

# Christmas Articles



## [A Christmas Quiz](#) [Dale Taliaferro]

A quiz concerning the Christmas story from a biblical perspective.

## [3 Points About Christmas: Evidence for Biblical Truth](#) [Paul Rutherford]

Paul Rutherford suggests using three fulfilled biblical prophecies as an apologetic for biblical truth.

## [The Star of Bethlehem](#) [Dr. Ray Bohlin]

What was the Star of Bethlehem? Some people suggest it was an astronomical conjunction of planets and stars. But it might have been the Shekinah Glory, a physical manifestation of God's presence on earth.

## [Christmas Film Favorites](#) [Todd Kappelman]

Todd Kappelman highlights some favorite films of the Christmas season, encouraging Christians to enjoy the films while separating the sacred from the secular: *A Christmas Carol*, *Miracle on 34th Street*, *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*, *It's a Wonderful Life*, and *A Charlie Brown Christmas*.

## [Truth You Can Sing About: 5 Christmas Carols](#) [Steven Davis]

Probe Radio producer Steven Davis wrote the scripts providing devotional insights into five Christmas carols, and his son

and Mind Games Camp alumnus Jon Clive Davis wrote and performed the music underneath.

### [Truth You Can Sing About: Part 2](#) [Steven Davis]

Probe Radio producer Steven Davis wrote five more scripts providing devotional insights into five Christmas carols, and his son and Mind Games Camp alumnus Jon Clive Davis wrote and performed the music underneath.

### [Truth You Can Sing About: Part 3](#) [Steven Davis]

For the third year in a row, Steven Davis and his son Jon Clive Davis collaborated on a new look at five Christmas carols, accompanied throughout each day's broadcast by new compositions of each carol.

### [The Theology of Christmas Carols](#) [Dr. Robert Pyne]

A look at the theology behind five Christmas carols: Come Thou Long Expected Jesus, Hark the Herald Angels Sing, Joy to the World, O Little Town of Bethlehem, and O Holy Night.

### [Christmas SHINY!](#) [Sue Bohlin]

The visible presence of God in the Old Testament—the Shekinah glory—shows up again at Christmas. No wonder we like shiny, sparkly things that remind us of the glory of heaven!

### [Is Christmas Necessary?](#) [Jerry Solomon]

Christians have had to respond to the customs of the surrounding culture since the beginning of the church. In the end, though, Christmas is necessary only in terms of its historical and theological content.

### [Reincarnation: The Christmas Counterfeit](#) [Sue Bohlin]

Sue blogs that Jesus is the only person who had a life before His birth, which we celebrate at Christmas.

### [The Christmas Story: Does It Still Matter?](#) [Rusty Wright]

Christmas often means time with family, hectic shopping, parties, cards and gifts. But what about the first Christmas? Why is the original story the baby in a manger, shepherds,

wise men, angels important, if at all? The answer may surprise you.

[The First Christmas Wreath](#) [Jimmy Williams]

The founder of Probe Ministries examines the role of the wreath in Christmas.

[The Great Light](#) [Jimmy Williams]

A short essay on the role of light at Christmas.

[The Stable](#) [Jimmy Williams]

Jimmy Williams examines the symbolic and prophetic role of the stable in Christmas.

[Are You Listening? Do You Hear What I Hear?](#) [Rusty Wright]

Have you ever missed a great opportunity because you weren't listening carefully? Twenty centuries ago some clues to impending good news of monumental import eluded most folks. Fascinating prophecies of Jesus' birth and life bring revealing insights into your own life today.

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Michael Gleghorn

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Patrick Zukeran

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Patrick Zukeran

## **Was Jesus Truly, or Merely *Declared*, God?**

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Dr. Ray Bohlin

[Jesus' Claims to be God](#)

Sue Bohlin

[The Deity of Christ](#)

Don Closson

[The Council of Nicea](#)

Don Closson

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Michael Gleghorn

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Michael Gleghorn

[Jesus' Resurrection: Fact or Fiction?](#)

Rusty Wright

[The Resurrection: Fact or Fiction?](#)

Patrick Zukeran

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[The Da Vinci Code: Who Is Jesus, Really?](#)

Rusty Wright

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Jimmy Williams

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Patrick Zukeran

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Rick Wade

[Goddess Worship](#)

Russ Wise

[The Goddess and the Church](#)

Russ Wise

[The World of Animism](#)

Patrick Zukeran

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- [“Why Do You Believe the Bible is Inspired and the Quran is Not?”](#)
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• ["No need to yell, only a challenge for some who need to step up and could"](#)

Blog post of Biblical scholar Darrell Bock.

• ["The Jesus Tomb? Titanic Talpiot tomb theory sunk from the start"](#)

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• [Christian Newswire](#): Ten reasons why the Jesus tomb claim is bogus.

• [Remains of the Day](#): Scholars dismiss filmmakers' assertions that Jesus and his family were buried in Jerusalem.

• [The Jesus Family Tomb?](#) From respected scholarly apologetics site, *Leadership University*.

## Probe Articles on Christ's Resurrection, Biblical Archaeology and the Bible

• [Cruci-Fiction and Resuscitation](#) by Russ Wise

If Jesus' remains do inhabit a tomb anywhere, that demands an explanation of what really happened after his crucifixion. In 1997, a paid advertisement in a campus newspaper declaring Christ's resurrection a hoax was deeply disturbing to its readers. This essay raises nine problems with the ad and answers them, and addresses one aspect of the current debate in so doing.

- [Evidence of Jesus' Existence?](#) by Rusty Wright

An ancient bone receptacle (ossuary) from Israel announced in 2002 contains the inscription, "James, son of Joseph, brother of Jesus." It could be the earliest extra-biblical archaeological evidence of Jesus. This article notes the speculative nature of determining the authenticity of such finds, even with the best of evidence. Yet, time after time, archeology attests to what even a Jewish expert describes as the "almost incredibly accurate historical memory of the Bible."

- [Jesus' Resurrection: Fact or Fiction?](#) by Rusty Wright

Resurrection evidences made clear and simple.

- [Archaeology and the New Testament](#) by Pat Zukeran

Numerous people, places and events described in the New Testament have been verified by archeology. Helpful section on Understanding Archaeology.

