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BLACK or WHITE

In his book, The Evolution of God, Robert Wright explains that mankind's concept of God evolved, just as man himself evolved, by natural selection. Mr. Wright himself was born into a Southern Baptist family, but when he learned about evolution he abandoned his childhood faith. (This has happened to multitudes of people in our secular society, right?) He says, "God is a construct. He consists of the traits that are attributed to Him at any given time by people. God is an illusion, and I'm tracing the evolution of an illusion."

Mr. Wright seems to be a thoughtful, considerate man, but he truly believes that science and psychology have supplanted "God," and that only simple-minded people still cling to concepts of a Creator, a Savior, and a Judge of our conduct on earth - - although he says: "I'll tell you one thing I have not lost is the sense that I'm being judged by a being." He says that there is nothing beyond nature ("God") that is knowable and that all religions are simply man's attempt to protect himself in a dangerous world. He decries the belief that is held by Christians or any other religion that their God is the true and only God and the wars that have resulted from that belief.

It is not my intention to set up a straw man, and I think I have fairly presented some of Robert Wright's key stated beliefs. Since I think that his writings represent views about the Christian faith that are pretty normative in our society, let me now respond with my views:

(1) I know I am not an intellectual, but I have average intelligence and I did not become a "true believer" as a Christian without many years of mental and emotional wrestling. Your experience has probably been a lot like mine. And I have continued to read and study and think about the matter for 60 years. Do I still have a lot of unanswered questions? Absolutely.

(2) I choose to believe that the Bible is the word of God and that it is reliable. There are many good reasons for believing that. (See The Case for Christ by Lee Strobel, and Evidence that Demands a Verdict by Josh McDowell, among scores of other insightful books.) I attended seminary for three years, have read through the Bible more than 50 times, have read scores of books about the Bible, and I am more convinced now that at the beginning that the Bible proves itself to be of supernatural origin. Are there still things in the Bible that puzzle and confuse me? Yes, there are.

(3) According to the Bible, the way we come into a saving relationship with God is by faith in Jesus Christ. Faith means that we believe things that cannot be proven. "God" cannot be proven. Also, "God does not exist" cannot be proven. Robert Wright's declaration: "There is nothing beyond nature that is knowable!" is a statement of his belief based on his experience. It is a statement of faith. Stephen Hawking, called by some, "The world's most preeminent scientist," explained to us less brilliant folks that "Invoking God isn't necessary to explain the origin of the universe, the Big Bang is a consequence of the laws of physics and nothing more." His explanation is that: *The universe could have spontaneously arisen from probabilistic quantum fluctuations acting to bring the negative energy of empty space – nothingness – into balance.* That is the most ridiculous, irrational statement I have ever seen. I don't mean to be unkind, but anyone who believes Mr. Hawking's hypothesis is as dumb as a rock.

(4) Christianity and the Bible answer the four key questions of mankind:

- (a) Where did we come from?
- (b) What is our purpose?
- (c) How about evil and suffering?
- (d) What happens when we die?

Secularism has no answers to these questions and says they are not answerable.

(5) For the past 2,000 years, the testimony of millions of Christians is that through faith in the Gospel of Jesus Christ they have come into a vital relationship with the living God and that their lives have been rescued from destruction and transformed for the better.

(6) A common definition of religion is that religion is man's attempt to know and understand God, it is man reaching out to God. Judaism and Christianity, on the other hand, represent God's reaching out and revealing Himself to man.

(7) Jesus Christ is in a different category from the founders of all other religions in history. Each of them claimed to reveal truth and to present a way to God, while **Jesus claimed to be God the Son, the One through whom God the Father created the universe, the Savior, the final Judge of mankind, and He said that He was the only way to God (No one comes to the Father except by Me)**. This claim can only be true or false. As C. S. Lewis said, Jesus is either who He claimed to be or He was a fraud and a madman. The issue is not obscure, it is black or white.

