into a largely intellectual undertaking where applications to real life were never made clear. Thus, the goal of the *Dictionary* isn’t merely to produce correct definitions of theological and cultural terms. After all, it’s possible to be knowledgeable in these areas yet remain spiritually dull and practically ineffective. So the *Dictionary* intentionally addresses the relevance and application of each term to godly living and Christian service with the Everyday Application. This section highlights how each term affects and applies to our relationship with God, self, others, and the surrounding world. So, while the *Dictionary* doesn’t neglect formal truths, it’s intentionally practical—or life related—because it emphasizes the relevance of theology for Christian living and service in today’s complex cultural setting.

To this end, the *Dictionary* is written for informed everyday Christians. However, pastors, other ministry leaders, and seminary and Bible college students will also find its explanations and life applications informative, enriching, and helpful.

The creative team behind the *Dictionary* believes its practical focus will make it uniquely useful. After all, if we want to be effective disciples of Jesus Christ, we must know the truth with our minds, feel the truth with our hearts, and obey the truth with our entire lives. Professor and author Dallas Willard wisely unites these two goals of understanding and application: “Every Christian must strive to arrive at beliefs about God that faithfully reflect the realities of his or her life and experience, so that each may know how to live effectively before him in his world. That’s theology!”<sup>1</sup>

What’s more, the *Dictionary* also brings attention to issues of importance and relevance in the world of today. While fundamental

1. Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines* (HarperSanFrancisco, 1988), 26.

truths of theology remain unchanged from God's perspective, biblical, historical, and theological studies have brought to light new insights that enhance our understanding and facilitate our service for the kingdom. Christian theology isn't static. Because theology means knowing God, loving him, and serving his kingdom in our world, our conversations about theological issues must reengage with every new generation. Each age presents new issues and poses revolutionary questions.

The editors and contributors pray that this *Dictionary* will enhance your understanding of essential topics of theology and important issues of contemporary society and at the same time enable you to live virtuously and fruitfully for the glory of God and for the good of the church.

## ABORTION

### EVERYDAY DEFINITION

Abortion means the termination of fetal life in a uterus prior to birth. Some abortions are natural, such as when a pregnancy miscarries due to illness. Currently, the term “abortion” more often refers to induced abortions, involving human intention and intervention.

Especially since 1973, when the United States Supreme Court ruled it unnecessary to protect those who aren’t “persons in the whole sense,” abortion has become a matter of concern for Christians. We face the issue in personal decisions, in pastoral care, in political responsibilities, and in our response to culture in general.

The issue of abortion raises some important questions: What is “human” life? When does “personhood” begin? Is it ever appropriate to terminate a human life? What rights do human beings have? Some people argue that induced abortion should rarely be allowed. Others argue that abortion is rarely immoral. Still others fall somewhere between these two positions, identifying various cases where abortion might or might not be acceptable. A full treatment of this issue requires wrestling with medical, psychological, political, legal, philosophical, biblical, theological, and practical wisdom.

As Christians, we must consider key biblical and theological issues that inform our definition and practice of “life.” Simply put, the Bible presents no explicit teaching regarding abortion. Ancient Assyrian law condemned a woman who “has a miscarriage by her own act,” but the Israelites had no such law. Greek and Roman writings included a range of views on abortion, but the New Testament is silent on the issue. However, soon after the writing of the New Testament, early Christians condemned abortion along with magic and infanticide (see *Didache* 2:2; *Epistle of Barnabas* 19:5).

Ultimately, we must take a biblical approach to abortion by looking at Scripture’s more general teaching about such themes as life, human nature, and sexuality. God is the giver of life, breathing into humans “the breath of life” (Genesis 2:7). Because we’re stewards of life, not creators, when we terminate a fetus we take into our own hands the life and death of a being who belongs to God and whose times belong to God.

In addition, the human life that God creates is precious. Above all

living things, God declared human beings to be “very good” (Genesis 1:31). Because human beings are created in God’s image, they are of special value to him (Genesis 1:27-28; 9:6; Psalm 8:3-8). Human beings form a microcosm of God’s full creation, participating bodily in the earthly realm and participating spiritually in the heavenly realm. God also gave humans a distinct role as partners with him in caring for creation (Genesis 1:28; 2:15).