- [Archaeology and the Old Testament](#) by Pat Zukeran

Apologist Zukeran surveys the importance of archaeology with regard to its confirmation of biblical history. Includes sections entitled Historical Confirmation of Jesus, Accuracy of the Gospels, Confirmation Regarding the Crucifixion and more.

- [Authority of the Bible](#) by Pat Zukeran

Why take biblical accounts seriously in light of discoveries like the supposed tomb of Jesus' family? This article explores why the Bible is the Word of God by examining Internal evidence (self-proclamation, the Holy Spirit, transforming ability, and unity) and External evidence (indestructibility, archeology, prophecy).

- ["How Do We Know Christ Rose from the Dead? And Who Wrote the](#)

[Bible?](#) by Jimmy Williams

Almost half of Probe's nearly 1300 Web resources are responses to actual questions from visitors like you. This one answers the question, "How Do We Know Christ Rose from the Dead?" and "Who Wrote the Bible?"

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# Amazing Grace in John Newton – A Christian Witness Lived and Sung

## "How Sweet the Sound"

Are you familiar with the classic song *Amazing Grace*? You probably are. Do you know the inspiring story behind its songwriter? Maybe like I did, you *think* you know the real story, but you don't.

John Newton was an eighteenth century British slave trader who had a dramatic faith experience during a storm at sea. He gave his life to God, left the slave trade, became a pastor, and wrote hymns. "Amazing Grace! (how sweet the sound)," Newton wrote, "That saved a wretch like me! I once was lost, but now am found, was blind but now I see."[1](#) He played a significant role in the movement to abolish the slave trade.

Newton's song and story have inspired millions. *Amazing Grace* has been played at countless funerals and memorial services, sung at civil rights events and in churches, and even hit pop music charts when Judy Collins recorded it. It's loved the

world over. In South Korea, a local audience asked a coworker and me to sing them the English version; they responded by singing it back to us in Korean.

Newton wrote the lyrics, but the tune we know today did not become linked with them until about 1835, after his death.[{2}](#) My university roommate and I used to try to see how many different tunes would fit the *Amazing Grace* lyrics. My favorites were *Joy to the World* (the Christmas carol), *Ghost Riders in the Sky*, and *House of the Rising Sun*. Try them sometime. They work!

Jonathan Aitken has written a biography titled *John Newton: From Disgrace to Amazing Grace*.[{3}](#) Aitken sees some parallels between his own life and his subject's. Aitken was once a prominent British parliamentarian and Cabinet member, but perjury landed him in prison where his life took a spiritual turn. He's now active in prison ministry and Christian outreach.

John Newton's journey from slave trader to pastor and hymn writer is stirring. But it has some surprising twists. You see, Newton only became a slave-ship captain *after* he placed his faith in Christ. And he left the slave trade not because of his spiritual convictions, but for health reasons.

## Lost and Found

Newton was the prototypical "bad boy." His devout Christian mother, who hoped he would become a minister, died when he was six. He says that through much of his youth and life at sea, "I loved sin and was unwilling to forsake it."[{4}](#) At times, "I pretended to talk of virtue," he wrote, "yet my delight and habitual practice was wickedness."[{5}](#) He espoused a "freethinking" rationalist philosophy and renounced the Christian faith.[{6}](#)

Flogged and demoted by the Navy for desertion, he became

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In West Africa he partnered with a slave trader and negotiated with African chiefs to obtain slaves.[{9}](#) Life was good, he recalled. “We lived as we pleased, business flourished, and our employer was satisfied.”[{10}](#) Aitken, the biographer, says Newton engaged in sexual relations with female slaves.[{11}](#)

One day on another ship, Newton was reading—casually, “to pass away the time”—an edition of Thomas à Kempis’ classic, *On the Imitation of Christ*. He wondered, “What if these things were true?” Dismayed, he “shut the book quickly.” [{12}](#) Newton called himself a terrible “blasphemer” who had rejected God completely.[{13}](#) But then, as Forrest Gump might say, God showed up.

That night, a violent storm flooded the ship with water. Fearing for his life, Newton surprised himself by saying, “The Lord have mercy on us!” Spending long hours at the ship’s helm, he reflected on his life and rejection of God. At first, he thought his shortcomings too great to be forgiven. Then, he says, “I . . . began to think of . . . Jesus whom I had so often derided . . . of His life and of His death . . . for sins not His own, but for those who in their distress should put their trust in Him.”[{14}](#)

In coming days, the New Testament story of the prodigal son (Luke 15) particularly impressed him. He became convinced of the truth of Jesus’ message and his own need for it. “I was no longer an atheist,” he writes. “I was sincerely touched with a sense of undeserved mercy in being brought safe through so many dangers. . . . I was a new man.”[{15}](#)

Newton discovered that the “new man” would not become perfect.

Maturation would be a process, as we'll see.

## From Slave-Ship Captain to Pastor

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During my youth in the US south, I was appalled by racism I observed, more so when church members practiced it. [I concluded](#) that some merely masqueraded as followers of Jesus. Others had genuine faith but—by choice or confusion—did not faithfully follow God. It takes years for some to change. Others never do. Aitken observes that in 1751, Newton's spiritual conscience "was at least twenty years away from waking up to the realization that the Christian gospel and human slavery were irreconcilable." [{18}](#)

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uprising.[{19}](#)

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Eventually, Newton sought to become an ordained minister, but opposing church leaders prevented this for six years. Intervention by the Earl of Dartmouth—benefactor of Dartmouth College in the US—helped launch his formal ministry.[{22}](#) Newton was to significantly impact a young Member of Parliament who would help rescue an oppressed people and a nation's character.

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Newton advised Wilberforce not to leave politics. "I hope the Lord will make him a blessing, both as a Christian and as a statesman," Newton later explained.[{23}](#) His advice proved pivotal. Wilberforce began attending Newton's church and spending time with him privately. Newton became his mentor.[{24}](#)

Perhaps you've seen the motion picture *Amazing Grace* that portrays Wilberforce's twenty-year parliamentary struggle to outlaw the trading of slaves. If you missed it in theaters, I

encourage you see it on DVD. It was after spending a day with Newton that Wilberforce recorded in his diary his decision to focus on abolishing the slave trade.[{25}](#) During [the arduous abolition campaign](#), Wilberforce sometimes considered giving up and quitting Parliament. Newton encouraged him to persist, reminding him of another public figure, the biblical Daniel, who, Newton said, “trusted in the Lord, was faithful . . . and . . . though he had enemies they could not prevail against him.”[{26}](#)

Newton’s biblical worldview had matured to the point that he became active in the abolition movement. In 1788, he published a widely circulated pamphlet, *Thoughts Upon the African Slave Trade*. “I hope it will always be a subject of humiliating reflection to me,” he wrote, “that I was once an active instrument in a business at which my heart now shudders.”[{27}](#) His pamphlet detailed horrors of the slave trade and argued against it on moral and practical grounds.

