

CHAPTER NINE

IMAGINE THERE'S NO HEAVEN: SPIRITUALITY

In 1977, George Lucas made a movie called *Star Wars*, which dramatically changed the theology of the average American. In that movie, a retired Jedi knight named Obi Wan Kenobi explains “The Force” to young Luke Skywalker, and anybody else who will listen. This Force that he talked about was a nonconscious spirit that permeated the universe, moved in and out of everything and held it all together. That understanding of spirit resembles the theology of Hinduism and Buddhism.

But the Force also had another dimension. There was a good side to it, and a bad side—the light side, and the dark side. Like the ancient religions of Zoroastrianism and Manichaeism the conflict in *Star Wars* was not between different concepts of the spirit, as though Christians would have a different concept of the spirit from Hindus; the real conflict in that movie was between the very few who believed there was some sort of spirit and the very many who believed that there was not.

Most of the people living in the United States grew up in the modern age, and the modern age is a world that denied spiritual reality—that denied there was anything “out there” at all. The modern world, so consumed with science and answers to every question, believed basically that everything has a material explanation, governed by laws that humans could discover. Natural science led the way with laws of physics, but we tried to find laws to explain every realm of human experience. Psychology has attempted to operate like a science to explain the human mind. Sigmund Freud applied this field to

theology when he said that God is just an idea, just man's projection of his desire to have a father figure in the universe. Sociology and economics have sought to define their study of society and livelihood in terms that resembled scientific laws.

Karl Marx, the founder of Communist philosophy, explained human behavior, history, and destiny in terms of the great economic class struggle. The idea of God was just a ploy by the ruling class to keep the workers in subjugation. There's no God out there. There's no spirit world. There's just the here and the now, and then you die.

For the last few hundred years, Christians increasingly insisted "There is too a spirit world." There are things you can't imagine. There's more to people than the sum total of the chemicals in your body. There's more to the mind than just the brain. There's more to the emotions than just the nervous system. And we kept insisting that there is something. But unfortunately, something else happened over the last couple of hundred years with Christians in the Western world. Gradually we adapted ourselves to the modern view of the world and to modern methods. Liberals like Rudolf Bultmann and conservatives like C. I. Scofield both sought to establish a scientific approach to Bible study. If it were scientific, it would be better because science is the real proof. People like Charles Finney, the great evangelist, sought to establish the scientific laws of revival so that if we can just reproduce those laws, we will have revival.

In the twentieth century we have seen Christians who want to hold on to the church, the institution, the organization, the influence, but without the supernatural dimension of the Spirit. A growing number of people in the mainline church in the United States abandoned belief in an incarnation. They abandoned the idea of an atonement; they abandoned the idea of the Resurrection; they abandoned any idea of a real devil, or hell, or angels, or demons, and were left with only an idea of God. But a very vague idea. Certainly not a God who talks to us, who reveals himself, who sent us prophets and gave us his word. Certainly not that kind of a being. The God of dissipated faith in the modern era began to look more like the Force of *Star Wars* than anything else. Though conservatives held onto the old beliefs, many of us adopted "principles" of ministry that had been discovered scientifically. The Church Growth Movement provided a scientific way to accomplish our ends as though God were not even there. If you just use the method in the right way, something's going to happen. And we became functionally liberal.

Star Wars came out in 1977. That was the end of the baby bust. The baby busters were born from 1963 to 1977. Then we had what's called the echo-boom because the increased birthrate "echoed" the large birthrate of the

baby boom. That echo-boom generation has grown up on television as latchkey kids with both parents working. They grew up in an officially secular country with a modern worldview that had no room for the spiritual. For the most part, they grew up without any exposure to church, unlike the baby boomers who were taken to church as children. This generation had virtually no connection with the spiritual and cultural tradition of the West. It was for them as though the past had never happened.

I think we sometimes flatter ourselves if we think postmodernity is an ideology opposed to Christianity. It's not Christian. It's quite un-Christian. But the postmodern people don't even know that the Christian faith exists. For the most part they have never heard the old, old story of Jesus and his love. For the most part, they have rejected modernity, which attempted to explain all of reality and all of human experience in terms of scientific laws. They have rejected modernity but not Christianity, because they have never experienced Christianity. At most, Christianity is nothing more than a vague rumor they have heard.