Some cultures recognize an unborn fetus as a human life, condemning induced abortion while at the same time permitting the abandonment of deformed or unwanted children. Early Christians, however, rejected both abandonment and abortion, choosing instead to care sacrificially for those formed in the image of God. The Scriptures give no explicit answer to the issue of when human life begins, although we find clear hints that God acknowledges and honors life within the womb (Exodus 21:22-25; Psalm 139:13-16; Luke 1:44).

Our spirit/body nature and our role as caretakers of God’s creation combine in a single act. Through intercourse, we contribute with God in creating new life (Genesis 4:1). Consequently, marriage and intercourse are sacred to God, a holy and life-giving institution. The Scriptures urge God’s people to live lives that recognize the sacredness of human sexuality (1 Thessalonians 4:3-8; Hebrews 13:4). Human sexuality is the means through which we cocreate life with God.

In conclusion, while Scripture doesn’t provide explicit instruction about induced abortions, the biblical teachings about life, human nature, and sexuality lead us toward a deep regard for all innocent human life.

#### EVERYDAY APPLICATION

The issue of abortion is first of all—as it was for early Christians—an issue the Christian community must wrestle with. Our current context of permissive abortion laws necessitates that the church form disciples intellectually, morally, and spiritually who are capable of honoring human life at every level. Within our own communities, we must be willing to provide—as in earlier centuries—the care necessary to heal and embrace those suffering among us, both unborn children and struggling parents.

Second, we must transcend the contemporary rhetoric around this issue to see the broader meaning of abortion. Human sexuality isn’t

simply about women, but about the relationships between men and women. Until men comprehend the sacred nature of intercourse, until the “hearts of the fathers” are turned “to their children” (Malachi 4:6), the casual sexual relationships that lie behind some abortions will continue. As cocreators of life and caretakers of creation, Christians are obliged to avoid sexual sin. In this way, culture is positively influenced through the model of the Christian community.

Third, as those who live in an increasingly advanced medical environment, we must learn to think through the complexities of abortion ethics. When does human life begin? At conception? At implantation? At viability? At birth? What kinds of factors are most central in understanding our personhood (physical, psychological, social)? With increased technology, we can predict the difficulties of a deformed embryo. Should this knowledge influence our decisions regarding abortions? We must learn to evaluate new questions in light of the fundamental themes of Scripture.

Finally, as Christians, we must also deal with abortion as a public policy issue. What is the responsibility of a mixed Christian/non-Christian republic toward the unborn child or toward its parents? How involved should Christians be in shaping public policy? What strategies should be used or avoided?

To honor the gospel of life means becoming a life-giving community, caring for unborn children and broken parents, honoring proper sexual relationships, and serving as salt and light in the world. Through these thoughts and actions, we can foster the life that comes from God.

#### FOR FURTHER READING

Paul B. Fowler, *Abortion: Toward an Evangelical Consensus*.

Multnomah, 1987.

Richard B. Hays, “Abortion,” in *The Moral Vision of the New Testament—Community, Cross, New Creation: A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics*. HarperSanFrancisco, 1996.

—EVAN B. HOWARD

## ANGELS

### EVERYDAY DEFINITION

Angels, like other beings, were created by God to be his cooperative coworkers, agents, and messengers. The Bible describes the number of angels as enormous: “ten thousands” (Deuteronomy 33:2; Psalm 68:17); “thousands upon thousands” (Hebrews 12:22); “ten thousand times ten thousand” (Revelation 5:11). Although they don’t have physical bodies, angels are still personal beings. A part of the unseen world, they occasionally appear to humans, announcing the will of God, strengthening God’s people, protecting, and guiding. Angels do sometimes take on human-like form. When angels appear to people, they act as instruments of God’s plan, making known to our eyes and ears the unseen—yet real—world.