Abolitionists sent a copy to every member of both Houses of Parliament. Newton testified before important parliamentary committees. He described chains, overcrowded quarters, separated families, sexual exploitation, flogging, beating, butchering. The Christian slave-ship captain who once was blind to his own moral hypocrisy now could see.[{28}](#) Jonathan Aitken says, “Newton’s testimony was of vital importance in converting public opinion to the abolitionist cause.”[{29}](#)

Wilberforce and his colleagues finally prevailed. In early 1807 Britain outlawed the slave trade. On December 21 of that year, grace finally led John Newton home to his Maker.

## **Lessons from a Life of Amazing Grace**

John Newton encountered “many dangers, toils, and snares” on his life’s voyage from slaver to pastor, hymn writer, mentor, and abolitionist. What lessons does his life hold? Here are a

few.

*Moral maturation can take time.* Newton the morally corrupt slave trader embraced faith in Jesus, then continued slave trading. Only years later did his moral and spiritual conscience catch up on this issue with the high principles of the One he followed. We should hold hypocrites accountable, but realize that blinders don't always come off quickly. One bumper sticker I like reads, "Please be patient; God is not finished with me yet."

*Humility became a hallmark of Newton's approach to life.* He learned to recognize his shortcomings. While revising some of his letters for publication, he noted in his diary his failures to follow his own advice: "What cause have I for humiliation!" he exclaimed. "Alas! . . . How defective [I am] in observing myself the rules and cautions I propose to others!"[\[30\]](#) Near the end of his life, Newton told a visitor, "My memory is nearly gone, but I remember two things: That I am a great sinner and that Christ is a great Savior."[\[31\]](#)

*Newton related Jesus' message to current events and everyday life.* For him, faith was not some dull, dusty, irrelevant relic but a living relationship with God, having immense personal and social relevance. He grew to see its import in fighting the slave trade. He used both the Bible and friendship to encourage Wilberforce. He tied his teaching to the news of the day, seeking to connect people's thoughts with the beliefs that had changed his life.[\[32\]](#)

*Newton was grateful for what he saw as God's providence.* Surviving the storm at sea that helped point him to faith was a prime example, but there were many others. As a child, he was nearly impaled in a riding accident.[\[33\]](#) Several times he narrowly missed possible drowning.[\[34\]](#) A shooting accident that could have killed him merely burned part of his hat.[\[35\]](#) He often expressed gratitude to God.

Have you ever considered writing your own epitaph? What will it say? Here's part of what Newton wrote for his epitaph. It's inscribed on his tomb: "John Newton. Once an infidel and libertine, a servant of slaves in Africa was by the rich mercy of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ preserved, restored, pardoned and appointed to preach the faith he had long laboured to destroy." [\[36\]](#)

## Notes

1. From *Olney Hymns*, 1779; in John Newton, *Out of the Depths, "Revised and Updated for Today's Readers by Dennis R. Hillman"* (Grand Rapids: Kregel 2003), 9. Newton's autobiography was originally published in 1764 as *An Authentic Narrative*, a collection of letters between an anonymous writer (Newton) and a pastor. Newton was not yet ordained when he wrote the letters.
2. Jonathan Aitken, *John Newton: From Disgrace to Amazing Grace* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2007), 233.
3. Aitken, *op. cit.*
4. Newton, *op. cit.*, 24.
5. *Ibid.*, 33.
6. *Ibid.*, 34.
7. *Ibid.*, 34-37; 40-41.
8. *Ibid.*, 44-45.
9. *Ibid.*, 57-64; Aitken, *op. cit.*, 63-64.
10. Newton, *op. cit.*, 60.
11. Aitken, *op. cit.*, 64.
12. Newton, *op. cit.*, 69.

13. Ibid., 65, 68.
14. Ibid., 69-80; quotations from 71, 75.
15. Newton, op. cit., 82-83.
16. Aitken, op. cit., 85 ff.
17. Ibid., 91, ff.; 106, 107.
18. Ibid., 112.
19. Ibid., 125-126.
20. Ibid., 127-137.
21. Ibid., 140-141.
22. Ibid., 143-177; 193.
23. Ibid., 304.
24. Ibid., 299-308.
25. Ibid., 310 ff.
26. Ibid., 315 for the quote about Daniel; 312-316 for background on Wilberforce's thoughts about quitting.
27. Ibid., 319.
28. Ibid., 319-328.
29. Ibid., 319.
30. Ibid., 243.
31. Ibid., 347.
32. Ibid., 293-296. See also Newton, op. cit., 154.
33. Newton, op. cit., 23.
34. Ibid., 23, 66-67, 94-95.

35. Ibid., 85.

36. Aitken, op. cit., 350, 356.

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# Amazing Grace Movie: Lessons for Today's Politicians

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Perhaps you've seen the motion picture *Amazing Grace* that portrays Wilberforce's twenty-year parliamentary struggle to outlaw the trading of slaves. If you missed it in theaters, I encourage you see it on DVD. It was after spending a day with

Newton that Wilberforce recorded in his diary his decision to focus on abolishing the slave trade.<sup>{25}</sup> During [the arduous abolition campaign](#), Wilberforce sometimes considered giving up and quitting Parliament. Newton encouraged him to persist, reminding him of another public figure, the biblical Daniel, who, Newton said, “trusted in the Lord, was faithful . . . and . . . though he had enemies they could not prevail against him.”<sup>{26}</sup>

Newton’s biblical worldview had matured to the point that he became active in the abolition movement. In 1788, he published a widely circulated pamphlet, *Thoughts Upon the African Slave Trade*. “I hope it will always be a subject of humiliating reflection to me,” he wrote, “that I was once an active instrument in a business at which my heart now shudders.”<sup>{27}</sup> His pamphlet detailed horrors of the slave trade and argued against it on moral and practical grounds.