(8) This is what God says about humanists and secularists who believe that God does not exist and that the Bible and its report about Jesus Christ are mythology and foolishness: *The Good News we preach...is hidden only from people who are perishing. Satan, who is the god of this world, has blinded the minds of those who don't believe. They are unable to see ... (or) understand this message about the glory of Christ, who is the exact likeness of God.* (2 Cor. 4:3-4)

FROM GOD'S PERSPECTIVE

I have written above about how people see the God of the Bible. Now, let us look at some Biblical words that illustrate how God sees people. To God, people are either: *Saved or Lost; Alive or Dead; Seeing or Blind; Believers or Unbelievers; Light or Darkness; Sheep or Goats; Righteous or Wicked; Wheat or Tares; Light or Darkness; Children of God or Children of the devil.* These words are not based on people's conduct but on whether they have stepped on the stairway or ladder to heaven that God has provided: faith in the Lord Jesus Christ (John 1:51).

Some years ago when Promise Keepers was popular, they had a big meeting in a football stadium. They ended the meeting with a candle-lighting ceremony. All the lights were turned off, and the stadium was pitch dark. Then a single candle was lit, ushers lit their candles from it and passed the light up the rows so that the whole stadium was brilliant with light. It was a windy night, and the wind would blow out whole sections of the stadium, which would be in darkness until they were relit. This is the way God sees our world. This is the way God sees you and me. We either have the Light of Christ, or we are living in darkness.

Who is and who isn't a child of God, a Christian? Who has eternal life, and who is heading toward eternal judgment? You can't tell by looking, and the matter is very obscure to us. But it is not obscure to God. It is black or white.

EXAMINE YOURSELF

(If You Were Arrested for Being a Christian...)

Some years ago there was a popular saying in church circles: "If you were arrested for being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict you?" As we enter a new year, I pose this question to us. It is a Biblical question. Paul writes to the church at Corinth and challenges them: *Examine yourselves to see if your faith is genuine. Test yourselves.* (2 Cor. 13:5)

So how does God tell us to examine ourselves? Let me share some ways that I have found in the Bible:

(1) **Faith, Hope and Love.** In several of Paul's letters to the churches, he seems to evaluate them, give them a report card, based on three things: faith, hope and love. **Ephesians:** *After I heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all the saints.* (1:15) **Colossians:** *Since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of your love for all the saints, because of the hope that is laid up for you in heaven...* (1:4-5) **Thessalonians:** *Remembering without ceasing your work of faith, labor of love, and patience of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ...*(1:3) **Examination:** So, let's look at our lives in the light of these three keys: faith, hope, and love. Note that it is called a "work" of faith and a "labor" of love. Faith, hope and love are never just feelings in the Bible, they are words of action.

(2) In his letter to the Corinthians, just before he tells them to examine themselves, Paul makes it clear what he wants these church people to examine. He says, *I'm afraid when I come visit you again I will find quarreling, jealousy, anger, selfishness, slander, gossip, arrogance, and disorderly behavior. I'm afraid I will be grieved because many of you have not given up your old sins. You have not repented of your impurity, sexual immorality, and eagerness for lustful pleasure.* (2 Cor. 13:20-21) **Examination:** Wow, that's an ugly list. Paul had obviously seen some of those bad qualities in some of the new Christians in Corinth. Remember that we are not saved by "the law," i.e., by living sinless lives. We will never be able to do that perfectly. We are saved by faith in His sinless life. But if we have been saved by Christ, then we will start changing, being transformed, obeying God, living a life of love.

(3) In his letter to the Galatians, Paul warns them that, *The sinful nature wants to do evil and opposite what the Spirit wants.* (Gal. 5:17) He then lists those things that Christians must resist, and the list includes all the things he wrote to the Corinthians about (above list from Corinthians), and he adds: *idolatry, sorcery, selfish ambition, envy, drunkenness, wild parties, and other sins like these.* And he says, *Let me tell you again that anyone living that sort of life will not inherit the Kingdom of God.* (Gal. 5:19-21) **Examination:** Friends, this self-exam is a serious matter. Meditate on that last sentence in Vs. 21. (A super-scary verse!) Peter also warns us not to be casual and blasé about our salvation but to make sure about it. (2nd Peter, all of chapter 1)

(4) Paul doesn't just warn about obviously sinful things to avoid, he goes on to list the positive things that God will add to our lives. He says, *But the Holy Spirit produces this kind of fruit in our lives: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.* **Examination:** What a lovely list! This describes what Jesus is like, what God is like, and what He wants us to be like. Note that love is in all of these lists. How are you doing with love?

