

NEWS & VIEWS

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Four Analogies by Ron Julian

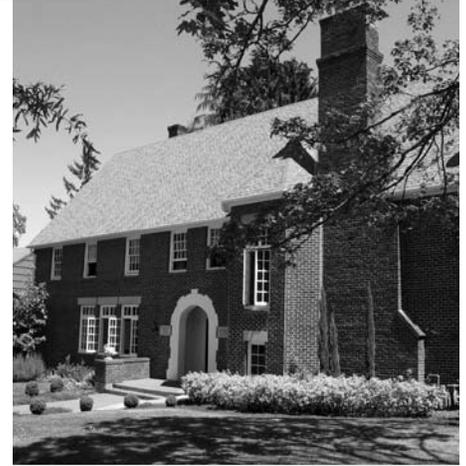
Some time ago I was asked to speak to a group of students. My usual approach on such an occasion would be to pick a biblical passage to explain. But not knowing the interest level of the group, I chose not to teach from any specific passage. Instead, I presented them with four analogies, four pictures that I find helpful in explaining what it means to be a Christian believer.

First analogy: *Mankind has often looked up at the sky, and our universal experience seems to suggest that everything revolves around us. The sun, moon, and stars appear at one horizon, travel in an arc overhead, and disappear at the opposite horizon. They never stop doing this. But among this completely uniform motion we see some erratic movement that needs explaining. Puzzling balls of light, which we call planets, slowly wander back and forth among the stars. Why do they do this? A man named Copernicus proposed a satisfying but counterintuitive solution. The sun is at the center of our solar system, and we are on one planet circling that sun just as the other planets do. With this new understanding, the strange dance of the planets is explained in a simple and satisfying way. Although our experience still seems to tell us that the sun and the planets revolve around us, we now understand that the sun is at the center, and we are just one of a number of planets circling it together.*

The Copernican revolution is striking in the way that one simple change of perspective can so completely change the way we think of the relationship between the heavenly bodies and ourselves. Whereas our common sense experience tell us that everything revolves

around us, Copernicus tells us that in fact not we but the sun is at the center, and we are in fact one of those planets, one of those wandering balls of light, orbiting around that sun. Likewise, our relationship to God and our fellow human beings can be seen as strikingly Copernican. We all by nature think of ourselves as of central importance; our interests, our needs, our desires have an obvious priority over anyone else. Other people—even God (if we allow for His existence)—are secondary, serving as the support team that helps me get what I want. Becoming a believer, then, is as profound a shift in perspective as that proposed by Copernicus: I am not at the center of the universe. My Creator is at the center, and I am just one of the planets, one of His creatures, no more or less important than any other human being. Thus Jesus tells us that the two greatest commandments are “love God” and “love your neighbor as yourself.” When I shift the center of the universe back to God, two truths emerge: God has priority over all His creation, and my fellow human beings are just as important as I am. This shift in perspective is central to becoming a believer in the God of the Bible.

Second analogy: *Sam's friends are concerned. Sam has gotten into a very bad relationship. His girlfriend, Sandy, is into drugs, criminal activity, and rampant promiscuity, much more than Sam realizes, and she is slowly leading Sam down the same path. His friends patiently try to explain to Sam why Sandy is bad for him, but he won't listen. When they talk about her extensive drug use, Sam says, “Oh, she is just trying it out. Why are you so judgmental?” When Sandy steals a watch from a friend of Sam, and that friend tries to tell Sam, Sam angrily refuses*



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to believe it and stops talking to him. Finally Sandy, who wants to separate Sam from his old friends, makes a grave accusation against Sam's best friend, Tom. She says that Tom came to her house, insulted and ridiculed Sam behind his back, and tried to force himself on Sandy. Tom, a friend who has stood by Sam through thick and thin for many years, tells Sam, “I would never do such a thing. You have got to believe me.” Sam looks him in the eye and says, “You are not my friend anymore.”

This rather melodramatic story reminds us that what we believe is influenced by what we want; we only believe what we are willing to believe. Sam has many very good reasons to believe his friends, especially his best friend, Tom. But the bottom line is that he doesn't want to; he wants Sandy more than he wants the truth. This is what the Bible means when it says that mankind unrighteously suppresses



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Four Analogies, continued

the truth about God (see Romans 1:18-23). This is why “faith” is such a big deal. There are good and sufficient reasons to believe in God, to believe the gospel. But such belief requires a *willingness* to believe, and we don’t want to. We don’t want to give the center of the universe back to God; we don’t want to admit we have been wrong. Ignorance about God is a moral issue, and so accepting the truth about God requires a moral revolution. The Bible tells us we can be reconciled with God and find life if we believe—that is, if we are *willing* to admit we were wrong and embrace the knowledge of God.

