

Meaning

By William Arthur Stephens
August 19, 2012

Preface

This is a statement of my thoughts on spiritual life and the meaning of the life. This statement expresses thoughts on the teachings of Jesus Christ and the role of God in our lives. It also addresses the role of Christianity in the world and the relationship of Christians with people of other beliefs. The statement explores different ways of interpreting the words of the Bible, and traces the Bible, Christian creeds, and the evolution and transformation of Christian precepts.

I have committed these to writing for my own purposes and in hopes that family and friends might gain something from considering the application of these thoughts to their own lives. I claim no divine inspiration or special knowledge – only that I have thought deeply about these subjects for the past 50 years.

Some will say that this document is sacrilegious and possibly even blasphemous; that we are not supposed to question what we read in the Bible or are told by ordained clergy. To them I say *“Look first to the acts of Jesus for your answers – not to others who have interpreted the acts or to those who may seek to control you. God gave you the ability to reason. Use that gift.”*

The Role of Creeds

The Christian tradition includes “creeds” written to summarize the fundamental beliefs of a particular group of leaders and followers. Among those are the Nicene Creed, the Apostles’ Creed, and the Athanasian Creed.

The purpose of a creed is to act as a yardstick of [correct belief](#). The creeds of Christianity have been drawn up at times of conflict about doctrine: acceptance or rejection of a creed served to distinguish believers and deniers of a particular doctrine or set of doctrines. For that reason a creed was called in Greek a σύμβολον, a word that meant half of a broken object which, when placed together with the other half, verified the bearer's identity. The Greek word passed through Latin "symbolum" into English "symbol", which only later took on the meaning of an outward sign of something.^[7]

The Nicene Creed was adopted in the face of the [Arian](#) controversy. [Arius](#), a Libyan preacher, had declared that although [Jesus Christ](#) was divine, God had actually created him, and "there was when he was not,"^[8] also worded by others of the era "there was once when he was not" and "he was made out of nothing."^[9] This made Jesus less than the Father and contradicted the doctrine of the [Trinity](#).^[10] Arius's teaching provoked a serious crisis.

The Nicene Creed of 325 explicitly affirms the [divinity of Jesus](#), applying to him the term "God". The 381 version speaks of the Holy Spirit as worshipped and glorified with the Father and the Son. The [Athanasian Creed](#) describes in much greater detail the relationship between Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The [Apostles' Creed](#) makes no explicit statements about the divinity of the Son and the Holy Spirit, but, in the view of many who use it, the doctrine is implicit in it.

The Nicene Creed and the Council of Nicaea

The origin of the Nicene Creed is the Council of Nicaea, a “congress” or “senate” of sorts convened by the Emperor Constantine to make good on a contingent “promise” made to the “Christian God” early in the fourth century AD. Constantine said that he promised during the heat of battle to the God of Christians that he would convert to Christianity and see that his entire kingdom converted if the Christian God would help him defeat his enemy. He won and he made good on his promise.

Constantine put out a call to scholars and leaders of sects of Christians far and wide, asking that they bring their documents and ideas to Nicaea, where, in 325 AD, a group of 318 of the most enlightened people of the time, “bishops”, would reach consensus on the writings and underlying principles to be employed in the “one true faith” from that time on. The result was the Nicene Creed and the Holy Bible.

Ultimately, the Council endorsed the following principles, embodied in the Nicene Creed of 325. In 381 AD the First Council of Constantinople modified the original Nicene Creed of 325 AD. The two are compared as follows:

First Council of Nicea (325)

We [believe in one God](#), the Father Almighty, Maker of all things visible and invisible.

And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, begotten of the Father [the only-begotten; that is, of the essence of the Father, God of God], Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father; By whom all things were made [both in heaven and on earth];

Who for us men, and for our salvation, came down and was incarnate and was made man;

He suffered, and the third day he rose again, ascended into heaven;

First Council of Constantinople (381)

We believe in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of [heaven](#) and earth, and of all things visible and invisible.

And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the *only-begotten* Son of God, begotten of the Father *before all worlds* (æons), Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father;

by whom all things were made;

who for us men, and for our salvation, came down from heaven, and was incarnate *by the Holy Ghost of the Virgin Mary*, and was made man;

he was crucified for us under Pontius Pilate, and suffered, *and was buried*, and the third day he rose again, *according to the Scriptures*, and

From thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead.

And in the Holy Ghost.

[But those who say: 'There was a time when he was not;' and 'He was not before he was made;' and 'He was made out of nothing,' or 'He is of another substance' or 'essence,' or 'The Son of God is created,' or 'changeable,' or 'alterable'—they are condemned by the holy catholic and apostolic Church.]

ascended into heaven, *and sitteth on the right hand of the Father*;

from thence he shall come again, *with glory*, to judge the quick and the dead;

whose kingdom shall have no end.

And in the Holy Ghost, *the Lord and Giver of life, who proceedeth from the Father, who with the Father and the Son together is worshiped and glorified, who spake by the prophets.*

In [one holy catholic and apostolic Church](#); we acknowledge one baptism for the remission of sins; we look for the [resurrection of the dead](#) and the life of the [world to come](#). Amen.

The Apostles' Creed

The Apostles' Creed was based on Christian theological understanding of the [Canonical gospels](#), the letters of the [New Testament](#) and to a lesser extent the [Old Testament](#). Its basis appears to be the old [Roman Creed](#). Because of its early origin, it does not address some [Christological](#) issues defined in the later [Nicene](#) and other [Christian Creeds](#). It thus says nothing explicitly about the [divinity](#) of either [Jesus](#) or of the [Holy Spirit](#). This makes it acceptable to many [Arians](#) and [Unitarians](#). Nor does it address many other theological questions that became objects of dispute centuries later.

The name of the Creed may come from the probably [5th-century](#) tradition that, under the inspiration of the [Holy Spirit](#) after [Pentecost](#), each of the [Twelve Apostles](#) dictated part of it.^[2] It is traditionally divided into twelve articles. However, Ambrose refers to the "Creed of the Apostles" in 390.

Some have suggested that the Apostles' Creed was spliced together with phrases from the New Testament.^[13] For instance, the phrase "descendit ad inferos" ("[he descended into hell](#)") echoes [Ephesians 4:9](#), "κατέβη εἰς τὰ κατώτερα μέρη τῆς γῆς" ("he descended into the lower, earthly regions"). According to Father Pat McCloskey, O.F.M.: "The term 'hell' in the Apostles' Creed does not mean 'place of eternal punishment.' This is actually a poor translation of the Hebrew [Sheol](#) (place where all the dead go, in the Old Testament understanding, regardless of the type of life they lived) or of the Latin *ad inferos* ([to] the underworld)." McCloskey adds, "The Creed uses this expression to link the saving death and resurrection of Jesus with the salvation of all the good

women and men who died before Jesus did. All the saints invite us to believe in God and act accordingly."^[14]

This phrase and that on the [communion of saints](#) are articles found in the Apostles' Creed, but not in the old Roman Creed nor in the Nicene Creed.

The [Catechism of the Catholic Church](#) gives the following English translation of the Apostles' Creed.^[16] In its discussion of the Creed,^[17] the Catechism maintains the traditional division into twelve articles, the numbering of which is here added to the text.

1. I believe in [God, the Father](#) almighty, creator of heaven and earth.
 2. I believe in [Jesus Christ](#), his [only Son](#), our Lord.
 3. He was conceived by the power of the [Holy Spirit](#) and born of the [Virgin Mary](#).
 4. He suffered under [Pontius Pilate](#), was crucified, died, and was buried.
 5. He [descended to the dead](#). On the third day [he rose again](#).
 6. He [ascended into heaven](#) and is seated at the right hand of the Father.
 7. He will [come again](#) to [judge the living and the dead](#).
 8. I believe in the [Holy Spirit](#),
 9. the holy catholic Church, the communion of [saints](#),
 10. the forgiveness of [sins](#),
 11. the [resurrection of the body](#),
 12. and [life everlasting](#).
- [Amen](#).

The Athanasian Creed

The **Athanasian Creed** (*Quicumque vult*) is a [Christian statement of belief](#), focusing on [Trinitarian](#) doctrine and [Christology](#). The [Latin](#) name of the creed, *Quicumque vult*, is taken from the [opening words](#), "Whosoever wishes." The Athanasian Creed has been used by Christian churches since the sixth century. It is the first creed in which the equality of the three persons of the Trinity is explicitly stated, and differs from the [Nicene-Constantinopolitan](#) and [Apostles' Creeds](#) in the inclusion of [anathemas](#), or condemnations of those who disagree with the Creed (like the [original Nicene Creed](#)).

Widely accepted^[1] among [Western Christians](#), including the [Roman Catholic Church](#), the [Anglican Communion](#), the [Lutheran Church](#) and most [liturgical Protestant](#) denominations, the Athanasian Creed has been used in public worship less and less frequently.^[2]

The Athanasian Creed is usually divided into two sections: lines 1–28 addressing the doctrine of the [Trinity](#), and lines 29–44 addressing the doctrine of [Christology](#).^[11] Enumerating the three persons of the Trinity (i.e., [Father](#), the [Son](#), and the [Holy Spirit](#)), the first section of the creed ascribes the [divine attributes](#) to each individually. Thus, each person of the Trinity is described as uncreated (*increated*), limitless (*Immensus*), eternal (*aeternus*), and omnipotent (*omnipotens*).^[12] While ascribing the divine attributes and divinity to each person of the Trinity, thus avoiding [subordinationism](#), the first half of the Athanasian Creed also stresses the unity of the three persons in the one Godhead, thus avoiding a theology of [tritheism](#). Furthermore, although one God, the

Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are distinct from each other. For the Father is neither made nor begotten; the Son is not made but is begotten from the Father; the Holy Spirit is neither made nor begotten but proceeds from the Father and the Son ([filioque](#)).