Abolitionists sent a copy to every member of both Houses of Parliament. Newton testified before important parliamentary committees. He described chains, overcrowded quarters, separated families, sexual exploitation, flogging, beating, butchering. The Christian slave-ship captain who once was blind to his own moral hypocrisy now could see.<sup>{28}</sup> Jonathan Aitken says, “Newton’s testimony was of vital importance in converting public opinion to the abolitionist cause.”<sup>{29}</sup>

Wilberforce and his colleagues finally prevailed. In early 1807 Britain outlawed the slave trade. On December 21 of that year, grace finally led John Newton home to his Maker.

## **Lessons from a Life of Amazing Grace**

John Newton encountered “many dangers, toils, and snares” on his life’s voyage from slaver to pastor, hymn writer, mentor, and abolitionist. What lessons does his life hold? Here are a few.

*Moral maturation can take time.* Newton the morally corrupt slave trader embraced faith in Jesus, then continued slave trading. Only years later did his moral and spiritual conscience catch up on this issue with the high principles of the One he followed. We should hold hypocrites accountable, but realize that blinders don't always come off quickly. One bumper sticker I like reads, "Please be patient; God is not finished with me yet."

*Humility became a hallmark of Newton's approach to life.* He learned to recognize his shortcomings. While revising some of his letters for publication, he noted in his diary his failures to follow his own advice: "What cause have I for humiliation!" he exclaimed. "Alas! . . . How defective [I am] in observing myself the rules and cautions I propose to others!"[{30}](#) Near the end of his life, Newton told a visitor, "My memory is nearly gone, but I remember two things: That I am a great sinner and that Christ is a great Savior."[{31}](#)

*Newton related Jesus' message to current events and everyday life.* For him, faith was not some dull, dusty, irrelevant relic but a living relationship with God, having immense personal and social relevance. He grew to see its import in fighting the slave trade. He used both the Bible and friendship to encourage Wilberforce. He tied his teaching to the news of the day, seeking to connect people's thoughts with the beliefs that had changed his life.[{32}](#)

*Newton was grateful for what he saw as God's providence.* Surviving the storm at sea that helped point him to faith was a prime example, but there were many others. As a child, he was nearly impaled in a riding accident.[{33}](#) Several times he narrowly missed possible drowning.[{34}](#) A shooting accident that could have killed him merely burned part of his hat.[{35}](#) He often expressed gratitude to God.

Have you ever considered writing your own epitaph? What will it say? Here's part of what Newton wrote for his epitaph. It's

inscribed on his tomb: "John Newton. Once an infidel and libertine, a servant of slaves in Africa was by the rich mercy of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ preserved, restored, pardoned and appointed to preach the faith he had long laboured to destroy."[\[36\]](#)

## Notes

1. From Olney Hymns, 1779; in John Newton, *Out of the Depths, "Revised and Updated for Today's Readers by Dennis R. Hillman"* (Grand Rapids: Kregel 2003), 9. Newton's autobiography was originally published in 1764 as *An Authentic Narrative*, a collection of letters between an anonymous writer (Newton) and a pastor. Newton was not yet ordained when he wrote the letters.
2. Jonathan Aitken, *John Newton: From Disgrace to Amazing Grace* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2007), 233.
3. Aitken, op. cit.
4. Newton, op. cit., 24.
5. Ibid., 33.
6. Ibid., 34.
7. Ibid., 34-37; 40-41.
8. Ibid., 44-45.
9. Ibid., 57-64; Aitken, op. cit., 63-64.
10. Newton, op. cit., 60.
11. Aitken, op. cit., 64.
12. Newton, op. cit., 69.
13. Ibid., 65, 68.
14. Ibid., 69-80; quotations from 71, 75.
15. Newton, op. cit., 82-83.
16. Aitken, op. cit., 85 ff.
17. Ibid., 91, ff.; 106, 107.
18. Ibid., 112.
19. Ibid., 125-126.
20. Ibid., 127-137.
21. Ibid., 140-141.
22. Ibid., 143-177; 193.

23. Ibid., 304.
24. Ibid., 299-308.
25. Ibid., 310 ff.
26. Ibid., 315 for the quote about Daniel; 312-316 for background on Wilberforce's thoughts about quitting.
27. Ibid., 319.
28. Ibid., 319-328.
29. Ibid., 319.
30. Ibid., 243.
31. Ibid., 347.
32. Ibid., 293-296. See also Newton, op. cit., 154.
33. Newton, op. cit., 23.
34. Ibid., 23, 66-67, 94-95.
35. Ibid., 85.
36. Aitken, op. cit., 350, 356.

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## **Can Western-style Education Transform the Middle East?**

Dear Probe reader,

A highlight of my recent tour of Jordan—a land teeming with biblical history—was visiting King's Academy. Jordan's new prep school emphasizes critical thinking over rote learning, teaching students not *what* to think but *how* to think. Could it become a model to train a new generation of Middle Eastern leaders to shake hands with each other and the West?

As you analyze your world through biblical lenses, it's important to be aware of significant global developments. King's Academy has garnered considerable attention among US and international media:

*"Rather revolutionary" (TIME)*

*"What could be more important in the Middle East than educating open-minded future leaders?" (The Sunday Times [London] op-ed)*

*"Bringing the best of western education to the Middle East." (NPR)*

*"There is a crisis in Arab education. This school [is] about the future—trying to pull an education system into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century—to build bridges between clashing cultures." (CBS-TV News)*

Biblical worldview, of course, promotes careful, critical thinking. Many westerners are unaware of how lack of critical thinking permeates Middle Eastern education and, hence, influences international relations. This piece aims to expand readers' geopolitical understanding. And, alas, too many western readers lack critical thinking themselves, so this uses current news to help focus attention on that biblical value, a crucial one if we are to communicate cross culturally.

As are most of my shorter articles on the Probe Ministries website, this is an op-ed written for secular newspapers. I'm honored that you might read it and hope you find it useful.

Warm regards,

Rusty Wright

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If you only learn to repeat what you've been taught—and not to think for yourself—you may be ill prepared to vote.