They know there is more to life than what meets the eye. There is something within them that is searching. They have a deep longing for something beyond the mundane of everyday existence. Nearly three thousand years ago, King Solomon said that God had placed eternity in our hearts (Eccles. 3:11), and three hundred years ago Pascal said that only God can fill the vacuum in the human heart. Baby boomers may be spiritually malnourished, but the echo-boom has been spiritually starved. There is a longing in the human spirit to have that void filled, and people are searching for it; but they do not know what it is, and they do not even know what they're looking for. These people are like the first-century pagans that Paul encountered all around the Roman Empire who had no sense of guilt because they had never known the law.

So we see a world now in the United States where morals are virtually nonexistent. The United States is like Jonah's Nineveh. God said to Jonah about the people of Nineveh, "Jonah, those people don't know their right hand from their left. But Jonah, I'm not going to blast them to smithereens. Oh no. I'm going to send you to tell them about me, because they don't know me" [Poe's Free-Flowing Translation]. So this new generation, the people that are now moving into influence, are like the Athenians on Mars Hill who experimented with a variety of religious approaches: a little Buddhism here, a little Native American religion there, a little witchcraft—because they are looking for something. Something deep inside them tells them there is a spiritual dimension to life. But they are ignorant of the Creator God who came into this world to take our sins away and give us life.

In this context of spiritual ignorance and experimentation, what opportu-

nity do Christians have to reach the postmodern generation? First of all we need to recall that the Savior *is* exalted. He is over all. We cannot defend the Savior; he defends us. He is exalted over all other spiritual beings, whether they be demons or angels. That being the case, we have the opportunity to make known to this new generation the source of spiritual life. God as we can know him through Jesus Christ is not the nebulous, unconscious Force of *Star Wars* that we can tap into and take advantage of. God knows us, and he wants us to know him personally. The Spirit of God is not an impersonal force we can use but a personal being who desires relationship with us.

WHAT KIND OF GOD EXISTS?

The postmodern generation embodies American pragmatism. They look for a spirituality that works for them. Rather than condemn them for not having a lofty enough basis for their spirituality, we should realize that humans were designed in such a way that they would search for a spirituality that works for them, since the Creator is the only one who will finally satisfy. People often settle for something less. It matters a great deal what kind of God exists. Instead of trying to prove to the postmodern generation that God exists, we need only explain why the God of creation is the one who deserves our attention.

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning” (John 1:1). The opening to John’s Gospel is a famous passage of scripture, but it is a little bit confusing to our modern ears. What does he mean by “in the beginning was the Word”? People have explained to me since I was a child that John means that Jesus Christ the Lord, the Son of God, was in the beginning. Jesus was both with God and was God. Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who was with God in the beginning was the one who was the agent of creation. My Sunday school teachers had to teach me about this passage because we do not use this terminology today about “the Word” meaning the Son of God. We say the Son of God, we say Jesus, we say Christ, we say the Lord; but John was writing to people who did not know these terms because they did not know the Scriptures. They were not Jewish in their background. They did not know the prophecies. John wrote for a world that did not believe that God had created everything. The Greek world had a concept they called “the Word.” The Word was a spiritual being that mediated between the physical world and the divine. By “the divine” they did not mean the God of Creation or the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. In Greek philosophical thought, “God” was both impersonal and unconscious.

The Hellenistic world had the idea of a spirit realm, a spiritual dimension, of which truth, wisdom, and perfection had a part. In ancient thought “the Word” represented this notion of divine truth, wisdom, and perfection that might be known. It was “out there” somewhere. People strove for it; but in the Hellenistic world in which John lived, in the world of Greek thought, people had a major dilemma. All the material world that was seen was considered evil or corrupt. It was the result of evil. It was the result of a demon, not of a creator God who made everything and made it good. All of nature and physical existence was seen as a terrible accident. Many people believed they had come from the divine, but that they had gotten separated from this pure spirit. As a result, people are stuck in their bodies. That is the reason for pain and suffering in the world. So the quest of life is to escape the body and remerge with this spiritual origin from which everything came. Striking parallels exist between this ancient Platonic philosophy, Buddhist thought, and current postmodern spiritual seekers.