The text of the Athanasian Creed is as follows:

in Latin	English translation ^[13]
<i>Quicumque vult salvus esse, ante omnia opus est, ut teneat catholicam fidem: Quam nisi quisque integram inviolatamque servaverit, absque dubio in aeternum peribit. Fides autem catholica haec est: ut unum Deum in Trinitate, et Trinitatem in unitate veneremur. Neque confundentes personas, neque substantiam separantes. Alia est enim persona Patris alia Filii, alia Spiritus Sancti: Sed Patris, et Filii, et Spiritus Sancti una est divinitas, aequalis gloria, coeterna maiestas. Qualis Pater, talis Filius, talis [et] Spiritus Sanctus. Increatus Pater, increatus Filius, increatus [et] Spiritus Sanctus. Immensus Pater, immensus Filius, immensus [et] Spiritus Sanctus. Aeternus Pater, aeternus Filius, aeternus [et] Spiritus Sanctus. Et tamen non tres aeterni, sed unus aeternus. Sicut non tres increati, nec tres immensi, sed unus increatus, et unus immensus. Similiter omnipotens Pater, omnipotens Filius, omnipotens [et] Spiritus Sanctus. Et tamen non tres omnipotentes, sed unus omnipotens. Ita Deus Pater, Deus Filius, Deus [et] Spiritus Sanctus. Et tamen non tres dii, sed unus est Deus. Ita Dominus Pater, Dominus Filius, Dominus [et] Spiritus Sanctus. Et tamen non tres Domini, sed unus [est] Dominus. Quia, sicut singillatim</i>	Whosoever will be saved, before all things it is necessary that he hold the Catholic Faith. Which Faith except every one do keep whole and undefiled; without doubt he shall perish everlastingly. And the Catholic Faith is this: That we worship one God in Trinity, and Trinity in Unity; Neither confounding the Persons; nor dividing the Essence. For there is one Person of the Father; another of the Son; and another of the Holy Ghost. But the Godhead of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, is all one; the Glory equal, the Majesty coeternal. Such as the Father is; such is the Son; and such is the Holy Ghost. The Father uncreated; the Son uncreated; and the Holy Ghost uncreated. The Father unlimited; the Son unlimited; and the Holy Ghost unlimited. The Father eternal; the Son eternal; and the Holy Ghost eternal. And yet they are not three eternals; but one eternal. As also there are not three uncreated; nor three infinities, but one uncreated; and one infinite. So likewise the Father is Almighty; the Son Almighty; and the Holy Ghost Almighty. And yet they are not three Almighties; but one Almighty. So the Father is God; the Son is God; and the Holy Ghost is God. And yet they are not three Gods; but one God. So likewise the Father is Lord; the Son Lord; and the Holy Ghost Lord. And yet not three

unamquamque personam Deum ac Dominum confiteri christiana veritate compellimur: Ita tres Deos aut [tres] Dominos dicere catholica religione prohibemur. Pater a nullo est factus: nec creatus, nec genitus. Filius a Patre solo est: non factus, nec creatus, sed genitus. Spiritus Sanctus a Patre et Filio: non factus, nec creatus, nec genitus, sed procedens. Unus ergo Pater, non tres Patres: unus Filius, non tres Filii: unus Spiritus Sanctus, non tres Spiritus Sancti. Et in hac Trinitate nihil prius aut posterius, nihil maius aut minus: Sed totae tres personae coeternae sibi sunt et coaequales. Ita, ut per omnia, sicut iam supra dictum est, et unitas in Trinitate, et Trinitas in unitate veneranda sit. Qui vult ergo salvus esse, ita de Trinitate sentiat.

Sed necessarium est ad aeternam salutem, ut incarnationem quoque Domini nostri Iesu Christi fideliter credat. Est ergo fides recta ut credamus et confiteamur, quia Dominus noster Iesus Christus, Dei Filius, Deus [pariter] et homo est. Deus [est] ex substantia Patris ante saecula genitus: et homo est ex substantia matris in saeculo natus. Perfectus Deus, perfectus homo: ex anima rationali et humana carne subsistens. Aequalis Patri secundum divinitatem: minor Patre secundum humanitatem. Qui licet Deus sit et homo, non duo tamen, sed unus est Christus. Unus autem non conversione divinitatis in carnem, sed assumptione humanitatis in Deum. Unus omnino, non confusione substantiae, sed unitate personae. Nam sicut anima rationalis et caro

Lords; but one Lord. For like as we are compelled by the Christian verity; to acknowledge every Person by himself to be God and Lord; **So are we forbidden by the Catholic Religion; to say, There are three Gods, or three Lords.** The Father is made of none; neither created, nor begotten. The Son is of the Father alone; not made, nor created; but begotten. The Holy Ghost is of the Father and of the Son; neither made, nor created, nor begotten; but proceeding. So there is one Father, not three Fathers; one Son, not three Sons; one Holy Ghost, not three Holy Ghosts. And in this Trinity none is before, or after another; none is greater, or less than another. But the whole three Persons are coeternal, and coequal. So that in all things, as aforesaid; the Unity in Trinity, and the Trinity in Unity, is to be worshipped. **He therefore that will be saved, let him thus think of the Trinity.**

Furthermore it is necessary to everlasting salvation; that he also believe faithfully the Incarnation of our Lord Jesus Christ. **For the right Faith is,** that we believe and confess; that our Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is God and Man; God, of the Essence of the Father; begotten before the worlds; and Man, of the Essence of his Mother, born in the world. Perfect God; and perfect Man, of a reasonable soul and human flesh subsisting. Equal to the Father, as touching his Godhead; and inferior to the Father as touching his Manhood. Who although he is God and Man; yet he is not two, but one Christ. One; not by conversion of the Godhead into flesh; but by assumption of the Manhood into

*unus est homo: ita Deus et homo
unus est Christus. Qui passus est
pro salute nostra: descendit ad
inferos: tertia die resurrexit a
mortuis. Ascendit ad [in] caelos,
sedet ad dexteram [Dei] Patris
[omnipotentis]. Inde venturus [est]
judicare vivos et mortuos. Ad cujus
adventum omnes homines
resurgere habent cum corporibus
suis; Et reddaturi sunt de factis
propriis rationem. Et qui bona
egerunt, ibunt in vitam aeternam:
qui vero mala, in ignem aeternum.
Haec est fides catholica, quam nisi
quisque fideliter firmiterque
crediderit, salvus esse non poterit.*

God. One altogether; not by
confusion of Essence; but by unity of
Person. For as the reasonable soul
and flesh is one man; so God and
Man is one Christ; Who suffered for
our salvation; descended into hell;
rose again the third day from the
dead. He ascended into heaven, he
sitteth on the right hand of the God
the Father Almighty, from whence he
will come to judge the quick and the
dead. At whose coming all men will
rise again with their bodies; And
shall give account for their own
works. And they that have done good
shall go into life everlasting; and they
that have done evil, into everlasting
fire. This is the Catholic Faith; which
except a man believe truly and
firmly, he cannot be saved

The Intent and Effects of the Creeds

The original intent of the Apostles' Creed and the Nicene Creed was likely threefold:

- to insure that the foundation of the Christian faith was solid and clear so that it could be effectively taught, celebrated together, and sustained, and
- to establish Christianity's place as a legitimate religion in the world, and
- to eliminate the possibility that conflicting versions would destroy the integrity of Christianity or interfere with its legitimacy.

The early creeds accomplished those purposes. As might have been expected, the early creeds also spawned a competition between Christianity and other faiths. The Athanasian Creed of the sixth century is evidence of that. To win the hearts and minds of non-believers and to keep the hearts and minds of the faithful, two elements were essential: Exclusivity and Consequences.

Regarding Exclusivity

As can be seen from the progression of language, beginning with the Apostles' Creed, through the Nicene Creed of 325 and its amended version of 381, and finally with the Athanasian Creed of the sixth century (a reflection of the doctrine of the Roman Catholic church of the time), a curious combination of explanation and exclusivity evolves. While there are some references to exclusivity in the Nicene Creed of 325, the Athanasian Creed is much clearer on that principle.

The fact that the Athanasian Creed was not used widely in worship services after the sixth century is understandable. Reciting the creed, let alone beginning to understand it, was and is tedious. Yet the ideological doctrine lived on and is very much a central part of the doctrine of most Christian denominations today. This topic is discussed later.

Regarding Consequences

Exclusivity and Consequence is always a matched pair: After all, what is the purpose of Exclusivity if there are no Consequences – bad, good, or both?

No doubt, the writers of the creeds – particularly the early ones – were focused on positive consequences for the individuals considering adoption. Creeds provide principles and a sense of belonging to a worthy set of beliefs.

Somewhere along the way, creeds generally become a means of separating “Adopters” from “Non-adopters”, then “Believers” from “Non-believers” – This happens by process: first the Adopters become Believers, then the Believers celebrate their differences from Non-believers, then the Believers see the Non-believers as “lost”, and finally the Believers paint the Non-believers as villains or cult worshipers.