That's the lesson the Jerusalem-born librarian conveyed as we sat in her office in a brand new boarding school near Madaba, Jordan. When Afaf Kazimi moved to Jordan many years ago and could vote for the first time, she simply cast her ballot on another's recommendation without knowing much about the candidate. I voted for the wrong person, she concluded in hindsight.

Much of her early school education had involved rote memorization—learning facts for tests, as is common in the Middle East—and had lacked training in critical thinking, skills she developed later. Now she's excited to be part of a new experiment that blends Western analytical emphases with traditional Arab culture, helping students avoid the educational path she and others had to take.

## **Arab Preppies**

Jordan's King's Academy opened in 2007 with goals of helping students from many nations and different religious backgrounds learn not *what* to think but *how* to think. Patterned after Deerfield Academy in Massachusetts, King Abdullah's alma mater, King's looks much like a New England prep school. Think *Dead Poets Society* or *The Emperors Club*, coed and transplanted to a desert oasis.

Students wear preppie blue blazers and ties, khaki trousers. Many live in dormitories, with faculty house parents. They have service responsibilities in the dining hall and community.

Sports aim to cultivate teamwork and discipline. An honor code is being developed. Course offerings involve the humanities, social sciences and hard sciences and include studies in

Islam, Christianity, world religions, communication, rhetoric and ethics. Financial aid aims for socioeconomic diversity. Courses are taught in English and Arabic.

King Abdulla's Deerfield experience was formative in his young life. It developed lasting relationships. He's a friend of the West. Jordan has led efforts to renounce religious extremism and help religions coexist peacefully. King's Academy hopes its multinational faculty will train future leaders for the Middle East and beyond.

## Critical Thinking

Since I attended Choate, Deerfield's peer (and, my classmates would want me to emphasize, chief rival), I'm especially interested in this Jordanian experiment. I'm grateful that I learned early to think critically and to ask lots of questions. King's appears eager to cultivate inquisitive minds.

A poster of William Shakespeare hung in the King's library along with promotion for J.R.R. Tolkien and the *International Herald Tribune*. Broad reading—especially of writers with whom you disagree—can facilitate learning and enhance communication. Intelligent people are always ready to learn, affirms an ancient proverb. Their ears are open for knowledge ([Proverbs 18:15](#) NLT). How much better to get wisdom than gold, and good judgment than silver! claims another ([Proverbs 16:16](#) NLT).

Logical, analytical thinking is, of course, crucial for healthy societies. Sloppy logic can be amusing or devastating: All fish swim. I swim. Therefore, I am a fish. Somewhat similar illogic appears in numerous aberrations: Muslim extremists threaten Western society. Omar is a Muslim. So Omar is a threat to me. Or, American foreign policy undermines my country. You're an American. Thus, you're my enemy. Shallow thinkers can turn illogic into dogma and breed fanaticism.

Of course, no school will produce perfect students. George W. Bush's critics might sometimes wonder if his Andover education taught him to think clearly. And if Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad had attended Andover, would he and Bush get along? Well, maybe. But please, don't expect miracles.

King Abdullah's promising educational venture deserves close scrutiny. Could it become a model to train a new generation of Middle Eastern leaders to shake hands with each other and the West?

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## Slavery, William Wilberforce and the Film "Amazing Grace"

*The transatlantic trade in slavery was outlawed 200 years ago. This anniversary is marked by the release of Amazing Grace,* a feature film about abolitionist William Wilberforce. Byron Barlowe argues that his life is an exemplar of how God can use faith, moral bravery along with biblical thinking and long-term action—even against tough odds—to transform culture for good.

You may have caught the buzz surrounding the film *Amazing Grace*, still in theaters nationwide at this writing. It premiered just in time to celebrate the anti-slavery campaign led by William Wilberforce, which outlawed [1](#) transatlantic slavery 200 years ago.

Culturally active Christians, especially, hail the film as a refreshingly well-done cinematic rendering of a historical hero that will be worth viewing and, if you're so inclined,

owning. Wilberforce's story is an exemplar of how God can use faith, moral bravery along with biblical thinking and long-term action to transform culture for good.

## Slavery then & now

The term "slavery" usually evokes images of forced-émigrés from Africa in the American South from the advent of the American colonies. Yet, slavery in some form is a feature of life in much of the world's history and may be more rampant today than ever before. From indentured servants who willingly pledged submission to their masters to those bought and sold as property—as in the American and British systems—to those held in present-day fear and financial bondage right under our modern noses, slavery is simply a hard fact.

According to Probe writer Rusty Wright, the 18<sup>th</sup> Century British slave trade "was legal, lucrative, and brutal."[{2}](#) Altering that reality was a life-cause for Wilberforce and his abolitionist brethren.

This was not always the sentiment among Christians, going back to the early Church. Although their ancient slavery was often more benign than in Wilberforce's day, it surprises many to discover that such notables as Polycarp (Bishop of Smyrna), Clement of Alexandria, Athenagoras (Second Century Christian philosopher), and Origen held to slavery as a God-given right. Later Church luminaries such as St. Bonaventure agreed. Pope Paul III even granted the right of clergy to own slaves.[{3}](#)

Latin America's pre-Columbian slave-based culture was prodigious, but how much does one hear of this or the claim that the Church ended it? Author Nancy Pearcey tells of a Mexican man [who] spoke from the audience at a recent conference:

*My ancestors were the Aztecs. We were the biggest slave*

*traders, and the slaves were used for human sacrifice—to make the sun rise each day! Our Aztec priests ripped out the beating hearts from living slaves who were sacrificed in our temples...*

*I don't like it. I am not proud of it... It is part of our history. We have to face up to it.*

Pointing out the unique ameliorative influence of the Christian faith as contrasted with Islam, he added:

*And the slavery and human sacrifice in Mexico only stopped when Christianity came and brought it to an end. That is the fact of history. When are the Arabs going to face up to the facts of their own history, and to what is going on in many Muslim countries today? When are they going to rise up like the Christians to bring this slavery in their own countries to an end?*[{4}](#)

Using the film as a launching pad, present-day abolitionist groups continue a campaign to publicize and eradicate modern-day slavery. According to *World* magazine, “today 27 million people live on in captivity, their lives worth far less than any colonial era slave.”[{5}](#) “About 17,000 are trafficked annually in the United States.”[{6}](#)