Both the Hebrew and Greek words for angel mean *messenger*. Angels are enormously powerful when they appear in Scripture—so powerful that they often frighten people. As a result, ancient art and various kinds of contemporary media give them exaggerated physical features. While an angel sighting would be dramatic—it isn’t every day that we get a glimpse into the invisible world—the occasion would probably be functional.

In terms of function, angels are ambassadors of God who act from positions of power and prestige from within the heavenly court. While some angels rebelled against God, the angels who stayed true to God don’t seem to struggle with a sin-nature as do God’s human servants. They don’t appear to be tempted with disobedience, so they are especially trustworthy servants of God. Angels act on God’s behalf; they are representatives of God, carrying out his will. As his spokesmen, angels declare or witness to the words of God. As emissaries of God’s government, angels execute the work of God. As ministering spirits, they strengthen and sustain God’s people. Interestingly, as powerful and magnificent as angels are, God’s people—as the renewed humanity—will ultimately judge them (1 Corinthians 6:3).

Some form of order or hierarchy seems to exist among the angels. For example, Michael is called an archangel (Daniel 12:1; Revelation 12:7). Gabriel, singled out by being named, might also have prominence. The designation “The angel of the LORD” (Judges 13:2ff and Luke 2:9)

is thought to sometimes to be an appearance of Jesus Christ himself. At a minimum, The Angel of the Lord speaks with an unusual authority, perhaps from the precise connection of the message to The Messenger.

Other types of angels or distinct spiritual beings might exist as well. The biblical story mentions Cherubim, Seraphim, and “The Living Creatures.” These beings guarded access to Eden (Genesis 3:24); continually worship God (Isaiah 6:2-7); and surround God’s throne (Revelation 4:6-8).

Throughout church history, people have debated about the exact role of angels. Some have believed in *guardian* angels. Among these beliefs, the precise connection of angels to humanity differs. Some conclude that each believer has a personal guardian angel (Psalm 91:11-12; Matthew 18:10; Acts 12:15; Hebrews 1:14). In the book of Acts, angels are active among the first followers of Jesus. For example, an angel directed Phillip, guided Cornelius, moved Peter to action, and gave a promise to Paul (Acts 8:26; 10:3-6; 12:6-11; 27:23-24). The Bible describes a group of angels watching over all God’s people (Psalm 34:7). Some Jewish traditions see angels watching over nations (Daniel 10:13,21). The New Testament depicts angels over churches (Revelation 1-3; 1 Corinthians 11:10), caring for children (Matthew 18:10), and ministering to believers at death (Luke 16:22).

Whatever work angels might be sent to do, they clearly play frequent and significant roles in God’s story. Angels represent to us the view of heaven regarding things on earth. To note just a few instances, angels predicted to Abraham the birth of Isaac, to Manoah the birth of Samson, and to Abraham the annihilation of Sodom. God sent an angel to bring Israel out of Egypt, lead them to the Promised Land, and destroy their enemies (Exodus 23:20; Numbers 20:16). An angel brought Elijah meat and drink (1 Kings 19:5). There are also combative angels. In one night, The Angel of the Lord destroyed the entire Assyrian army of 185,000 men (2 Kings 19:35). Angels are notable at the birth (Luke 2:9), resurrection (Luke 24:4), ascension (Acts 1:10), and return in glory of Jesus Christ (Matthew 24:31).

#### EVERYDAY APPLICATION

As followers of Jesus, we should expect that in a myriad of unseen ways, and rarely even in a visible way, that angels act on our behalf as we act

on God's behalf. Angels work alongside us, reinforcing and supporting our human role as ambassadors of God's kingdom. Essential to Christian discipleship is an ongoing, beneficial, and real interactive relationship with the unseen world. Clearly, our conversation is meant to be primarily with God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Yet God, as a part of his means of grace for humanity, has also given angels to minister to and with his people.