The consequences of “believing” then become enhanced in the collective mind of the Believers. Leaders of the Believers (often self-appointed and endorsed by a sanctioning body) find a variety of ways to emphasize this benefit, using motivational theories.

If the benefits of believing are not compelling enough to sustain the Believers or to attract prospective Believers, the leaders frequently turn to emphasizing the negative consequences of not believing. That is where the element of control creeps in. (Discussed later.)

Negative consequences of not believing are generally a natural evolution from the theme of being “lost”. No one relishes the prospect of being “lost” in any sense of the word. Losing one’s way temporarily may be an adventure, but losing one’s way forever is not good in anyone’s mind. Neither are being unworthy, pathetic, or doomed.

The evolution of the Believers’ approach to perpetuating and propagating the faith is much like the dichotomy of the meaning of the “carrot and stick” analogy. One version puts a carrot on the end of a stick in front of a mule to motivate it to move; the other has the carrot as a reward for good behavior and the stick as punishment for bad. The latter version has found the most use across Christianity for most of its 2000 years of existence.

The positive consequences (benefits) of being a Believer are:

- Being “found”.
- Being “saved”.
- Having a clear path.
- Belonging to a group of people who believe something worthwhile.

And sometimes, depending on the Believer group,

- Having both the opportunity and the responsibility to act on beliefs

The negative consequences of being a Non-believer may be:

- Being lost.
- Being doomed to a terrible existence.
- Being shunned by Believers.
- Being attacked.
- Being punished or persecuted by God or others.

Note that this dynamic occurs when enough Adopters decide that Exclusivity is a goal. This will be discussed further.

The Role of Constantine in Christianity

Constantine is perhaps best known for being the first "Christian" Roman emperor.

In February 313, Constantine met with Licinius in Milan, where they developed the [Edict of Milan](#). The edict stated that Christians should be allowed to follow the faith without oppression. This removed penalties for professing Christianity, under which many had been martyred in [persecutions of Christians](#), and returned confiscated [Church](#) property. The edict protected from religious persecution not only Christians but all religions, allowing anyone to worship whichever [deity](#) he chose. A similar edict had been issued in 311 by [Galerius](#), then senior emperor of the [Tetrarchy](#); Galerius' edict granted Christians the right to practice their religion but did not restore any property to them. The Edict of Milan included several clauses which stated that all confiscated churches would be returned as well as other provisions for previously persecuted Christians.

Scholars debate whether Constantine adopted his mother [St. Helena](#)'s Christianity in his youth, or whether he adopted it gradually over the course of his life. Constantine would retain the title of [pontifex maximus](#) until his death, a title emperors bore as heads of the pagan priesthood, as would his Christian successors on to [Gratian](#). According to Christian writers, Constantine was over 40 when he finally declared himself a Christian, writing to Christians to make clear that he believed he owed his successes to the protection of the Christian High God alone. Throughout his rule, Constantine supported the Church financially, built basilicas, granted privileges to clergy (e.g. exemption from certain taxes), promoted Christians to high office, and returned property confiscated during the Diocletianic persecution. His most famous building projects include the [Church of the Holy Sepulchre](#), and [Old Saint Peter's Basilica](#).

However, Constantine certainly did not patronize Christianity alone. After gaining victory in the Battle of the Milvian Bridge (312), a triumphal arch—the [Arch of Constantine](#)—was built (315) to celebrate his triumph. The arch is most notably decorated with images of the goddess [Victoria](#) and, at the time of its dedication, sacrifices to gods like [Apollo](#), [Diana](#), and [Hercules](#) were made. Most notably absent from the Arch are any depictions whatsoever regarding Christian symbolism.

Later in 321, Constantine instructed that Christians and non-Christians should be united in observing the **venerable day of the sun**, referencing the [esoteric eastern sun-worship](#) which

[Aurelian](#) had helped introduce. Furthermore, and long after his oft alleged "conversion" to Christianity, Constantine's coinage continued to carry the symbols of the sun. Even after the pagan gods had disappeared from the coinage, Christian symbols appeared only as Constantine's *personal* attributes: the [chi rho](#) between his hands or on his [labarum](#), but never on the coin itself. Even when Constantine dedicated the new capital of Constantinople, which became the seat of Byzantine Christianity for a millennium, he did so wearing the [Apollonian](#) sun-rayed [Diadem](#); no Christian symbols were present at this dedication.

The reign of Constantine established a precedent for the position of the emperor as having great influence and ultimate regulatory authority within the religious discussions involving the early Christian councils of that time, e.g., most notably the dispute over [Arianism](#), and the nature of God. Constantine himself disliked the risks to societal stability that religious disputes and controversies brought with them, preferring where possible to establish an orthodoxy. One way in which Constantine used his influence over the early Church councils was to seek to establish a consensus over the oft debated and argued issue over the nature of God.

Most notably, from 313–316 bishops in North Africa struggled with other Christian bishops who had been ordained by Donatus in opposition to Caecilian. The African bishops could not come to terms and the Donatists asked Constantine to act as a judge in the dispute. Three regional Church councils and another trial before Constantine all ruled against Donatus and the [Donatism](#) movement in North Africa. In 317 Constantine issued an edict to confiscate Donatist church property and to send Donatist clergy into exile. More significantly, in 325 he summoned the [Council of Nicaea](#), effectively the first [Ecumenical Council](#) (unless the [Council of Jerusalem](#) is so classified). The Council of Nicaea is most known for its dealing with [Arianism](#) and for instituting the [Nicene Creed](#).

Constantine enforced the prohibition of the [First Council of Nicaea](#) against celebrating the Lord's Supper on the day before the Jewish [Passover](#). This marked a definite break of Christianity from the Judaic tradition. From then on the Roman [Julian Calendar](#), a solar calendar, was given precedence over the lunar [Hebrew Calendar](#) among the Christian churches of the [Roman Empire](#).

Constantine made new laws regarding the [Jews](#). They were forbidden to own Christian slaves or to [circumcise](#) their slaves.

The Origin of the Holy Bible

During the Council of Nicaea of 325, many documents containing writings from the first century AD and later were considered for inclusion in a compendium to establish the definitive authority for the Christian faith. The approach agreed upon was to reach consensus on a collection of writings providing an historical perspective and a collection representing the Christian faith, beginning with accounts of Jesus' life, from birth. The first collection was called "[The Old Testament](#)" and the second, "[The New Testament](#)".

Since the Christian faith arose out of the Jewish community, books of [The Torah](#) were employed for much of [The Old Testament](#). These had been tested by time and were

accepted by most in the Christian community as representing the historical understanding of The Creator, The Creation, and life and morals before Jesus. Other historical writings were considered and debated by the leaders and delegates in attendance, and some were selected for inclusion. Whether this process was entirely by consensus is unclear.

Similarly, many writings were considered for inclusion in the second, definitive collection on Christianity. The result of the process was the same collection of writings Christians worldwide know as The New Testament.

The process of coming to agreement on the principles and writings of The New Testament was reportedly contentious to say the least. Debate was extremely “spirited”. Much like in any “congress”, factions arose and alliances were formed.

Many of the discussions centered on six issues:

- The nature of Jesus – divine or human
- The origin of Jesus – existing eternally or created by God
- The primary purpose of Jesus’ life and death
- The role of men and women in Jesus’ life
- The role of men and women in the future life of the faith (and therefore society)
- The authority of the resulting documentation of the Council of Nicaea

The Gnostic Gospels, employed by Coptic Christians of far northeastern Africa (mostly Egypt and Libya), were virtually shut out of the final collection which would become The New Testament. These gospels were “rediscovered” as part of the Dead Sea Scrolls, found by children playing in a cave by the Dead Sea in the 1950’s AD. (“Gnostic” means “knowledge”.)

There were several troubling problems for many of the Council members:

- The Gnostic Gospels did not identify Jesus as divine, but “created by God” or “of God” or “inhabited by the Holy Spirit”, and
- Some of the Gnostic Gospels indicated that Mary Magdalene, not Peter, was the primary leader of the apostolic movement after the crucifixion of Jesus – and, in fact, that many of the apostles were less than committed in spreading the word as Jesus had required of his chosen messengers, and
- The Gnostic Gospels generally placed the role of women in the faith at least equal with that of men, and
- Some of the Gnostic Gospels inferred a closer relationship between Jesus and Mary Magdalene than might be consistent with the image of Jesus portrayed by the other candidate writings, and
- The fantastic imagery and complex metaphorical language of some of the Gnostic Gospels (which is similar to that in the Book of Revelations) might create difficulty for the masses in understanding and accepting The New Testament as “The Word of The One True God”. These might also bring into greater question which passages of The

New Testament were to be taken literally, and which were to be read as similes or metaphors.

Certainly, there were many other such debates and much consternation in the work of the Council of Nicaea; the Gnostic Gospels are probably the best documented illustration that remains today.

Literal versus Spiritual Interpretations

Early in life, we are exposed to similes and metaphors. A father calls his little girl his “princess”. A mother calls her son a “little devil”. A sister refers to her little brother as a “terrorist”. A Sunday school teacher says that the World is God’s beautiful garden. The school teacher says you are like a noxious weed in the garden. (I resemble that remark.)

It’s all very confusing until you figure out that these people are not speaking literally – they are speaking figuratively. They are likening one thing to another to create a more graphic illustration of the message they are trying to convey. (“God’s beautiful garden” can be interpreted literally or figuratively, depending on your perspective.)

