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Ralph D. Winter



Dear Reader,

We do not normally present our readers with discouraging information. We all need encouragement.

But now and then we need to face some hard facts. Yes, hard facts about mission work, the durability of the Gospel, both at home and abroad.

Digest This Sad, Sad Joke

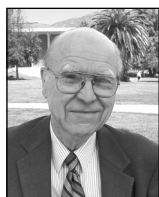
Two senators—one a Republican, the other a Democrat—were eating breakfast together. The Republican says to the Democrat, “You guys aren’t religious. You don’t know your Bible. I’ll bet you \$20 you can’t even say the Lord’s Prayer.” In reply the Democrat immediately launched out, “Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep”

Stunned, the Republican Senator blurted out, “I can’t believe you could do it. Here’s the \$20.”

Along this line I read recently that only a minority of college students today can name even one of the four Gospels.

Is Christianity Relapsing Globally?

Far worse, is the nightmare of a thought that our vast global, hard-won expansion of Christianity is falling to pieces before our eyes. We always used to think, “Even if things are not going too well in the USA, at least those millions of newly won believers overseas are flourishing in the faith.”



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Okay, that is mainly true. They are flourishing. However, there are some disquieting facts that are hard to ignore.

Kenya, with over 400 denominations and almost as many Evangelicals as in all of Europe, has exploded before our eyes—into nasty and unprecedented intertribal warfare—despite being 80% Christian, just like the USA.

Nearby, the Central African Republic is considered by some to be one of the more dangerous and corrupt countries of the world. We might say, “Those people need Christianity.” Well, 70% of the country is “Christian” in 59 denominations, with a higher percentage of Evangelicals than any other country in Africa.

In Nagaland, almost 100% of the Nagas are Christian—it is the most Christian state of India. It also is considered the most corrupt. At least there is less head-hunting.

Does this mean we are planting a superficial kind of Christianity all around the world? Are people seeking or accepting our offered Gospel for reasons other than what we have expected?

A related question. Are emotional good feelings, however valid and beneficial, any match for the likely moment when logical and hard intellectual questions surface? That is, are emotions more valid, more credible, more durable, than our use of the mind? Or, are mind and heart both important? An Indian scholar addresses this on p. 15.

No Campus Crusader has ever been taught that getting people to “pray to receive Jesus” is more than a beginning. That’s a good beginning. But what follows? What are the next steps? Will Bible knowledge be all that is necessary? Note that the Bible itself does not tell us we must learn nothing elsewhere—for example, about nature and microbiology.

A Christianity that does not teach the Bible points the way nowhere but to New Age groping, ambiguity and relativism.

However, a Christianity that only teaches the Bible is blind to all the other knowledge God wants us to discover and value.

So why are Christians losing their faith?

I have never been more negatively impressed than by three very recent books.

An Irrelevant Bible?

In *The End of Biblical Studies*, by Hector Avalos, former Pentecostal and now Professor of Religious Studies at the University of Illinois, says that the Bible ought not to be studied because it is totally out of date. He is particularly offended by what he sees as the Bible’s “endorsement of violence” (p. 28). In describing this is the Bible teaching it?

When the Bible accurately and honestly reveals the fact that Jacob had concubines does that mean the Bible endorses concubines?

Again and again Avalos and other writers are giving up on the Bible for similar reasons. Avalos constantly points out how this and that passage of the Old Testament is “not at all applicable” to modern situations.

But the Bible is unlike any other religious book in the world. It doesn’t tell us of perfect people. It records horrendous evils and describes people who condone those evils. It even portrays the flaws of leaders.

But it doesn’t teach those flaws. It portrays both plural marriage and slavery. It does not teach those. It records the literal truth of a chosen nation both seeking and denying God’s will. Does it intend for us to take its every sentence, its every event, as a model to be followed?

Of course not. In one sense it mirrors for us how deep and dark our human past has been, how far we have come in better understanding God and His will for us. At the same time, for the same reason, it intends that we not slide back. Most important, we cannot logically criticize it for its honesty and accuracy!

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Pagan Additions?

The second book, quite the opposite, is co-authored by George Barna and Frank Viola, *Pagan Christianity*. Barna has now apparently bought into the thesis that we must flee all the many new ways Christians have devised in living out the Gospel down through history. Were choirs, keyboards and guitars in the NT church? Out!

Such a book, with its meticulous historical hounding-out of things we do that are not in the Bible, is totally out of tune with the global church movement. There we see thousands of novelties created in the worship and living out of Biblical teaching. For missionaries, “contextualization” (employing the language and culture as far as possible) is the name of the game! And that’s Biblical.

Post-Biblical forms in the church are certainly to be evaluated, but not by their degree of correspondence to Biblical forms (principles, yes) for that is ecclesiolatry—and to a missionary it is the ultimate absurdity.

I am astounded. Barna is a respectable thinker. This time it seems he stumbled. He is promoting “the Organic Church.” But, what is the value of pointing out that Jesus did not pass out plastic cups at the Last Supper or talk about antibiotics (my own illustration of this thinking).

Just as Avalos’ book leads to a total abandonment of the faith, Barna’s book, despite some helpful insights, could easily lead to the total abandonment of the Church as we know it.

One book says the Bible has nothing to offer us. The other says that we must only go back to the Bible, to the precise form of the nascent Church.

Why Suffering?

An even worse misuse of the Bible, leading to massive confusion, comes from perhaps the most widely known Biblical scholar in the USA today, Bart Ehrman. His latest book is, *God’s Problem: How the Bible Fails to Answer Our Most Important Question—Why We Suffer*.

A Moody and Wheaton graduate, and also a Princeton Seminary Ph.D., he is now a professor of religion at the Uni-

versity of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Not long ago he was quoted as saying,

[I began to] think more deeply about my own understanding of why there is suffering in the world. Finally, because I became dissatisfied with all of the conventional answers I decided that I could not believe in [a] God who was in any way intervening in this world given the state of things. So that’s how I ended up losing my faith.

Now just out, his latest book unfolds this serious transition of faith. The book points out that the Bible gives various explanations for suffering and they could not all be right. Apparently he does not understand that the Bible very reliably portrays a nation of people who across the centuries gradually gain deeper insights, whose flawed words and deeds are not always what the Bible teaches, and that the story as it leads into the NT reveals an archangel adversary who is the most basic answer for the presence of suffering.

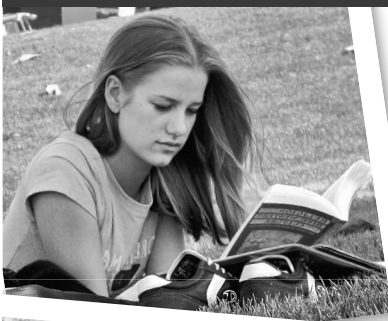
Okay, all articles in this issue of *Mission Frontiers* are focused on “Why do people lose their faith?” This is a very key issue for the mission of the Church today. 🌐

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A pastor and parent share about INSIGHT, a college-level worldview program of the U.S. Center for World Mission, available for 32 college credits at locations nationwide:

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John Piper
Pastor, Bethlehem Baptist Church

“The INSIGHT Program was a life changing experience for our daughter....My wife and I consider the money invested in the program to be one of the best investments we ever made with any of our children.”

Doug Birdsall
Executive Chair, Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization



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