The unseen world that angels are a part of is real. The Nicene Creed says we believe that God is the creator of things *seen and unseen*. This isn't merely theoretical knowledge; it's crucial to functional and practical discipleship. When Elisha was surrounded and about to be captured, he saw into the invisible world; he saw chariots of fire (2 Kings 6:17). Jesus in the garden, facing arrest, told his overzealous friend that he could call on God's angels at any time (Matthew 26:53). As Christians, we come to terms, in a practical sense, with this immaterial aspect of Christian life. God does actually watch over us—often through the agency of angels. Their consistent lives of devotion to God and their conformity to the story, the plan, and the intention of God is a great inspiration for us in our lives as followers of Jesus.

Although interaction with angels is a part of God's plan for humanity, we should exercise some cautions:

- We need to be cautious about believing things that purportedly come from angels but that are contrary to Scripture (1 Kings 13:18; Galatians 1:8; 2 Corinthians 11:14).
- We shouldn't have an over-exuberant interest in angels. The Holy Spirit is the primary leader of churches and the people of the church.
- No Scripture encourages us to pray to angels; we pray only to God.
- We shouldn't worship angels or even seek appearances from them. The scriptural pattern is that angels appear unsolicited.

Asking God to use angels in our lives according to his design for them is in alignment with the purposes of God and a life of faith. While the church now has the canon of Scripture, a great deal of historically agreed upon theology and practice, and the Holy Spirit directly at

work among us, it doesn't follow that we no longer need the guidance, protection, and ministry of angels.

#### FOR FURTHER READING

J. I. Packer, *Concise Theology*. Tyndale, 1993.

Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*. Zondervan, 1994.

Billy Graham, *Angels: God's Secret Agents*. A Crossings, 1994.

—TODD HUNTER

## APOSTASY

### EVERYDAY DEFINITION

Apostasy constitutes a serious turning away and repudiation of core Christian beliefs and practices. The Greek verb, *aphistēmi* (Luke 8:13; 1 Timothy 4:1; Hebrews 3:12) means “to fall away” or “become apostate.” An apostate is a professing Christian who renounces Christian faith previously held and who often opposes and assaults the faith. Someone who professes Christianity but who then turns aside from the faith commits apostasy, or in the words of Jesus, commits “blasphemy against the Spirit” (Matthew 12:31). An apostate (unbeliever) can't be said to fall from grace because he never was truly in a state of grace.

The apostle Paul taught that “in later times some will abandon the faith and follow deceiving spirits and things taught by demons” (1 Timothy 4:1). He added, “Some have in fact already turned away to follow Satan (1 Timothy 5:15). The apostle Peter acknowledged in his day that false prophets and teachers “secretly introduce destructive heresies, even denying the sovereign Lord who bought them” (2 Peter 2:1). These false teachers claimed to know the way of righteousness, but they turned their backs on Christ and returned to the fallen world order where they belong. Peter characterized the false teachers and those influenced by them as blasphemers (verse 12), “springs without water” (verse 17), and “slaves of depravity” (verse 19). Peter described apostates via two sayings: “A dog returns to its vomit,” and “A sow that is washed returns to her wallowing in the mud” (verse 22, TNIV). Peter repeatedly stated that God has reserved the blackness of everlasting punishment for those who repudiate sound faith (2 Peter 2:1,3,12,17). Jude also

warned against apostate teachers, highlighting their depraved character and announcing their coming doom (Jude 4,8,10-13,16,18-19).

Apostasy shouldn't be confused with backsliding, which is understood as a temporary weakening of trust in Christ. Biblical examples of backsliding include believers in Israel who turned away from Yahweh to serve idols (Isaiah 1:4); David, as seen in his acts of adultery and murder (2 Samuel 11:1-17); Solomon, whose many wives turned his heart away from the Lord (1 Kings 11:4,9,10); Peter, who three times denied Christ (Mark 14:66-72); and Demas, a coworker of Paul who abandoned discipleship (2 Timothy 4:10). Regrettably, true Christians for a time can become weak in faith, love, and zeal for Christ.