Relative to the *chattel* slaves of Wilberforce's day, for which owners paid heavy prices and held title deeds, today's illegally held human “property” comes cheap—and blends in. Most are in debt bondage, some are contract laborers living under harsh conditions, and others are forced into marriage and prostitution. “Human trafficking, which ensnares 600,000 to 800,000 people a year, is the newest slave trade and the world's third-largest criminal business after drugs and arms dealing.”[{7}](#)

Contemporary abolitionist, hands-on human rights campaigner,

member of the British House of Lords and professed follower of Christ, the Baroness Caroline Cox points out that obliteration of the white slave trade lends hope to modern-day campaigns. "There have been many slaveries, but there has been only one abolition, which eventually shattered even the rooted and ramified slave systems of the Old World."[\[8\]](#)

An "alliance of modern Wilberforces" includes "lawmakers, clergy, layers, bureaucrats, missionaries, social workers, and even reclusive Colorado billionaire Philip Anschutz," who bankrolled the film *Amazing Grace*.[\[9\]](#) They seek to repeat Wilberforce's success.

## **Opposition in Wilberforce's day**

Wilberforce and his compatriots faced an entrenched pro-slavery culture. "...The entire worldview of the British Empire was what we today call social Darwinism. The rich and the powerful preyed on and abused the poor and the weak."[\[10\]](#)

The British royal family sanctioned slavery. The great military hero of the day, Admiral Lord Nelson, denounced "the damnable doctrine of Wilberforce and his hypocritical allies."[\[11\]](#)

Once again, the religious climate of the day tolerated institutionalized evil. In a chapter entitled "Slavery Abolished: A Christian Achievement" in his sweeping book *How Christianity Changed the World*, Alvin J. Schmidt writes, "A London church council decision of 1102, which had outlawed slavery and the slave trade[\[12\]](#), was ignored." Schmidt continues regarding religious hypocrisy, that the "revival of slavery" in Wilberforce's time in Britain, Spain, Portugal and their colonies "...was lamentable because this time it was implemented by countries whose proponents of slavery commonly identified themselves as Christians, whereas during the African and Greco-Roman eras, slavery was the product of

pagans.”{13}

Most compellingly, Wilberforce’s convictions put his own welfare at risk. Twice, West Indian sea captains threatened Wilberforce’s life.{14} This campaign was not a casual *cause célèbre* to him.

Wilberforce biographer Eric Metaxas states:

*...The moral and social behavior of the entire culture...was hopelessly brutal, violent, selfish, and vulgar. He hoped to restore civility and Christian values to British society, because he knew that only then would the poor be lifted out of their misery.*

## **Wilberforce’s Secret: learn to disagree agreeably{15}**

It has been fashionable, on occasion, to lionize William Wilberforce to the point of exaggeration. However, we can legitimately extract godly, courageous and wise principles from his life’s story.

Holding fast to a distinctively biblical worldview will often come smack into conflict with the most cherished societal sins of one’s day. It was slavery then, you name the issue today: abortion, gluttony, gambling, pornography, human trafficking. Yet, many a well-meaning activist has fallen prey to a crass loss of civility in the long battle to turn the tide of public opinion and policy.

Metaxas contrasts:

*Wilberforce understood the Scripture about being wise as serpents and gentle as doves. He was a very wise man who worked with those from other views to further the causes God had called him to. Because of the depth of his faith,*

*Wilberforce was a genuinely humble man who treated his enemies with grace—and of course that had great practical results.*

Just as Cambridge professor Isaac Milner, his mentor to faith in Christ, had once stood against Wilberforce's skepticism agreeably, so he learned to do politically. He was relevant, shrewd, yet genuine. "Wilberforce wasn't full of pious platitudes. He really had the ability to translate the things of God in a way that people could really hear what he was saying," Metaxas says.

Even privately, his actions forcefully, yet humbly, disagreed with prevailing cultural winds. Metaxas describes his serious conviction to spend significant time raising his six children, certainly uncommon for fathers in his day. One lasting result: "because of his fame [this] set the fashion with regard to family togetherness and being together on Sundays that lasted far into the 19th and even 20th centuries."

## **The Christian worldview drove Wilberforce and his predecessors to oppose slavery and its effects**

Wilberforce gained a reputation as a man of faith. Sir Walter Scott credited Wilberforce with being a spiritual leader among Parliamentarians. Biographer John Stoughton wrote that his effectiveness as speaker was greatest when he "appealed to the Christian consciences of Englishmen."[16](#) Nonetheless, Wilberforce was his own biggest proponent of his need for grace.

The doctrines of *sola fide* ("by faith alone") and *sola gratia* ("by grace alone") formed the foundation of Wilberforce's theology, or how he viewed God and His relation to the world. Metaxas relates, "He really knew that he was as wicked a

sinner as the worst slave trader—without that sense of one’s own sinfulness, it’s very easy to become a moralizing Pharisee.”

Author and pastor John Piper writes:

*...The doctrine of justification is essential to right living—and that includes political living... [The “Nominal Christians” or Christians in name only, of Wilberforce’s day] got things backward: First they strived for moral uplift, and then appealed to God for approval. That is not the Christian gospel. And it will not transform a nation. It would not sustain a politician through 11 parliamentary defeats over 20 years of vitriolic opposition.* [{17}](#)

The Apostle Paul wrote, “Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.” [{18}](#) Sometimes it takes 20 years or much longer for the Spirit to move an entire culture! God is patient and works with our free wills, but accomplishes His purposes in the end.

Paul wrote several other times in Scripture regarding slavery. He told Philemon to treat his own slave as a brother. That is, lose the slave, gain a spiritual brother.