Some similes and metaphors are easy to recognize and nearly impossible to interpret literally. For example, few would claim that “...having faith even as a grain of mustard seed...” should be read literally. Likewise, a person being referred to as “an empty vessel” would make little sense interpreted literally; however some people may approximate the analogy intellectually.

So what do we make of one of the most quoted – and arguably one of the most important – verses in the New Testament?

“I am the way, the truth, and the life: no one comes to the Father but by me.”

John 14:6, King James Version

“I am.....” sounds very clear and unequivocal. But what does it mean?

Does it mean that Jesus is literally “the way,” or figuratively “the way,”?

What would a literal reading mean? Would we each have to become Jesus? Is Jesus actually an inanimate object?

Or is Jesus referring to himself in metaphorical terms?

- Is this a foreshadowing of his sacrifice, through which he becomes the singular conduit to the way, the truth, the life, and the Father?
- Or is Jesus saying that he is clearly demonstrating the way, the truth, and the life – which provide the singular path to the Father?

The answer to this question is a critical factor in shaping how we view the role of God, Jesus, ourselves, and others in the universe.

The Role of Changes in Translation and Meaning of Words

A clear candidate for the most quoted verse of the New Testament - and one of the most important to many Christians is:

"For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life."

John 3:16, King James Version.

Now this verse seems like it was intended to be clear, unequivocal, and certainly not subject to interpretation. For that reason, this verse is often cited as the defining statement by Jesus that sets Christianity as the certain path for eternal life.

But let's make sure of that, since the quote will be used to differentiate Christianity as the one true religion.

Everyone knows that the Bible was not written in English. In fact, the Bible is a collection of writings that were, for the most part, written a few hundred years before the notion of assembling a Bible was proposed. The books of the Bible were originally written in Hebrew, Greek, Latin – and in a few cases, other languages. Those cultures 2000 years ago had words that meant something to them that may have been a concept that was discontinued or changes dramatically along the way.

For example, _____ in ancient Greece would be roughly synonymous with _____ in America today. And the Aramaic word “*rabboni*” would be interpreted to mean “The Great Master” in American English today, though the King James Version uses the term “teacher” as synonymous.

The verse given the reference number john 3:16 in the king James Version of the Bible is written in the original Greek is as follows (associated Strong's Number in superscript):

Οὕτως³⁷⁷⁹ γὰρ¹⁰⁶³ ἠγάπησεν²⁵ ὁ³⁵⁸⁸ Θεός²³¹⁶ τὸν³⁵⁸⁸ κόσμον²⁸⁸⁹, ὥστε⁵⁶²⁰ τὸν³⁵⁸⁸ Υἱόν³¹ ⁵²⁰⁷
τὸν³⁵⁸⁸ μονογενῆ³⁴³⁹ ἔδωκεν¹³²⁵, ἵνα²⁴⁴³ πᾶς³⁹⁵⁶ ὁ³⁵⁸⁸ πιστεύων⁴¹⁰⁰ εἰς¹⁵¹⁹ Αὐτόν⁸⁴⁶ μὴ³³⁶¹
ἀπόληται⁶²² ἀλλ'²³⁵ ἔχῃ²¹⁹² ζωὴν²²²² αἰώνιον¹⁶⁶

This can be translated literally as:

“For in this way God loved the world: that he gave the unique son, so that all the ones trusting in him would not perish, but have eternal life.”

So, in an exact literal interpretation, “*only son*” is actually “*unique son*” and “*whoever believes in him*” is actually “*all the ones trusting in him*”.

So does that really make any difference to us in this day and age?

The answer is that it makes all the difference in the World. From this more accurate interpretation of the ancient writing, we can infer that there may be other “sons”. We can also sense the fundamental difference between “*believes in...*” and “*trusts in...*”.

So why would the translators incorporate such fundamental changes in their translations?

There are several possible answers:

- The translators were not capable of exact translations
- The translators tried to make the language more understandable for “modern” readers of another culture
- The translators tried to make the stories and concepts more appealing and compelling
- The translators tried to create a body of work by skillfully editing the text of various interrelated documents to make the resulting belief system superior to others

Most likely, the translators were absolutely capable of exact translations. The King James Version certainly used language that made the text more understandable for “modern” readers.

Now, trying to make the stories more appealing and compelling is not, in itself, a problem; however, exaggeration and ‘literary license’ with the facts can be a very serious problem when people are encouraged to adopt, as a foundation, the basic “truths” of the documents.

Now a real problem arises if the translators have collaborated to produce a set of strategically embellished literary works in order to establish superior credibility for an entire belief system.

The Bible: Word of God or Words of People about God?

Simply posing the question of whether the Bible is the Word of God or the words of people about God is considered heretical by many or most Christians. Much of the passion over this question is rooted in the premise of infallibility of the Bible, *i.e.*, if the Bible is the Word of God, it is inherently infallible.

However, if the Bible comprises words of people about God, the possibility of flaws exists. In fact, the likelihood of flaws exists. Now a way around this disturbing possibility might be to assert that the Bible consists of words of people about God which were written by divine inspiration. Still, the possibility of flaws still lurks.

This issue poses a serious problem for many Christian organizations. Most churches rely on a set of beliefs and principles that are considered hard and fast. Creeds, dogma, and ceremonies bind the Believers in ways that give great comfort to individuals and stability to the organization.

Opening up to interpretation the very set of words that form the foundation for the organization would potentially create dissent and chaos. This could well pose an existential threat to the organization, so the pragmatic alternative is to fervently maintain that the Bible is the infallible Word of God. This requires that the leaders of the organization discourage inquiry into topics such as the historical accounts of the origins of the Bible as well as the myriad of obvious contradictions in statements regarding morals, values, and principles – particularly in the Old Testament.

But what if the Bible is considered as the words of people about God? Does that mean the words are insignificant or useless? Does that mean the Bible is nothing more than another collection of philosophical ramblings, quaint stories, and tales to illustrate important moral and behavioral concepts? To some, that is what the Bible is, at best. For those people, at worst it is a brilliantly crafted and arranged set of words designed, like the sheet music of a _____ opera, to create a diabolical system for control of the masses by a fraternity of naive, well-meaning stooges led by power-seeking orchestrators. Those perspectives seem to come from people who are cynical about most things spiritual, so dwelling on conspiracy theories, assigning misanthropic motives, and dismissing leaders and followers as naive buffoons is a simple-minded and foolish way of writing-off millennia of good and worthwhile benefits and accomplishments rooted in the words of the Bible.

Manipulators, buffoons, misanthropes, cynics, and fools will always exist. So what?

The essential quest for each individual is to search for and find his or her own truth. To choose his or her own guiding principles. To establish his or her own foundation. To find the means to ignore the noise and confusion. To find an enduring peace within and around.

Beyond the fact that the original Bible was created by a parliamentary process, complete with voting and consensus for the purposes of which texts would be included and which would be excluded, the most critical element of acceptance of the Bible as the infallible Word of God is the apparent inconsistencies in addressing fundamental concepts. Clergy throughout the ages have used mystical sleight of hand to dismiss these clear inconsistencies and incongruities. These are things we should not question and cannot possibly understand because God is beyond our understanding.

And yet, the purpose of the Bible is clearly to understand the most important things about God so that we might live as he meant for us to live. Another incongruity many Christian leaders would urge followers to ignore.

I have concluded that the Bible is indeed the words of man about God. Does that mean the Bible isn't holy? Not at all. Holy things are things we value above all because they transcend

the here and now. They provide clear guidance in chaos. To those who believe in a Creator or Creators, Holy things are “of God” - essential elements borne before and as part of the Creation.

What this means to me is that the Holy Bible must be interpreted spiritually and in the context of the world around the writer. Again remember the words of the Apostle Paul, *“The letter kills and the spirit gives life.”* We must ask ourselves, *“Who is the more authoritative source – the Apostle Paul or the Pastor trying to whip up a mildly enthusiastic congregation in preparation for passing the collection plate or requesting pledges for the building fund for the church gymnasium?”*

For those who chose the authority of the Pastor or the Diocese, none of these writings are likely to resonate with you and I suggest that you return to the blissful comfort of the flock. Just realize that you will be passively wasting the time of your life.

Evolution, Creation and Intelligent Design

Nothing is more fundamental to the meaning of life than the origin of life. The Bible addresses the history of creation in __ sentences, with descriptions of the events of seven days. The first sentence reads, *“In the beginning the earth was without form and void...”*. Overall, the sequence described tracks fairly well with the development steps described by scientists over centuries, but seven days...? Come on, now. That sounds like a tall tale.

Biblical literalists have often responded to skepticism in the literal veracity of the creation account of Genesis by statements like, *“With God all things are possible.”* Those attempting to mediate a possible middle ground between the literalists and the “fatal flaw seekers” have suggested that maybe the “days” were longer then – or maybe that the reference to “days” was a metaphor used by God to help people understand something virtually incomprehensible.

On the other hand, ever since Darwin articulated his Theory of Evolution, those who have sought a rational argument to disprove the existence of a deity have pointed to Darwin’s theory as a *de facto* irrefutable summary argument.

Curiously, while the Theory of Evolution may help provide clues to begin to understand some aspects of “how” life on the earth may have developed over time, the theory does nothing to further our understanding of the origins of the earth or life on it. For that reason, the Theory of Evolution is relevant only to the most literal of Biblical literalists when it comes to questions regarding the origins of the universe, the world, and life. For those people, no discussion is useful. For those who subscribe to the philosophy of the Apostle Paul, the quest for understanding is still before them.