#### EVERYDAY APPLICATION

A child who spurns the love and favor of his parents grieves and saddens their hearts. Similarly, God, who graciously offers the gift of eternal life, is grieved and angered when those he created for fellowship forsake him and serve other gods (Deuteronomy 32:16). Because he is righteous and just, God will bring judgment on those who break covenant and practice idolatry (Isaiah 65:11-12; John 15:6). For those of us who profess to be Christians, we must examine our hearts to determine if we truly belong to the Savior and if we harbor any hostility toward Christ and the gospel. We also need to be alert to the peril of backsliding, becoming indifferent to Christ and the practice of discipleship.

People who profess to be Christians who then spurn the Savior, abandon faith, and deny God's grace seriously damage the testimony of Christ in the world. Those who are weak and unsettled spiritually might look to the ways of apostates and be tempted to abandon faith and discipleship. The damaging consequences that rejecting Christ has on the spiritual welfare of others who bear the name "Christian" are enormous.

Even entire societies enjoy God's blessing and prosper by virtue of faithfulness to Christ and the gospel. As was the case with Israel, forsaking the true and living God in favor of idols weakens and destabilizes societies at their core. Ultimately, if departure from Christian faith and practice remains unchecked, societies disintegrate from within and eventually become unjust, oppressive, and inhuman. The stability and integrity of societies worldwide requires determination not to commit apostasy and to remain faithful to the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Professing Christians who threaten to renounce Christ and the gospel need to examine the meaning of apostasy as set forth in God’s Word. They face perilous consequences for denying Jesus, who alone is “the way and the truth and the life” (John 14:6). Those threatening to commit apostasy should also understand the fatal outcomes of rejecting the gospel, which alone embodies the promise of eternal salvation. As Christians, we can pray that God will restore these potential apostates to the path of truth so they don’t they commit the “sin that leads to death” (1 John 5:16).

#### FOR FURTHER READING

O. S. Hawkins, *In Sheep’s Clothing: Jude’s Urgent Warning About Apostasy in the Church*. Loizeaux, 1994.

David G. Bromiley, *Falling from the Faith: Causes and Consequences of Religious Apostasy*. Sage Publications, 1988.

— BRUCE DEMAREST

## ASCENSION

### EVERYDAY DEFINITION

The ascension refers to the crucified and resurrected departure of Jesus Christ from earth and return to his original exalted status and place in heaven with God the Father and God the Holy Spirit.

Preceding the ascension, the divine Son of God “descended” to the world of salvation-needing human beings (Ephesians 4:9), humbling himself in the incarnation by taking on real and fully human nature (Philippians 2:6-8; Hebrews 2:14-18). After living in the world for approximately thirty years, and ministering for three years, the God-man was put to death through crucifixion and buried in a tomb (Matthew 27). Three days later, he rose from the dead (Matthew 28:1-15) and appeared to his disciples for forty days (Acts 1:3; John 20:17). As he was blessing them, the ascension occurred: “He was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight” (Acts 1:9; Luke 24:50-51). Jesus Christ ascended into heaven, where he then sat down at the right hand of God (Ephesians 1:20; Colossians 3:1; Romans 8:34; 1 Peter 3:22).

Because of this event, great honor and glory were bestowed on the

ascended Jesus, different from the majesty that had been his prior to his incarnation. Though glorified with the Father and the Holy Spirit from eternity past (John 6:62; 17:5), the Son is now highly honored with them as the crucified, resurrected, and ascended God-man (Philippians 2:9; 1 Timothy 3:16). He is now seated in heaven, indicating that his work of salvation on behalf of sinful people is completed (Hebrews 1:3) and sufficient to rescue all who embrace him as Savior and Lord.

Additionally, “exalted to the right hand of God, he has received from the Father the promised Holy Spirit” (Acts 2:33). On the Day of Pentecost, the ascended Jesus Christ poured out the Holy Spirit, launching him on his new covenant ministry (2 Corinthians 3) by which the church came into existence (Acts 2). Further, as the exalted Lord, Jesus “gave gifts” to humanity (Ephesians 4:8; Psalm 68:18), specifically equipping his followers to be apostles, prophets, evangelists, and pastor-teachers (Ephesians 4:11). People exercise these gifts for the building of Christ’s church toward maturity (Ephesians 4:12-16).