To the church in Galatia, Paul wrote that there was “neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free...for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” [{19}](#) The status of *slave* was subsumed under the category of *believer*, where all are equal. “...Given the culturally ingrained practice of slavery...in the ancient world, Paul’s words were revolutionary. The Philemon and Galatians passages laid the groundwork for the abolition of slavery, then and for the future.” [{20}](#)

Anti-Slavery positions were commonplace in the Early Church. Slaves worshiped and communed with Christians at the same altar. Christians often freed slaves, even redeemed the slaves of others [{21}](#) (much like contemporary believers who buy

freedom for Sudanese slaves). This equal treatment of slaves sometimes set Christians up as targets of persecution.[{22}](#)

Christianity is no stranger to abolition throughout history. Schmidt writes:

*...The effort to remove slavery, whether it was Wilberforce in Britain or the abolitionists in America, was not a new phenomenon in Christianity. Nor were the efforts of Martin Luther King, Jr. and the American civil rights laws of the 1960s to remove racial segregation new to the Christian ethic. They were merely efforts to restore Christian practices that were already in existence in Christianity's primal days.[{23}](#)*

The film *Blood Diamond* graphically portrays child soldiers brutally manipulated to do the killing for a rebel group in Africa, an actual contemporary tragedy. In the story's only bright spot, a gentle, fatherly African offers an apologetic for his work to rescue and rehabilitate boy warriors. The message is straightforward: do what you can in the moral morass, for "who knows which path leads to God?"

Wilberforce found the path—the Way, the Truth and the Life[{24}](#)—and it continues to light the way for people in bondage today. But it's only just begun, once again.

## Notes

1. The 1807 Act of Parliament outlawed the trade in the British Empire. In fact, the trade continued among other nations and illegally among British outlaws.
2. "Amazing Grace Movie: Lessons for Today's Politicians," by Rusty Wright, [www.probe.org/amazing-grace-movie-lessons-for-todays-politicians/](http://www.probe.org/amazing-grace-movie-lessons-for-todays-politicians/), accessed 3-22-07.
3. "Slavery Abolished: A Christian Achievement," chapter 11, in *How Christianity Changed the World*, Alvin J. Schmidt, 276.

Note: read further for examples of early Church Fathers and laypeople who opposed slavery and aided slaves.

4. From an email report entitled "Slavery and Its History," sent on behalf of author Nancey Pearcey to Phylogeny.net list 12/11/06.

5. *World*, Feb. 24, 2007, "Let my people go," by Priya Abraham, [www.worldmag.com/articles/12700](http://www.worldmag.com/articles/12700), accessed 3-21-07.

6. "Free at Last: how Christians worldwide are sabotaging the modern slave trade," Deann Alford, *Christianity Today*, March 2007, p. 32.

7. *World*, Abraham.

8. Ibid, "Whale of a man" (article sidebar). Quote from *This Immoral Trade: Slavery in the 21st Century* (Monarch Books, 2006), "a 175-page textbook, in a sense, featuring the history, the politics, the economics, and the present-day reality of forced servitude around the world" according to *World*. Co-written with Cox by John Marks, a human-rights advocate, researcher who advocates for slaves regularly with Cox.

9. Alford, *Christianity Today*, p 32.

10. "Doing good and helping the poor," interview with Wilberforce biographer Eric Metaxas, *World*, Feb. 24, 2007: [www.worldmag.com/articles/12703](http://www.worldmag.com/articles/12703), accessed 3-22-07.

11. Wright, accessed 3-21-07.

12. "The legal force of the event is actually open to question. The Council of Westminster (a collection of nobles) held in London issued a decree: 'Let no one hereafter presume to engage in that nefarious trade in which hitherto in England men were usually sold like brute animals.' However, the Council had no legislative powers, and no Act of law was valid unless signed by the Monarch." From Wikipedia entry, "History of Slavery," [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Slave\\_trade#\\_note-2](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Slave_trade#_note-2), accessed 3-23-07.

13. Schmidt, 276.

14. *World*, Metaxas interview, accessed 3-22-07

15. Ibid, entire section.

16. Schmidt, 277.

17. "Joy in the battle: Abolition and the roots of public justice," John Piper, *World*, Feb. 24, 2007, [www.worldmag.com/articles/12691](http://www.worldmag.com/articles/12691), accessed 3-22-07.
18. 2 Corinthians 3:17
19. Galatians 3:28
20. Schmidt, 273.
21. Ibid, 274.
22. Ibid, 289.
23. Ibid, 290.
24. John 14:6

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## Paris Hilton and What We Want

Paris Hilton. Paris Hilton. Paris Hilton. Paris Hilton. Paris Hilton.

Please excuse the repetition, but I want this article to score highly in Google searches.

You see, [Google Zeitgeist](#), the mega-search engine's report on its most popular search topics, says the heiress scored number one on 2006 Google News searches. The report presents a glimpse of the "spirit of the times," giving clues to websurfers' interests.

In news (yes, I said "news," not "entertainment") searches, Paris beat Orlando Bloom, cancer, and Hurricane Katrina. Borat and Hezbollah topped "Who is" searches. Among U.S. searches for "Scandal," the [Duke Lacrosse](#) episode took three of the first four slots.

What else do people want to know about? Google's top-ten lists

in various categories include MySpace, Nicole Kidman, Tom Cruise, Britney Spears, Paul McCartney, Pamela Anderson, Reggie Bush, and Clay Aiken.

Why do celebrities and entertainment rank so high? Perhaps it's the desire to connect with something larger than ourselves. Maybe boredom explains some celebrity obsession. And don't rule out diversion.

For some—maybe many—daily life ranges from harried to overwhelming: soured relationships, job conflict, financial pressure, health distress. Diverting focus can ease your troubled mind, at least temporarily.

Of course, everyone needs mental and emotional breaks. Diversion can be a healthy coping mechanism—until it becomes obsessive. Then it can lead to denying reality, perhaps obscuring genuine wants and needs.

Suppose we had a mind/heart/soul reader to discover what people really want once their basic physical needs are met. What would we find? Psychologist Abraham Maslow's renowned hierarchy of basic needs includes safety, love, esteem and self-actualization.[{1}](#) Perhaps our soul reader would detect desires for acceptance, thriving personal friendships, peace of mind, health, security.

Maslow also realized that several profound fears—including the fear of death—trouble humanity.[{2}](#) Our soul reader might find that people also want an answer to death.

Anthropologist Ernest Becker argued in his Pulitzer Prize-winning book, [The Denial of Death](#),[{3}](#) that much human behavior can be explained by a deep desire to deny death's reality, to repress "the terror of death." No wonder. Which would you enjoy more, right this minute: contemplating your own death and its aftermath . . . or reading, exercising, web- or channel surfing, conversing, partying, working, shopping, etc.?