As an engineer and scientist by training, I understand the Scientific Method as described by _____. Hypothesis, experimental design, constants and variables, results and interpretations. A very useful methodical approach to gain an understanding of one factor of a system at a time.

But what do scientists do when attempting to identify and understand the role of many factors in a system? We use advanced integrated approaches to systems modeling – including formula-based (deterministic) and statistically-based models. Formula-based models are often derived by integrating results of related experiments using the Scientific Method. Statistically-based models do not seek to develop formulas to predict the outcome of operating systems, but rather use “data mining” or “information synthesis” to predict outcomes while not necessarily understanding the detailed relationships among the elements of the system.

The “Observational Method” is a critical component of sound science. When we observe the relationships among elements of a system, we begin to understand the system by gaining intelligence about the system. We understand that, as the days get cooler and daylight lasts shorter, plants begin to adapt. Deciduous trees turn color and lose their leaves over several weeks. Over several seasons a child begins to understand the seasons. He or she gains firsthand intelligence about the seasons.

Observation is critical to understanding the earth, our universe, and life in all respects. Here are some thoughts and observations regarding the concepts of Creation and Intelligent Design:

- My physics professor concluded a semester with this thought, written on a blackboard: *“We don’t know one one-hundredth of one percent of what there is to know about anything in this universe.”* He was one of the smartest people I ever knew. I believe this thought was the most important thing I learned from him. Profound knowledge.
- Observation is the foundation for physics, chemistry, biology, and most other earth sciences and life sciences. Formulas, models, and all types of explanations are based on observations. Experiments are designed and performed to derive, test, and improve these explanations. Nearly all explanations attempt to address What?, How?, Where?, and When?.
- Science generally steers clear of attempting to address Who? and Why?. Pseudoscientists (prominent and obscure), obsessed with the egotistical need to provide complete, irrefutable theories and results, proclaim that “Who?” and “Why?” are irrelevant factors – artifacts of superstition and manipulative “religions”.
- The Big Bang Theory of *how* the universe might have been initiated is the current popular favorite among scientists. Many resources are being allocated to proving, disproving, or expanding this theory. Recall Genesis ____: *“In the beginning the earth was without form and void.”* Science and the Book of Genesis seem to agree

completely regarding this fundamental piece of profound knowledge. So *what* existed before the Big Bang? Is time linear or something else? Albert Einstein worked much of his career to derive the set of formulae to explain the universe. Late in his life, he stated that his goal was to derive (understand and explain) God's Laws. The more Einstein learned the more he realized and appreciated what he didn't know. He realized early on that evidence of Intelligent Design is everywhere.

- Here are some pieces of empirical evidence of Intelligent Design:
 - the oak tree
 - the seahorse
 - the butterfly
 - instinct
 - humor
 - compassion
 - curiosity
 - you and me
- Observation – not casual observation, but analytical observation – reveals intricate workings in all living things – plant and animal. The deeper we look, the more levels of intricacy we see. The broader we look, the more varieties and combinations we see. On land, in the sky, and beneath the oceans and rivers, we see amazing diversity and intricacy.
- Many scientists attempt to explain all the diversity, intricacies, and change through time we observe with one all-encompassing concept: **evolution**. Evolution (adaptation) is a process that clearly exists and has likely existed since the beginning of life. But does evolution provide a comprehensive explanation of the intricacies and diversity we see in nature? Again, if your answer to this question is “yes”, you should return to the blissful comfort of the flock, joining those who surrender reason to the Pastor who asserts the Bible must be interpreted literally in all respects. While apparently at opposite ends of the spectrum, the literal flockers and the evolution flockers have one important thing in common: they have surrendered curiosity and reason to “expert authorities” who don't know what they don't know.
- I believe the evidence for Intelligent Design is so ubiquitous and compelling that I will not knowingly hire someone who rejects the notion. My conviction is not based on religion, but rather on one of the most essential traits of capable scientists – the ability to apply curiosity and analytical thinking.

The Nature of God, The Nature of Humans

Genesis (_____) states that “God created Man in his own image.”

As we progress through the Bible, we see three strikingly different pictures of God:

One: The creative, all-knowing, benevolent, temperament-neutral God

Two: The omnipotent, judgmental, vindictive God

Three: The loving, compassionate, conciliatory God

Most Christian clergy of all denominations make use of portions of the scripture to illustrate and support the “Message of the Day”. When lay persons ask about these seeming incongruities, they answer with something like, “God passes all human understanding.” Translation, “I don’t know, no one knows, and let’s talk about something else.” Then the clergy generally refer to the infallibility of God’s Word in the Bible and God’s perfection.

The Old Testament includes many accounts of God’s demands on humans and the terrible consequences of man’s disobedience. From the original sin in the Garden of Eden to the Great Flood, God’s own destruction of nearly all of His/Her own Creation on earth – resulting in a “do-over”, the Old Testament provides a picture of God as an omnipotent, powerful, and dispassionate supreme being.

The emphasis in the doctrine of virtually all of the Christian denominations is the “New Covenant”, that is, God’s new relationship with humanity by virtue of Jesus. The concept is basically, that God tried the heavy-handed, fire and brimstone, vindictive approach and that didn’t get the desired results, so God turned to the compassionate, conciliatory, conditional love approach. ‘Conditional love’ rather than unconditional love, because the condition of God’s reconciliation with humanity as most Christian denominations preach is the death on the cross of God, himself – followed by the resurrection. Generally, the “conditional’ love concept is central to the member recruiting and retention strategies of the Christian denominations. *Ergo “He died for your sins.”*

The Bible says, *“Judge not that ye be not judged.”* (_____), and *“Before pointing out the speck in another’s eye, take the log out of your own eye.”* (_____) . These passages instruct us to *“Walk a mile in the other’s shoes.”* (_____) – reinforcement by Jesus of the importance of empathy and sympathy.

Certainly, other interpretations of the purpose and meaning of the death and resurrection of Jesus are possible – though all are ridiculed and dismissed by virtually all conventional Christian denominations – with the apparent notable exceptions of the Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter Day Saints (the Mormons) and some Unitarian churches. Among all of the denominations, the emphasis on teaching is absolutely consistent – whether God is teaching a lesson through the Great Flood or through Jesus. Through the story of David and Goliath, God teaches the lesson that great and righteous accomplishments can come from the commitment of individuals against great odds.

So, if one follows the logic of the First Interpretation, despite the condemnation by conventional Christian clergy of this heretical act of thinking outside the doctrine of their organizational doctrine, this is what might be concluded:

First Interpretation

If:

- God created us in His/Her own image.
- God is perfect in every way, and does not make mistakes.
- God has the capacity for creativity, cold and analytical judgment, vindictiveness, teaching, empathy, sympathy, unselfish sacrifice, compassion, and (now *vis-à-vis* Jesus suffering and brutal murder at the hands of foolish and arrogant humans) unconditional love.
- The vacillation of the prominence of God's traits is well documented and, by virtue of His/Her perfection, is right and proper.

Then:

- Humans have the capacity for creativity, cold and analytical judgment, vindictiveness, teaching, empathy, sympathy, unselfish sacrifice, compassion, and (now *vis-à-vis* Jesus suffering and brutal murder at the hands of foolish and arrogant humans) unconditional love.
- That is the way God intends for humans to be. Except maybe the vindictiveness: *"Vengeance is mine sayeth the Lord."* (_____). The action of vengeance, God has apparently reserved for Himself/Herself. The thought of and the righteousness of vengeance, though, is Godlike.
- The appropriate application of these Godlike traits is based on situations, which required judgment. So, the Christian clergy who urge members of the flock not to think for themselves are, in fact, substituting their own judgment (or more broadly the judgment of the sanctioning denomination) for the God-given capacity for rational and compassionate judgment given each of us.

Alternate Interpretation

Another, totally different, interpretation of the composite picture of God is possible from the Bible. This view is disturbing and frightening:

- God is inconsistent - Beginning as a neutral creator, becoming judgmental and vindictive, then abruptly abandoning the vindictive approach and embracing compassion and sacrifice as cardinal virtues. Curiously, the path to the most recent behavior was not possible without the ultimate punishment – inflicted on Himself/Herself rather than His/Her Creation – as a condition of the reconciliation.

This view of God, as potentially might derived from the Biblical scriptures by detractors of the Judeo-Christian faith, is disturbing in that it would seem to validate human behavior

commonly associated with schizophrenia, psychopathy, and sociopathic behavior in humans. None of those are seen as “good” or “rational” by humankind – including the clergy of any denominations of Christianity or Judaism. These traits may, in fact, be revered by Islam; however, that is a totally different subject.

My Conclusion

My conclusion is that the First Interpretation is correct. I am applying my God-given gifts of rational analysis and judgment. While the Alternate interpretation may be more in keeping with most of the doctrine of current Christian denominations (though they would never admit to my blunt wording), I believe that they are missing the point and therefore committing the ultimate sin of Blasphemy – the illegitimate use of God's name to advance selfish interests.

Most of the Christian clergy are sheep and are clueless of their sins, but ignorance is no excuse. God gave them the ability to think rationally and make judgments – like all humans. Most attended advanced studies in theology for several years. To feign rationality in order to control and manipulate others in the name of God is certainly Blasphemy.

So what does all of this mean to each of us?