Jesus Christ is the head of the church by means of the ascension. At that event, the Father exalted him above all heavenly and earthly powers, present and future, and “placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, which is his body” (Ephesians 1:22-23; 1 Peter 3:22). The fullness of the exalted Lord “fills everything in every way” (Ephesians 1:23), not bodily but by his Holy Spirit who is at work in and through the church.

#### EVERYDAY APPLICATION

As Christians, the ascension of Jesus Christ should encourage us to recognize the many benefits that flow to us as a result of Christ’s enthronement at the right hand of God the Father in heaven. Those benefits include:

- The exalted “Lord and Christ” (Acts 2:36) now rules the entire universe from heaven. All angels, all demons and their leader Satan, and all other heavenly beings exist and function under the sovereign direction of the ascended Christ. Additionally, all human authorities—presidents, kings, dictators, and all lesser human rulers—live and exercise their roles under the sovereign control of the exalted Christ. Because he possesses “all authority in heaven and on earth,” Jesus Christ decisively commissioned

his church before his ascension with these words: “Therefore go and make disciples of all nations” (Matthew 28:18-20). This Great Commission is given to us as the divinely called and divinely sent people living under the sovereign rule of our majestic head. As Christians, we rejoice that our ascended Lord has been “exalted . . . to the highest place” and given “the name that is above every name” (Philippians 2:9).

- Our “life is now hidden with Christ in God” (Colossians 3:3), which means that our identity as Christians is fully associated with the ascended Christ. This identification means that we are “seated . . . with him in the heavenly realms” (Ephesians 2:6), and that we are to set our hearts and minds “on things above, not on earthly things” (Colossians 3:2). When we do this, we decisively break from “sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed . . . anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language” (Colossians 3:5,8). Although Christians are *in* this world and are *for* this world, we are *not of* this world and we refuse to participate in its evil deeds. This identification also signals our ultimate victory over sin and death. We experience the Lord’s authoritative power now so as to struggle “not against flesh and blood, but . . . against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms” (Ephesians 6:12). Through the ascended Christ’s authority and power, we achieve partial victory now over temptation, sin, and evil as we also look forward to his ultimate triumph over all enemies (Hebrews 10:12-14).
- The exalted Christ is actively engaging on our behalf. As the great High Priest (Hebrews 4:14; 8:1), he intercedes for us (Hebrews 7:24-25; Romans 8:34). He prays for our persevering obedience and faithfulness, and is the advocate before the Father on our behalf, pleading his blood as the atoning sacrifice for our sins (1 John 2:1-2). Further, Christ prepares a place for his disciples until he returns (John 14:1-3). Concerning his coming return, we eagerly await this next event: The ascended Lord will return physically (Acts 1:11), appearing “a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him” (Hebrews 9:28; Philippians 3:20-21).

## FOR FURTHER READING

Gerrit Scott Dawson, *Jesus Ascended: The Meaning of Christ's Continuing Incarnation*. P & R, 2004.

Douglas Farrow, *Ascension and Ecclesia*. T & T Clark, 1999.

Michael Horton, *People and Place: A Covenant Ecclesiology*.

Westminster John Knox, 2008.

—GREGG ALLISON

## ATHEISM

## EVERYDAY DEFINITION

Atheism is the philosophical position asserting that all forms of theism are false. Atheists believe there is no personal, Creator God that transcends the universe (monotheism or deism), no impersonal God that is one with the universe (pantheism), no utterly transcendent God who exists apart from evil matter (gnosticism or dualism), or no collection of finite gods (polytheism). Put positively, atheists are naturalists who believe that everything that exists can be understood in terms of physics, chemistry, and biology. Atheism is distinguished from agnosticism, which claims that one can't *know* whether or not God exists. Atheists claim they know God doesn't exist.