If we don't have a solution to fear of death, we can invent ways to avoid thinking about it. Alas, attractive and even worthwhile pursuits can become enslaving. Amassing the most "toys"; rat-race schedules; obsession with career, job, education, sports or even friends can insulate people from facing their own mortality.

The biblical book of Hebrews presents a similar analysis of the human dilemma, reasoning that people "have lived all their lives as slaves to the fear of dying." {4} It claims that Jesus died to "deliver" people from this slavery so they might connect with God in time and eternity.

It seems morbid to always be thinking about your own death. But could avoiding it altogether constitute unhealthy denial? Could excessive focus on certain pursuits become risky diversion from life's real issues, like personal meaning, personal worth, fulfilling relationships, and what Sigmund Freud called "the painful riddle of death"?{5}

Could obsession with Paris Hilton and her *Google Zeitgeist* pals conceal deep longings, insecurities and fears in individual web surfers and in society at large?

As the esteemed British philosopher and rocker Sir Mick Jagger [famously counseled](#), "You can't always get what you want. But if you try sometime . . . you just might find you get what you need." {6} A friendly question for my fellow web surfers: Is what you want, what you need?

## Notes

1. A. H. Maslow (1943), "A Theory of Human Motivation"; Originally Published in *Psychological Review*, 50, 370-396; at <http://psychclassics.yorku.ca/Maslow/motivation.htm>, accessed December 28, 2006.
2. Abraham H. Maslow, *Religions, Values, and Peak-Experiences* (Penguin Books Limited, ©1964 by Kappa Delta Pi and ©1970 [preface] The Viking Press), Appendix A, "Religious Aspects of

Peak-Experiences," items 8 & 14; at <http://www.druglibrary.org/schaffer/lsd/maslowa.htm>, accessed December 28, 2006.

3. Ernest Becker, *The Denial of Death* (New York: Free Press Paperbacks, 1997; original copyright was 1973).

4. Hebrews 2:15 NLT.

5. Sigmund Freud, *The Future of an Illusion* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1961 edition; James Strachey translator and editor; original work was published in 1928) 19.

6. Mick Jagger and Keith Richards (songwriters), "You Can't Always Get What You Want." Lyrics at <http://rollingstones.com/discog/index.php?v=so&a=1&id=124>; accessed December 28, 2006.

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## A Little Kramer in All of Us?

Comedian Michael Richards—"Kramer" on TV's *Seinfeld*—saw his racist tirade at African-American hecklers ignite a firestorm. Mel Gibson, whose earlier anti-Semitic rant made headlines, said he felt compassion for Richards.[{1}](#)

Lots of people have dark sides. Maybe everyone. Maybe you.

I do.

Remember Susan Hawk? Her infamous diatribe against [another CBS Survivor contestant](#) declared if she found her "laying there dying of thirst, I would not give you a drink of water. I would let the vultures take you and do whatever they want with you."[{2}](#)

Richards—like Gibson—apologized profusely. Prominent African-

American comic Paul Mooney says [Richards told him privately](#), “He didn’t know he had that ugliness in him.”[}{3}](#)

I can identify with Richards’ surprise at his darker inner impulses. My own failing was private rather than public, differing in degree but not in kind. It taught me valuable lessons.

Growing up in the US South, I learned from my parents and educators to be tolerant and accepting in a culture that often was not. Racism still makes my blood boil. I’ve [sought to promote racial sensitivity](#).

One summer during university, I joined several hundred students—most of us Caucasian—for a South Central Los Angeles outreach project. We spent a weekend living in local residents’ homes, attending their churches, and meeting people in the community.

A friend and I enjoyed wonderful hospitality from a lovely couple. Sunday morning, their breakfast table displayed a mountain of delicious food. Our gracious hostess wanted to make sure our appetites were completely satisfied. It was then, eying that bountiful spread, that it hit me.

I realized that for the first time in my life, I was living in Black persons’ home, sitting at “their” table, eating “their” food, using “their” utensils. Something inside me reacted negatively. The strange feeling was not anger or hatred, more like mild aversion. Not powerful, not dramatic, certainly not expressed. But neither was it rational or pleasant or honorable or at all appropriate. It horrified and shamed me, especially since I had recently become a follower of Jesus.

The feeling only lasted a few moments. But it taught me important lessons about prejudice. Much as I might wish to deny it, I had inner emotions that, if expressed, could cause terrible pain. I who prided myself on racial openness had to deal with inner bigotry. How intense must such impulses be in

those who are less accepting? Maybe similar inner battles—large or small—go on inside many people. I became deeply impressed that efforts at social harmony should not neglect the importance of changing human hearts.

Holocaust survivor Yehiel Dinur testified during the trial of Adolph Eichmann, the Nazi leader responsible for killing millions of Jews. When he saw Eichmann in the courtroom, he sobbed and collapsed to the floor. Dinur later explained, “I was afraid about myself. I saw that I am capable to do this. . . . Exactly like he. . . . Eichmann is in all of us.”<sup>{4}</sup>

Jeremiah, an ancient Jewish sage, wrote, “The human heart is most deceitful and desperately wicked. Who really knows how bad it is?”<sup>{5}</sup> A prescription from one of Jesus’ friends helped me overcome my inner struggles that morning in South Central: “If we say we have no sin, we are only fooling ourselves and refusing to accept the truth. But if we confess our sins to [God], he is faithful and just to forgive us and to cleanse us from every wrong.”<sup>{6}</sup>

## Notes

1. “Mel Gibson Feels Michael Richards’ Pain,” Associated Press, November 29, 2006; AOL Entertainment News: <http://tinyurl.com/vh2nf>, accessed December 3, 2006.
2. Tim Cuprisin, “Susan Hawk stays afloat on ‘Survivor’ celebrity,” *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, January 23, 2001; <http://www2.jsonline.com/enter/tvradio/jan01/survive23012201.asp>, accessed December 3, 2006.
3. “Paul Mooney Cites Richards in N-Word Ban,” Associated Press November 29, 2006, <http://tinyurl.com/5pxnxy>, accessed December 3, 2006.
4. Charles W. Colson, “The Enduring Revolution,” excerpts of his 1993 Templeton Address; <http://www.gcts.edu/communications/contact/fall04/article03.ph>

[p](#), accessed December 3, 2006.

5. Jeremiah 17:9 NLT.

6. 1 John 1:8-9 NLT.

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