Third analogy: *Joan’s father has retired to the south of France and left her in charge of the family business. Before he left, he gave Joan a finished copy of the book that he had been writing for many years. In this book he tried to distill all the wisdom and business acumen he had gained through experience. Principles, rules, stories—all these things her father gathered together in a very large and complex book. But Joan is impatient; she thinks that her father is old-fashioned and that his advice will not allow her to make money fast enough. So although she occasionally looks at the book, she really doesn’t care much about what it says and ends up misunderstanding much of it. Years of following her own stubborn ideas lead the business to the brink of ruin. Finally, Joan admits to herself that she is lost and starts reading her father’s book carefully and in earnest. Some of the ideas in the book are immediately understandable and helpful. Much of it, however, is still difficult to understand, and Joan’s attempts to apply it are confused and make things even worse. The business is still in pretty sad shape. She dreads contacting her father and telling him how little she understands of his wise advice. Her father, however, tells her that he is quite pleased because at last she is willing to listen to him. She may misunderstand parts of what he is saying, but she wants to understand it, and that matters most to him.*

Believers have the same sort of complicated relationship with the doctrines of the Bible that Joan had with her father’s book. The Bible presents us with truths about God, the gospel, ourselves, and the world we live in. But how important is it that we understand and believe each and every doctrinal truth

contained in the Bible? The Bible answers that question in a rich and nuanced way. On the one hand, the Bible clearly shows us that wrong beliefs can arise from an unwillingness to know the truth. (See, for example, the book of Galatians.) Like Joan in her early days, we may be ignorant because we really don’t want to know what our Father is saying. On the other hand, the Bible shows us that the process of growing in understanding of God is a messy one and that we need to be patient with ourselves and with each other. (See, for example, Romans 14.) Like Joan, we may want to understand our Father but still be confused about what He is saying. So we cannot say that doctrine doesn’t matter, but we cannot say that doctrine is the most important thing, either. Bad doctrine can at times be a forgivable human failing, and yet at other times it can serve as an alarm signaling that the person is in great spiritual danger. What is central is a willingness to bow the knee to the God who has revealed His truths in the Bible.

Fourth analogy: *Tim is a wild and rebellious street kid who has been adopted by a compassionate family. The father tells him, “You are going to need a lot of help; I am prepared to help you get the education you need, break free of destructive habits, and in general learn a new way of living. If you want my help, just ask.” But Tim is not interested in his new father’s kind of help, and he doesn’t really trust him anyway. Every now and again he will hit the old man up for some cash, but since Tim will probably end up wasting the money anyway, the father rarely says yes. Tim continues to take care of himself the way he learned on the street, using manipulation, lies, seduction, and any other tool at hand. But at last Tim comes to the end of his rope, realizing that he has gone the wrong way. He comes to his adopted father and says, “You said if I needed help I could come to you. Well, I have gotten myself in a lot of trouble; please help me.” And so Tim starts coming to his father with his troubles. Sometimes the father says yes to Tim’s request. Often times he says no because he has a different idea of what Tim needs. But Tim always comes back. The fact that Tim keeps coming back, whether the answer is yes or no, says something important about his relationship with his father: at last Tim has come to believe that his father has Tim’s ultimate good in mind.*

Sometimes people think of prayer as a religious discipline that we engage in out of obedience. Other people think of prayer as a technique for getting what we want from God. But I would argue that Tim’s story is a model of how we should think about prayer. The most significant thing about our prayers as believers is that we see God as the one to turn to. We pray because we are now willing to believe that God is our Creator, and He has promised to rescue us, and we trust Him, so we pray. Prayer is a way of living out our belief that God is a real being who is trustworthy and loving. It is not a technique for getting what we want. It is not a religious ritual that God requires of us. It is our recognition that we are children who have a wise and loving father. Sometimes He says yes because He loves us. Sometimes He says no and claims that He does so also out of love. But whether He says yes or no, we continue to believe that He is trustworthy; He is the one to go to. Ultimately, our perseverance in prayer reflects our trust that one day God’s answer to our cries will be an unqualified “yes.” All the hurts and needs that drive us to God will be healed.

Conclusion

So in the end, what do these four analogies add up to? None of them deal with the specifics of the Christian faith. Becoming a Christian means believing that Jesus is the Messiah, that God raised Him from the dead, that He is returning to judge unrighteousness and establish the eternal kingdom of God. These little analogies don’t speak to any of that. But I think they speak to the deep issues underneath the gospel story. Why does it matter whether I believe that Jesus is the Messiah? What effect does it have on my life to believe that God raised Jesus from the dead? What does it mean to be a person of “faith”?

The answer that I see in the Bible, from beginning to end, is this: faith is significant because it is rooted in a deep-seated willingness to transform the way we look at God and ourselves. To believe in Jesus, we have to have undergone the Copernican revolution of seeing God, not ourselves, at the center of the universe. Then the tragic truth emerges that we have not lived as if God were at the center; we have not loved God, and we

have not loved our neighbor as ourselves. We need to be forgiven, and we need to be rescued from our own selfishness. And so we personally come to see the gospel as the good news it is.

But such a change of perspective can only arise out of a change of will. What we believe arises from what we are willing to believe. The doctrines we learn from the Bible are influenced by what we are willing for the Bible to tell us. Our lives of prayer before God are reflections of whether we are willing to trust Him and whether we will continue to do so. What I like about these little analogies is that they highlight the revolution that faith must be. To live a genuine Christian life, we must revolutionize our view of God and ourselves, which means we must be willing to revolutionize our view of God and ourselves. This is not some strange, esoteric religious mystery. We see this reflected in our everyday experience; we see it in the little stories we just read. A change in our beliefs can often only arise from a change in our wills, in our hearts; and such a change in beliefs will ultimately change the way we live. This is often true in everyday life; it is certainly true in the Christian faith.