(5) Remember the salvation-litmus test in 1 John of belief, obedience and love (1 John 5:1-5, 13). **Examination:** Are you noticing a pattern here, especially about love? How are you doing with loving the unlovable? Regarding obedience: Is there something that God has spoken to you about in the past that you have pushed down out of mind? Are you going to obey God or not?

(6) Remember the examination of the seven churches in Revelation 2 and 3 by the resurrected Christ? They were judged for: leaving their first love, idolatry, sexual immorality, tolerating corruption and compromise in the church, disobedience, indifference, and letting their hearts grow cold. **Examination:** Christ is our loving Savior, but He is also the Judge of our churches and our individual lives. Let us examine ourselves, judge ourselves, and amend our lives so that we will not be judged.

(7) \$ Money \$ - One of the big tests of our faith is centered around money and giving, specifically around tithing. The number 10, Biblically, equals a test: the ten commandments; ten tests in the wilderness; the ten virgins in Matthew 25; *Test your servants for ten days* – Daniel 1:12; the ten spies who failed to trust God; the ten lepers who were healed; the tithe. God says the tithe, 10% of our income, belongs to Him. We are never told to give a tithe, we are told to bring our tithe or to pay our tithe. (Ex. 23:9, etc.) When we pay our mortgage every month to the bank, they don't send a note thanking you for giving them some money, do they? It's their money. God says, *Test me now in this* (Mal. 3:10), *I will bless .. you if you will be faithful in paying me what you owe me. If you don't pay your tithe to God, you are robbing Me, and you are under a curse.* (Mal. 3:8-9) **Examination:** Jesus said, *Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.* (Matt. 6:21) Jesus also said that either God or money will be our master. (Matt. 5:24)

How about it? Is God or money your master? Are you being faithful to God, or are you robbing Him? Do you want God's blessing or His curse?

WHY GO TO CHURCH?

From the time I was a boy, I attended church pretty regularly with my parents until I was 18 years old. (At that time, February, 1945, the war with the Nazi's was over, but the war with Japan persisted. I joined the Navy and that event, plus the atomic bomb, caused the Japanese to capitulate pretty quickly.) I calculate that I went to church services perhaps 500 to 700 times during those formative years.

I didn't attend church much from the age of 18 until Doris and I started taking our kids to Sunday School and church in my late 20's. During those 12 years I estimate that I attended church maybe 100 times.

When I was in my 30th year I accepted Christ, and the church became a part, a fixture, of my life. From then until now (90 next month), I rarely missed a weekly church service and calculate I attended church during those 60 years 3,120 times.

Additionally, on the extended mission trips to Mexico and other places that went on for more than 20 years, we usually held extra worship services at least 5 times a week. (For instance, we always held services two and sometimes three times on a Sunday.) Possibly I attended church an additional 600 times during those years.

So I estimate that during my life I have attended church services somewhere between 4,000 and 5,000 times. So what is my impression of “going to church” so many times? Well, it’s like living through Groundhog Day a gazillion times. I’ve probably heard sermons about the Prodigal Son and the Good Samaritan and the Woman at the Well maybe 300 or 400 times each, and preached them myself 50 or 60 times.

Someone who goes to church that much must be a super-Christian, right? Not necessarily. The Pharisees were super religious – they went to church (synagogue and temple) all the time, fasted, tithed, and memorized their Bibles. But they hated the Son of God, hounded Him to the cross, and mocked Him as He was dying in agony!