It means:

- **Humans have the capacity for creativity, cold and analytical judgment, vindictiveness, teaching, empathy, sympathy, unselfish sacrifice, compassion, and (now *vis-à-vis* Jesus suffering and brutal murder at the hands of foolish and arrogant humans) unconditional love.**
- **That is the way God intends for humans to be. Except maybe the vindictiveness: “*Vengeance is mine sayeth the Lord.*” (_____). The action of vengeance, God has apparently reserved for Himself/Herself. The thought of and the righteousness of vengeance, though, is Godlike.**
- **The appropriate application of these Godlike traits is based on situations, which required judgment. So, the Christian clergy who urge members of the flock not to think for themselves are, in fact, substituting their own judgment (or more broadly the judgment of the sanctioning denomination) for the God-given capacity for rational and compassionate judgment given each of us.**
- **God is in everywhere: God is in Heaven, God is in me, God is in you, God exists throughout Creation.**
- **We should think and reason together about life, values, principles, situations, and actions.**
- **We should reject the artificial constraints of organized Christianity and Judaism which admonish us to adopt the precepts a particular set of beliefs as a condition of “belonging”. Often, these constraints originate in Blasphemy, arrogance, and selfishness. Just as Jesus rebuked the priests of the temple, so should we reject the false and manipulative words of the conventional Christian denominations.**

The Meaning of “Salvation”

The element of “salvation” is central and primary in the organized Christian denominations. In fact, most of the denominations concentrate on this element of the faith to the extent that all other elements are portrayed as secondary – or at least lesser. The emphasis of the salvation element is generally that the crucifixion of Jesus (and by virtue of that, God’s ultimate sacrifice for us) is the foundation for salvation. *“He died for your sins.”* is the most basic statement of the concept of salvation for most denominations of Christianity.

The concept of sin is defined by the account of Original Sin in Genesis as well as the Ten Commandments and subsequent references in the Bible to humans acting in defiance (or in non-compliance) with the Ten Commandments. Sin is identified in many passages of the Bible as the thing that separates mankind from God, and therefore damns mankind to a fate apart from God – at best separated from God; at worst an eternal existence in Hell with Satan – the opposite in every way from Heaven and God.

Hellfire and Damnation are the hallmarks of the consequences of sin in the conventional majority doctrine of current and historical Christian denominations. These colorful and compelling images have been used for two millennia to evoke an emotional response and to induce men, women, and children to embrace Christianity as the only means of avoiding the inevitable consequences of sin. Further, most denominations hold that the act of Jesus sacrifice is all that is needed to secure salvation; all that is needed from a person is acknowledgement of that fact and an earnest attempt at compliance with God’s laws.

Should one stray, holds the doctrine, all that is needed to be forgiven is an acknowledgment of the sin, a display of contrition, and a request for forgiveness. All is forgiven and the slate is clean each time this ritual is observed, regardless of the severity or frequency of the sin – except for blasphemy.

This is an appealing proposition to even the worst sinner. In fact, carried to the logical extreme, if one prays to God for a new car and God doesn’t deliver, one could simply steal a car, violating the ___ Commandment, and then ask God to forgive him. How great is that? If one desires a friend’s wife, the same deal. Even murder.... To the person seeking meaning and security, this sort of proposition is incredibly attractive. Limited effort required and guaranteed results because someone else did all the hard work. The proposition sounds much like advertising for no-effort weight loss solutions. This path is always aimed at answering the finish line question, which is *“What happens when I die?”* The *cross* provides the definitive answer for all people for life after death.

But then, much like weight loss solutions, there’s another more involved path to “salvation”. This path leads to a different result because it is not aimed at a finish line result, but rather the eternal journey.

The *fish* provides the abstract answer for thinking people for each and every moment from this one through eternity. Jesus said, “*I come that you might have life and have it more abundantly*”. Jesus never said, “*I die that you may have life...*”

Jesus spoke in parables, similes, and metaphors – just the way great communicators speak today. Yet, as discussed elsewhere, many who read the Bible read all but the most obvious phrases literally.

So what do we make of one of the most quoted – and arguably one of the most important – verses in the New Testament?

“I am the way, the truth, and the life: no one comes to the Father but by me.”

John 14:6, King James Version

“I am.....” sounds very clear and unequivocal. But what does it mean?

Does it mean that Jesus is literally “the way,” or figuratively “the way,”?

What would a literal reading mean? Would we each have to become Jesus? Is Jesus actually an inanimate object?

Or is Jesus referring to himself in metaphorical terms?

- Is this a foreshadowing of his sacrifice, through which he becomes the singular conduit to the way, the truth, the life, and the Father?
- Or is Jesus saying that he is clearly demonstrating the way, the truth, and the life – which provide the singular path to the Father?

The answer to this question is a critical factor in shaping how we view the role of God, Jesus, ourselves, and others in the universe.

The Fish or the Cross?

Since the crucifixion of Jesus, Christians have used symbols to signify their affiliation. The two most enduring symbols are the cross and the fish. The cross was originally represented as the Greek letter “X”.

The Cross

The Christian cross, seen as a representation of the instrument of the crucifixion of Jesus Christ, is the best-known religious symbol of Christianity. It is related to the crucifix (a cross that includes a usually three-dimensional representation of Jesus' body) and to the more general family of cross symbols.

In Christianity the cross reminds Christians of God's act of love in Christ's sacrifice at Calvary—"the *Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.*" The cross also reminds Christians of Jesus' victory over sin and death, since it is believed that through His death and resurrection He conquered death itself. They venerate it not as a material object seen in isolation but as the symbol of the sacrifice by which Christ saved them, as the instrument of Christ's triumph, according to Colossians 2:15 (*"Having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross"*), and *"as the instrument of our God's saving Love"*.

During the first two centuries of Christianity, the cross may have been rare in Christian iconography, as it depicts a purposely painful and gruesome method of public execution and Christians were reluctant to use it. A symbol similar to the cross, the staurogram, was used to abbreviate the Greek word for cross in very early New Testament manuscripts. The extensive adoption of the cross as Christian iconographic symbol arose from the 4th century.

However, the cross symbol was already associated with Christians in the 2nd century, as is indicated in the anti-Christian arguments cited in the *Octavius* of *Minucius Felix*, chapters IX and XXIX, written at the end of that century or the beginning of the next, and by the fact that by the early 3rd century the cross had become so closely associated with Christ that Clement of Alexandria, who died between 211 and 216, could without fear of ambiguity use the phrase τὸ κυριακὸν σημεῖον (the Lord's sign) to mean the cross, when he repeated the idea, current as early as the apocryphal Epistle of Barnabas, that the number 318 (in Greek numerals, ΤΙΗ) in Genesis 14:14 was interpreted as a foreshadowing (a "type") of the cross (T, an upright with crossbar, standing for 300) and of Jesus (IH, the first two letters of his name ΙΗΣΟΥΣ, standing for 18), and his contemporary Tertullian could designate the body of Christian believers as *crucis religiosi*, i.e. "devotees of the Cross".[

Roman Catholics, Eastern Orthodox, Oriental Orthodox, members of the major branches of Lutheranism, some Anglicans, and other Christians often make the Sign of the Cross upon themselves. This was already a common Christian practice in the time of Tertullian.

Members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (Mormons) believe that Jesus died on a cross, *however "For us the cross is the symbol of the dying Christ, while our message is a declaration of the living Christ... the lives of our people must become the only meaningful expression of our faith and, in fact, therefore, the symbol of our worship."*

Mormons do not place the cross on their buildings because the Bible does not mention the cross as a symbol for Christianity. Most Mormon temples will usually decorate one spire of the temple with a symbol of the Angel Moroni as an expression that the heavens have been reopened to man on earth.

In Plato's *Timaeus*, it is explained that the two bands which form the soul of the world cross each other like the letter X. Chi or X is often used to abbreviate the name Christ, as in the holiday Christmas (Xmas). When fused within a single typespace with the Greek letter Rho thus (Ϡ), it is called the *labarum* and used to represent the person of Jesus Christ.

The Fish

Ichthys (also *Ichthus* or *Ikhtus*), from the Koine Greek word for fish: ἰχθύς, (capitalized IXΘΥΣ or IXΘYC) is a symbol consisting of two intersecting arcs, the ends of the right side extending beyond the meeting point so as to resemble the profile of a fish, used by early Christians as a secret Christian symbol and now known colloquially as the "sign of the fish" or the "Jesus fish."

IXΘΥΣ (Ichthys) is an acronym for "Ἰησοῦς Χριστός, Θεοῦ Υἱός, Σωτήρ", (Iēsous Christos, Theou Yios, Sōtēr), which translates into English as "Jesus Christ, God's Son, Savior".

- [Iota](#) (i) is the first letter of [Iēsous](#) (Ἰησοῦς), Greek for "[Jesus](#)".
- [Chi](#) (ch) is the first letter of [Christos](#) (Χριστός), Greek for "anointed".
- [Theta](#) (th) is the first letter of *Theou* (Θεοῦ), Greek for "God's", the genitive case of Θεός, *Theos*, Greek for "God".
- [Ypsilon](#) (y) is the first letter of *(h)yios*^[3] (Υἱός), Greek for "Son".
- [Sigma](#) (s) is the first letter of *sōtēr* ([Σωτήρ](#)), Greek for "Savior".