These little stories are about fundamental change, and how such change is tied to a *willingness* to change. Faith is a big deal because faith is a change in what we want as much as in what we believe. I should not neglect to point out that, ultimately, such a change can come about because God Himself is working in our lives. Frankly, we are not good enough to effect such a profound moral revolution in our own thinking. But even though God is the ultimate author of such change, it is a change that each individual believer must undergo. As Hebrews 11:6 tells us, "And without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who seek Him." And such faith only belongs to those who are willing to admit they have been wrong.

Ron Julian is a tutor at Gutenberg College, a teacher at McKenzie Study Center, the author of *Righteous Sinners*, and a co-author of *The Language of God: A Commonsense Approach to Understanding and Applying the Bible*.

Gutenberg Traditions

During the twenty years since Gutenberg opened its doors in 1984, several school traditions have evolved. For example, the President's Dinner in February had its origins in two early annual events: first, the invitation to the student body (when it was small even for Gutenberg) from President David Crabtree and his wife, Susan, to a dinner of Russian food at their home; and second, the extracurricular writing assignment to parody a literary genre, the first being the Christian romance novel. Today, the President's dinner takes place at Gutenberg, but Dr. Crabtree and his wife (with helpers) still cook the same Russian menu, which is followed by an often hilarious evening of parodies, presented as group-efforts by each class.

The photos shown here are from the annual fall Junior Tea, when members of the junior class who successfully completed all their two-year exams at the end of their sophomore year are awarded a Greek New Testament by Gutenberg tutor Dick Booster (photo right), who teaches Greek to freshman and sophomores. Congratulatory Greek New Testaments were first given to the class of 2002 by the class of 2003, who purchased the books with their own funds. Now Gutenberg gives the New Testaments, awarding them at the Junior Tea, an event which provides incentive to sophomores facing their two-year exams.

The 2014 honorees (below, left to right) were: Nick McLaughlin, Benjamin Chase, Analia Chase, and David Robertson.



Visitors from the Messianic Community

In December 2014, Gutenberg College was privileged to receive a visit from Rabbi Eliot Klayman and his wife, Joyce, who both teach at the Messianic Jewish Theological Institute. The Klaymans shared their moving stories of coming to belief in the Messiah Jesus and also some of the background and concerns of the messianic community.

As this newsletter is in production, Gutenberg is anticipating the visit of Rabbi Carl Kinbar on January 23 and 24. He also

teaches at the Messianic Jewish Theological Institute. Dr. Kinbar, who has a background in philosophy, Jewish studies, and early rabbinic Judaism, will speak to Gutenberg's students and faculty, in addition to speaking to the larger community in Eugene.

In February, Gutenberg looks forward to a visit from Rabbi John Fischer and his wife, Patrice. Dr. John Fischer, who has earned two doctorates (Ph.D. and Th.D.), serves as Rosh Yeshiva (dean of a Talmudical academy) of the Netzer David International Yeshiva, where

both he and his wife teach. (The yeshiva is associated with the St. Petersburg Seminary in Florida.) He has spoken and taught throughout the United States and the world, having lectured in Israel, Russia, France, Germany, Hungary, the Ukraine, Canada, and South Africa.

Dr. Patrice Fischer has helped establish two Messianic synagogues and has taught at both the university and seminary level. She

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Gutenberg College
McKenzie Study Center • Art Project
1883 University Street
Eugene, OR 97403

TELEPHONE: 541-683-5141
541-485-4801 (MSC/AP)
FAX: 541-683-6997
EMAIL: office@gutenberg.edu
INTERNET: www.gutenberg.edu

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Please be praying...

1) As of January, more perspective students have shown interest in Gutenberg than perhaps ever before this early in the year. A couple of students have completed applications, a couple are in the process, and six or seven more have indicated a sincere interest in attending Gutenberg. Please pray that all of those students (and more) will follow through and attend Gutenberg next fall. And please pray specifically that we would be able to identify those communities where we might find good prospective students for Gutenberg.

2) Donations are a bit off from last year. Please pray that we would be able to finish this fiscal year in the black again.

3) After an outstanding time with Elliot and Joyce Klayman in November, we are looking forward (as *News & Views* goes to press) to visits in January with Rabbi Carl Kinbar and in February with Rabbi John and Patrice Fisher, all of whom are prominent in the Messianic community. Please pray that those times would be productive learning times for the Gutenberg community and that we would be able to continue to deepen our relationships with that community.

(continued from above)

presently serves as Professor of Hebrew Language and Literature at St. Petersburg Seminary and Yeshiva, and has been a guest lecturer in Jerusalem, Berlin, and the Ukraine.

Gutenberg is excited to learn from members of the Messianic Jewish community who share ancestry and traditions with our Messiah Jesus.

We hope you can join us to welcome the Fischers on **February 14**. As their visit draws near, check our website for more information.

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