It was after I went through seminary and had been a minister for several years that I fell back into alcohol, pornography, and anger.

“Going to church” is a very good thing if it is Christian church, as are the other spiritual disciplines, but they don’t really tell you what is going on in someone’s heart. I know a lot of good, Christian people who have stopped “going to church,” the way we do that in our church culture. I personally believe that Christians should be part of a Christian fellowship as a part of their commitment to God. I think that is Biblical. But perhaps they didn’t find the living presence of God in the churches around them. That is the first and primary reason and purpose for a Church’s existence. If the presence of God is not there, then it’s a club or hobby or meeting of Pharisees, or even a “Synagogue of Satan,” as Jesus described the church at Smyrna (Rev. 2:9), but it is definitely not a church in New Testament parlance.

Note: “Going to church” is not an insignificant, neutral activity. “Going to church” can be dangerous to your soul. You can be fed a diet of Pabulum that convinces you that attending church services periodically means that everything is OK between you and God. I know well-meaning people who continued for decades “going to church” in a denomination that denied the atoning death of Jesus on the cross, denied the literal resurrection of Jesus from the dead, denied the judgment of every soul before God at the end of life on earth, denied the necessity of Christians crucifying the flesh and living responsible, moral lives, and yet they dared continue to call themselves a “Christian” church. They stayed in those churches hoping to see a resurrection, but what they experienced was that they themselves slowly died spiritually. What you hear preached and taught week after week will incrementally but inexorably penetrate and affect your mind and heart and life.

About 20 years ago I had the privilege of preaching a week-long series in a small denominational church in Townsend, Montana. The people were gracious and kind, and it was a marvelous experience. But most of the people in that church had never heard the “gospel.” One man told me he thought he was going to heaven because he had not only attended church for over 60 years but had also swept the church and prepared the firewood every Saturday. A dear lady told me the dream she had recently experienced: She saw herself at some time in the future walking through Townsend and discovering the church she had attended. It was abandoned, paint peeling from the outside walls, weeds in the yard. She walked up to a window, rubbed away the filth and peered inside. She saw what at first appeared to be white paint thrown across the old pews, but as she looked more closely she saw it was dehydrated sheep! The members of that church had sat in the pews for years, never heard the Word of Life about faith in Jesus Christ, and they had dried up and died. I believe that was a dream from God, for it agrees with the warnings in the Bible.

The New Testament devotes a lot of space to warning about “false teaching” in churches. Jesus, Peter, Paul, John and Jude warn about false prophets, false apostles, false elders, false pastors and teachers. Paul even says, *If anyone preaches any other gospel to you than what you have received (from the Apostles) let him be accursed.* (Gal. 1:6-9) I reiterate, “going to church,” according to the Bible, is serious business.

Some thoughts and observations about church and about going to church:

- (a) Church, *ekklesia* in Greek, is God’s idea. The form and type government is not described or emphasized, but it is made clear that becoming a Christian means that you are part of a family, body, army, fellowship. Christians are not “lone Rangers,” we can’t do this alone. Apparently, the closest organization in our day to a New Testament *ekklesia* is the cell group.
- (b) Churches are full of fallible people like me. (God have mercy!) God knew what He was getting when He signed us up, and it is His plan to keep us totally dependent on Him and on each other to accomplish His purpose. We have to grow in Christlikeness in order to put up with each other.

- (c) In spite of all its fallibility, the Holy Spirit through Paul calls the church: *The house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth.* (1 Tim. 3:15)
- (d) Most of the work of the church is not done in the four walls of a building but in our homes, families, schools, jobs, and communities.
- (e) God has supernaturally fitted us together in a fellowship like the human body, with multiple gifts and talents so that we are dependent on one another. (See 1 Corinth. 12-14)
- (f) The Christian church is the only religion that worships God with song. We gather to worship the true God. Our songs and music are the way we say "Thank you!" to our Lord.

I believe in the God of the Christian church. I also believe in the church, and I still believe in going to church. See you in church.

God Bless

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