This explanation is given among others by Augustine in his *Civitate Dei*, where he notes that the generating sentence "Ἰησοῦς Χριστός Θεοῦ Υἱός Σωτήρ" has 27 letters, i.e. 3 x 3 x 3, which in that age indicated power.[5] Augustine quotes also an ancient text from the Sibylline oracles[6] whose verses are an acrostic of the generating sentence.

Historians say the 20th-century use of the *ichthys* motif is an adaptation based on an Early Christian symbol which included a small cross for the eye or the Greek letters "IXΘΥΣ".

An ancient adaptation of *ichthys* is a wheel which contains the letters IXΘΥΣ superimposed such that the result resembles an eight-spoked wheel.

Fish are mentioned and given symbolic meaning several times in the Gospels. Several of Jesus' twelve Apostles were fishermen. He commissions them with the words "*I will make you fishers of men*".

At the feeding of the five thousand, a boy is brought to Jesus with "five small loaves and two fish". The question is asked, "*But what are they, among so many?*" Jesus multiplies the loaves and fish to feed the multitude. In Matthew 13:47-50, the Parable of Drawing in the Net, Jesus compares God's decision on who will go to heaven or to hell ("the fiery furnace") at the end of this world to fishers sorting out their catch, keeping the good fish and throwing the bad fish away. In John 21:11, it is related that the disciples fished all night but caught nothing. Jesus instructed them to cast the nets on the other side of the boat, and they drew in 153 fish.

According to tradition, ancient Christians, during their persecution by the Roman Empire in the first few centuries after Christ, used the fish symbol to mark meeting places and tombs, or to distinguish friends from foes: when a Christian met a stranger in the road, the Christian

sometimes drew one arc of the simple fish outline in the dirt. If the stranger drew the other arc, both believers knew they were in good company.

The Choice – The Fish or The Cross

At the heart of personal decisions regarding the practice of Christianity is the choice symbolized by adoption of the Cross or the Fish as the primary symbol of Christian faith. Mormons have made that decision as a group and do not use the Cross. That choice is explained as follows:

"For us the cross is the symbol of the dying Christ, while our message is a declaration of the living Christ... the lives of our people must become the only meaningful expression of our faith and, in fact, therefore, the symbol of our worship."

On the other hand, Catholics, Greek Orthodox, Lutherans, Southern Baptists, and most other Christian denominations make use of the Cross as the primary symbol of their version of the Christian faith. The Fish is typically used as a secondary symbol by these groups – if it is used at all.

The use of the Cross in Catholic, Greek Orthodox, Lutheran, Southern Baptist, and many other Christian sects is often accompanied with phrases such as:

- *"...a full, reasonable, and sufficient sacrifice for the sins of the whole World..."*
- *"...reconciling the World to Himself..."*
- *"...the Lamb of God which takes away the sins of the World..."*


The concept of sacrifice has been a part of human civilization and spiritual systems since the dawn of civilization. The Pagan religions employed sacrifices as a central part of all creeds and ceremonies. For these reasons, one can easily see why early Christians might have sought to understand and rationalize the crucifixion of Jesus as the ultimate sacrifice with very personal consequences for them.

The fact is that depicting the crucifixion as a sacrifice, sufficient in itself to save all people from their own sins with no act required except acceptance of the premise, is a powerful proposition to potential believers. That premise alone created an amazing member recruiting and retention tool for the leaders of the religious sects which use the tool.

Promoting a perpetual feeling of overwhelming personal inadequacy and guilt is paramount to the effectiveness of the Cross as a sect membership recruiting and management tool. Related rituals such as confession of sins and the sacrament of communion are conducted in these sects with a strong subtext of individual guilt and helplessness.

Sects such as the Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses emphasize a strong personal relationship with the living Christ, behaving in a Christ-like way, and employing the teachings of Jesus to improve life for the believer and others. These sects – whether they use the fish

symbol or not – see and live Christianity in a very different way than sects that focus primarily on the Cross.

Some sects make substantial use of the symbol , known as the *labarum* to represent the person of Jesus Christ. Use of this symbol is not to be confused with the use of the Cross.

For me, the Fish as a symbol of my Christian beliefs is the most powerful. The Mormon Church, while incorporating some history and concepts that I cannot accept, “have it right” when it comes to defining the meaning and enduring significance of Jesus Christ. For that reason, the Mormon Church and others that put the significance of the life, teachings, and enduring role of Jesus in the everyday lives of Christians will always be denigrated by those who chose to emphasize the single ultimate act of sacrifice and atonement.

If there is one overarching lesson to take from Jesus life, it is that you will be persecuted for your Christian beliefs – and that being steadfast and loyal by living according to those beliefs is the path to righteousness and an abundant life.



Sacrifice, Atonement, and Acts

Virtually all of the Christian denominations in existence today emphasize sacrifice. Indeed, sacrifice has strong basis in the bible – both the Old Testament and the New Testament. Sacrifice is prevalent in the Old Testament:

- Lambs were sacrificed routinely
- God commanded Abraham to sacrifice his son. (Note that the basis for wars and terrorist acts for 1000 years has been the argument over which son Abraham was to sacrifice – David (an ancestor of Jesus) or Ishmael (an ancestor of Mohammed). David is the same David became king of the Israelites at a very young age and who slew Goliath with a sling. Ishmael was the illegitimate son on Abraham and a slave, **Bathsheba**. The entire legitimacy of Islam hinges on the historical question of whether the illegitimate son had standing in the recorded history of the spiritual beliefs stemming from Moses and Abraham.

In the New Testament, Jesus is quoted as saying:

- “If any man would come after me let him take up his cross daily and follow me.” (____), and
- “It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of Heaven.” (____), and
-

In fact, the concept of sacrifice is so intrinsic to the accounts of the Bible that the dominant explanation of the significance of the crucifixion of Jesus was and is that he sacrificed himself (that is, God sacrificed himself) to atone for all of the sins of humankind – past, present and future. This explanation makes for a compelling case for the adoption of an absolutely certain spiritual pathway to The Creator – as well as a guarantee of an eternal relationship.

For many, that explanation also relieves much of the pressure to act as God would have us act. They argue that the acknowledgement by God that humans are inherently sinful (that is disobedient), requiring the Ultimate Sacrifice by God himself, is a “free pass” to Heaven on one condition – that we accept this explanation and demonstrate proper gratitude.

I will say plainly that I reject this explanation of the crucifixion. I believe that this explanation is so detrimental to receiving God’s true message that it overshadows the real message and, for some or many, nearly negates the real value and meaning of Jesus’s life and suffering.

As you read this, do you regard these words as “blasphemous”? If so, I say to you that you have been taught from a very early age to reject with disgust any alternative suggestion of the meaning of the crucifixion. To perpetuate and make this explanation the centerpiece of Christian dogma is to control the sheep. *i. e., “But for His crucifixion, you would have been sacrificed and doomed to Hell.”*

So how do I interpret Jesus’s crucifixion, if not the way in which billions of people have been taught to interpret it?

The answer is *“I’m not sure, and I believe the following:”*

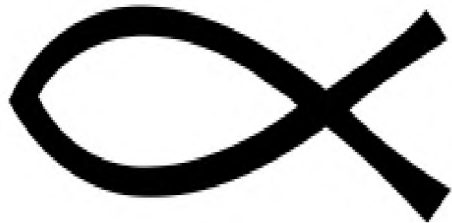
- God created us in his own image.
- God gave us (all of us) a conscience. That is His voice speaking to us.
- God gave us the ability to reason, and to make and act on our own decisions.
- When we seek God’s advice, we find it in the life of Jesus – reinforced by our own conscience.
- Our conscience is a part of us from conception. It is a part of our instinct.
- Our upbringing can help our conscience emerge and grow in context and depth - or suppress it and cause it to wither.
- When people of healthy conscience cooperate, great things are possible. Abundance is possible for all affected by the conscience-based acts.
- When people of withered conscience cooperate, horrible things are possible. Great suffering is possible for all affected by conscious-less (unconscionable) acts.
- Jesus said, *“I come that you might have life and have it more abundantly.”*
- Jesus taught consciousness and conscientious acts. He did not advocate passive acceptance as a basis for spiritual health of a living relationship with God.
- Jesus embodies the conscience we each have within us and provides a perfect illustration of living with our conscience.

- The crucifixion of Jesus represents the price we must be prepared to pay to act according to our conscience – that is, to act in the way God intended us to act.
- The crucifixion is not the desperate act of a masochistic Creator to reconcile the imperfections of his creation with his own consciousness. To believe such an explanation is to miss the point of the life of Jesus and the intent of God. To teach others such an explanation is to lead them astray.

In the timeless story, *Pinocchio*, Jiminy Cricket is the conscience of Pinocchio – a puppet who desperately wants to be a real boy. When Pinocchio is caught in a lie, his nose grows – a visible sign that he is ignoring his conscience. The name Jiminy Cricket begins with the same letters as Jesus Christ. That is no coincidence. The author used the euphemistic cuss phrase of the day “Jiminy Cricket” and turned it around to make constructive use of it.

Jiminy Cricket sings, *“Zip a de do dah, zip a de aye. My oh my, what a wonderful day. Plenty of sunshine comin’ my way. Zip a de do dah, zip a de aye.”*

Sounds a lot like abundant life to me.



The Relationship of Humans with the God's Creation

The Bible describes man's role as “...*having dominion over all of His Creation*” (_____). With that power comes great responsibility. The responsible stewardship of man in caring for God's Creation is prevalent in the Bible, from the story of Noah's ark to the many references to the role of the shepherd.