More specifically, in opposing Christianity, atheists assert that the universe wasn't created, but rather popped into existence at the "big bang" or has always been in existence in some form. Humans aren't made in God's image, but have evolved from lower life forms due to the combination of chance and natural laws. They claim that there is no soul, no supernatural salvation, no angels, no demons, and no afterlife. The Bible can't be divinely inspired, because there is no divine Author. Instead, these books are merely collections of prescientific superstition—groundless speculations that are refuted by the discoveries of science.

Atheists have been a distinct minority throughout history, but they can be found beginning with some of the pre-Socratic philosophers. In the West, atheism gained ground in the Enlightenment, as thinkers declared their autonomy from received religious traditions and attempted to rethink philosophy and culture apart from divine revelation. For many, Darwin's theory of natural selection was a kind of declaration of indepen-

dence from divine design, since it could explain the development (but not the origin) of life through mindless processes. Following in this train, much of modern science (particularly biology) has excluded any theistic understanding of nature from its theories. In the twentieth century, the communist regimes of the USSR (1917-1981) and Red China imposed atheism on entire civilizations. Although the United States Constitution guarantees freedom of religion, public education in the United States is taught at all levels according to the demands of naturalism. God is omitted as a meaningful explanation for anything in the curriculum.

Atheism promotes itself as enlightened, liberating, and free of superstition. With the publication of *The End of Faith* (2004), Sam Harris initiated a movement called “the new atheism,” which took a militant stand against belief in God and all religion. Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens, and others jumped on the bandwagon with a scorched earth (or heaven) approach that declared belief in God to be not only false but dangerous.

#### EVERYDAY APPLICATION

Christians must recognize the need to challenge atheist claims by demonstrating in practical ways that atheism is an illogical and unlivable worldview and that good and sufficient reasons exist for believing in the existence of the Christian God. Some ways we can do that are as follows:

- We must show that atheism provides no moral meaning for life. As Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) realized, the so-called death of God brings the death of any objective moral order. If matter is all that exists, we can make no appeal to any transcendent standard for conduct. We’re left only with instincts and changing social situations.
- We must communicate that if God is dead, so is human uniqueness. Atheists would argue that humans don’t bear the divine image, all forms of life have equal value. However, no animals are trying to protect humans from extinction. Given our rationality, creativity, and morality, we transcend the animal realm in ways that atheism cannot explain.
- We need to point out that moral responsibility makes no sense in a world without God, a world of mere matter in mindless motion. If humans are “meat machines,” who are part of a

larger cosmic machine, they cannot be held accountable for their actions. One well-known atheist claimed that when we do science, we deny humans free will; but when we think of law and morality, we must “play that game.” Christians must recognize this as double-think of the highest order.

- We must articulate sound reasons for belief in the existence of God. Several powerful lines of evidence have convinced many scientists and philosophers that the universe came into existence out of nothing a finite time ago. This “big bang” perspective denies the eternality of the universe and forces the atheist to claim that everything came from nothing without a cause and for no reason. But God as the universe-Maker is a far more rational explanation. In addition, scientists have found that dozens of factors about the universe must be just so in order for life to exist. If any of these “cosmic constants” or other variables—such as the expansion rate of the universe—were off by even a fraction, no life would exist. Atheists must claim this is sheer chance or that some unknown natural law explains it all. Yet, the idea that a Mind fine-tuned all of these elements is a far better explanation. Lastly, at the microscopic level of the inner workings of the cell, scientists have discovered extremely complex molecular machines and information-rich systems that can’t be explained on the basis of mindless matter and chance. Christians must argue the point that a designing Intelligence is the best explanation for observable phenomena.

Although atheism poses a significant and well-funded challenge to the Christian worldview, it is propped up more by ideology than by evidence. Given the strength of the arguments available against atheism and for God, we need to gain courage and acquire the needed knowledge to out-argue atheism in all areas of life.

#### FOR FURTHER READING

Lee Strobel, *The Case for a Creator*. Zondervan, 2004.

Anthony Flew, *There Is a God: How the World’s Most Notorious Atheist Changed His Mind*. HarperOne, 2007.

— DOUGLAS GROOTHUIS