Nowhere in the Bible (that I've found) does it infer that humans have the right to abuse God's Creation or the living things God has created. Nowhere (that I've found) does it say that only humans have souls – and if the Bible does say that anywhere, I believe these are the words of man about God, and not the words of God about His Creation.

One of the major benefits of science is that it has revealed the intricacies and magnificence of God's Creation. The similarities of humans and the rest of the animal kingdom. The amazing variety, adaptability, and persistence of plant life. And the wondrous orchestration of the interdependencies of the infinite number of elements of Creation.

So how are we humans supposed to interact with god's creation?

The message of the Bible is just this: Respect God's Creation. Enjoy it. And care for it.

Justice, Compassion and Forgiveness

The concepts of justice, compassion, and forgiveness are complex and interrelated.

When someone does wrong to another person or to some part of God's Creation, we instinctively seek to unmask the culprit and to hold him or her accountable for the wrongdoing. That, we call "**justice**". The Bible includes many stories of justice being served. Jesus confirmed justice as a legitimate concept. Justice - being held accountable - is intrinsic to conscience.

Then there is the concept of **compassion**. Jesus emphasized the importance of compassion and provided many remarkable illustrations of acts of compassion. His treatment of the poor, the sick, and the people regarded as being at the bottom of society in every way. In many denominations of the Christian faith, compassion is intrinsic to Jesus's passion on the cross. God's compassion for humans.

And there is the concept of **forgiveness**. If one message comes through louder than all the rest in the things Jesus said and did, it is the importance of forgiveness. "*How many times should I forgive my neighbor? I say not seven times but seventy times seven*" (____). Now did Jesus mean that you should keep a count and on the 4901st time your neighbor did or said something that might require forgiveness, you should feel free to "let him have it"? certainly not. He was saying, in effect, "Don't count. The answer is, "Always"".

Does forgiving someone negate the legitimacy of "justice"?

I believe the answer is most certainly "**No. Not at all.**"

Seeking justice for others who are wronged is an act of conscience. That is exactly what God wants us to do.

Seeking revenge is quite another thing. "*Vengeance is mine says the Lord*" (____). That's pretty clear on the face of it, but how do we distinguish justice from revenge? Sometimes the distinction is a bright line and sometimes it is very grey.

Justice requires the ingredients of accountability and consequence. Jesus gave us to "*Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.*" We refer to that precept as "The Golden Rule".

Does that mean we should let people walk all over us?

I think not.

Working Draft August 2012

© Copyright William A. Stephens 2012

Sometimes, when a person does something to intentionally harm us, the Golden Rule means that if we did something like that to someone else, we would want to be taught a lesson. Consequence is a part of justice and a part of learning to do the right thing. The Bible illustrates that God uses consequence to teach us, and the lessons can be painful.

Jesus also said that, when a person smites our one cheek, we should “...*turn the other cheek.*”

So what is meant by “turning the other cheek?” Is this in the context of insult or injury? Does that mean that if someone beats us half to death, we should let them finish their work? Is Jesus’ use of smiting our cheek literal or figurative?

I believe that Jesus was speaking metaphorically – as he often did. There is a great distinction to be made between an insult and an injury. That’s one of those “bright line” distinctions. I don’t believe that Jesus meant we should not defend ourselves against injury.

That brings us back to **forgiveness**. If we seek **justice**, does that mean that we, by definition, have not **forgiven**?

Again, not at all.

Justice and forgiveness coexist because rational forgiveness requires acknowledgement and contrition on the part of the individual or group causing injury. Forgiveness without (at least) seeking justice in the case of injury will promote abuse of others. That’s the lesson of the Bible, taken as a whole.

Personal Relationship *versus* Brokered Relationship with The Creator

The statement of this subject as an ideological distinction between a **personal** relationship with the Creator and a **brokered** relationship with the Creator may sound like a biased manner of describing the matter. It may be perceived as biased statement, but the fact is that, whenever another person serves as an agent or broker in the interaction with God, we are offering and receiving communication secondhand. Priests, ministers, and pastors may lead us in prayer or advise us, but **no one** needs to intercede on our behalf. The “intercession, absolution, and avocation” element of the Christian denominations which employ this concept are simply employing a method of controlling “the flock” and making the flock dependent on the agents or brokers.

One of the most important things about the life and lessons of Jesus is that no one needs to get between each of us and our Creator. If anyone suggests something to the contrary, they commit blasphemy – that is using God’s name to advance their own interests.

Blasphemy

Nothing will rile some Christians up more than hearing what they deem blasphemy. The concept of blasphemy is derived from the Commandment, *“Thou shall not take the name of the Lord God in vain.”*

Blasphemy is the act of insulting or showing contempt or lack of reverence for a religious deity or the irreverence towards religious or holy persons or things. Some countries have laws to punish blasphemy, while others have laws to give recourse to those who are offended by blasphemy. Those laws may discourage blasphemy as a matter of blasphemous libel, vilification of religion, religious insult, or hate speech.

Christian theology condemns blasphemy. It is spoken of in Mark 3:29, where blaspheming the Holy Spirit is spoken of as unforgivable - the eternal sin. However, there is dispute over what form this blasphemy may take and whether it qualifies as blasphemy in the conventional sense; and over the meaning of "unforgivable".

Blasphemy has been condemned as a serious, or even the most serious, sin by the major creeds and Church theologians.

- Thomas Aquinas says that “it is clear that blasphemy, which is a sin committed directly against God, is more grave than murder, which is a sin against one's neighbor. ... it is called the most grievous sin, for as much as it makes every sin more grievous.”
- The Baptist Confession of Faith says: “Therefore, to swear vainly or rashly by the glorious and awesome name of God...is sinful, and to be regarded with disgust and detestation. ...For by rash, false, and vain oaths, the Lord is provoked and because of them this land mourns.”
- Calvin found it intolerable “when a person is accused of blasphemy, to lay the blame on the ebullition of passion, as if God were to endure the penalty whenever we are provoked.”

Blasphemy is a concept that most religions have misunderstood and mischaracterized. The simple example is use of the phrase, *“God damn _____.”* Depending on the context and use, the phrase may be a crude and vulgar adjective used to convey disdain, or a plea of sorts, i.e., *“...May God damn _____.”* One use is blasphemous or akin to blasphemy, while the other may invoke a true and earnest (*albeit* emotional) request.

Only the speaker knows what is in his or her heart. God understands the differences and considers the state of mind of the person and the situation. No one should believe that he or she is damned for all time because he/she said, *“God damn _____.”* That doesn't mean that sort of language is at all acceptable; it is simply not an eternal death sentence.

The current use of the term “vanity” refers to an excessive belief in one's own abilities or attractiveness to others. Prior to the 14th century it did not have such narcissistic undertones, and merely meant *futility*. In modern Christianity, vanity is considered a form of self-idolatry, in which one rejects God for the sake of one's own image, and thereby becomes divorced from the graces of God.

In Christian teachings *vanity* is considered an example of pride, one of the seven deadly sins. This list evolved from an earlier list of eight sins, which included *vainglory* as a sin independent of *pride*. The related

term **vainglory** is now often seen as an archaic synonym for *vanity*, but originally meant *boasting in vain*, i.e. unjustified **boasting**. In Orthodox Christian sects, vanity is one of eight sinful and diabolical passions, the fight against which is a major task of every Orthodox Christian.

How does this help us understand what was meant by “...not taking the name of the Lord God in vain....”?

Simply put, ***real*** blasphemy is committed by those who profess to be acting in God’s name while actually acting in their own selfish interests and for their own prideful and vainglorious purposes. Some examples:

- The ‘religious leader’ or person who cloaks his/her own selfish interests in Christian doctrine or Godly talk.
- The “religious leader” or person who manipulates pure spiritual concepts to co-opt others into behavior that benefits him/her.
- The religious leader or person who engages in self-aggrandizing speech by stealing the legitimacy of God.

This suggests that all who have abused others for their own personal purposes in the name of God have committed blasphemy of the unforgivable type. Priests and other people in positions of trust who sexually abused children, evangelists who have extracted money in the name of God from the poor so that they could live in luxury, politicians who have used the name of God to justify abuse of others and worse.

May God damn them. And I really mean that.

God, the Devil, and Void

Concepts to include:

- God is in each of us. He made us in his own image.
- Heaven is not a physical place, it is a state of being. It is “where we are” when we are in harmony with God.
- The Devil may be real or may be a metaphor, but what is certainly real is that when we are not in harmony with God – when we act in such a way as to counter what God has shown us to be “...the Way, the Truth, and the Life”, we will suffer and we will make others suffer. That’s the definition of Hell.
- Void is what we feel when we are indifferent to God – when we are ambivalent. Agnostics and atheists are spiritually void and to be pitied.

What is Worship?

Working Draft August 2012

© Copyright William A. Stephens 2012

Concepts to include:

- Worship is to first acknowledge god, then to communicate with God. We do that by listening to our conscience and nurturing our souls with the knowledge of God. We can do that with prayers, songs, thoughts, and gestures.
- Most of all we worship by acting our faiths – not by doing as we please and relying on Jesus to rescue us with the “free pass he purchased with his blood.” An most of all, we do that directly - alone or with others – but never **through** someone else. That’s bullshit, plain and simple.

Evil in the World and My Responsibility

Concepts to include:

- Active, not passive role
- Set example: light a candle rather than cursing the darkness
- Help others distinguish between lack of consideration, acting out in anger or frustration, insanity, and evil intentions