John wrote for people of the Hellenistic world using terminology with which they were familiar. As he began with the Word, they would have said, “Oh, yes, the Word was in the beginning with God” and “Oh, yes, the Word was God.” But then he began saying some things that were a bit strange: the Word was responsible for creation, and creation is good rather than bad. Then John explained the biblical view of creation.

Paul had done the same thing when he began to go into the Greek world. The Roman army had conquered the political world, but Greek philosophy and the Greek value system had conquered Roman culture. That often happens in great empires. The United States has been the preeminent world power for fifty years, and a great world power now for almost one hundred years. Yet, the United States is being conquered by a variety of value systems and philosophies. It is intriguing to watch as what has happened in countless empires in the past is happening in the United States today.

When John went to bring the good news of Jesus Christ to a Greek world, he had to turn their value system upside down. The new value system expressed in John’s Gospel began with creation: the kind of universe that exists and where it comes from. John moved from the Greek worldview beginning with their idea of the Word. He said that the Word is not just a nebulous spiritual ideal, but a conscious being who spoke and caused everything to come into existence. A bold similarity exists between the beginning of the book of John and the beginning of the book of Genesis. John started at the starting place; he started at the beginning. In order to understand relationship with God, we really need to go back to that beginning, where we came from, how all reality in both the spiritual and the physical world came into being. We must deal with the goodness of creation. God made it good.

So if there is any problem with the world, it is not because of how God made it or the purpose for which God made it. The problem rests somewhere else.

WHO ARE WE AND WHAT ARE WE LOOKING FOR?

We live in a needy world. We live in a world in which broken relationships characterize discord that affects individuals, families, communities, countries, and international relations. We read in the newspapers about the way the neediness of people affects us at the local level: problems in schools, a family burned out of their home, a senseless murder. This neediness can be seen in the events in the former Yugoslavia. It can be seen in Somalia where people are starving, not because the country is incapable of producing food but because society has broken down to such a level of hostility one against the other that the crops cannot be planted and harvested because of war.

People experience need at a variety of levels from loneliness, to hopelessness, to low self-esteem. In the third chapter of John, Jesus met an unlikely needy person. This man was not like one of the beggars who came to Jesus, nor like one of the lepers, nor lame, nor blind, nor tax collectors or prostitutes. He was actually the most common of all needy people, somebody like us.

THE PURSUIT OF IMMORTALITY

A respectable man, a leader of the community, a member of the Sanhedrin, a keeper of the law, a good religious person, he was in pursuit of something. We are told that Nicodemus came to Jesus at night. He came to Jesus seeking something, but he did not ask a question. He made a statement, "Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the miraculous signs you are doing if God were not with him" (John 3:2).

Nicodemus called Jesus "Rabbi" and "teacher." By saying those words we know what he had on his mind. Here was a man who sat on the court of the Sanhedrin and was charged with administering the Law of Moses. The Law was the center of all that it meant to be a Jew in those days, and it was the center of whatever hope and expectation they had for immortality. Ultimately, immortality is always the human longing. Eternity is the human quest. We seek after something bigger and farther removed, some purpose, some goal, some completion, because we do not find it here.

Nicodemus had an openness to spiritual issues. Most people are religious.

Most people are spiritual. Atheism is not a major issue in the human race. Poll after poll taken in the United States lets us know that atheism is not a significant factor in the United States. Atheism represents a tiny perspective among the world's population. Most people believe there is something out there, and they want to be in touch with whatever it is. Paul acknowledged this when he went to Athens. He said, "I see that in every way you are very religious" (Acts 17:22). They were very religious people. The King James Version of the Bible says the people were "superstitious." Most people in the world are superstitious in their use of religion. That is, religion is the means to an end. Religion provides a way of getting something. Religion provides a way of making a deal. Religion provides a way of gaining power or immortality or something else.

That is the way that most people go about religion, and that was the criticism that Paul brought against the human race in the first chapter of Romans. He said that the problem with people is not that we are atheists. We have known about God from the beginning. The problem is what we do about God. We are not thankful to God. We do not give the glory to God, but we try to manipulate spiritual life and eternity to our purpose by the way we make religion in our own image. That is the problem (Rom. 1:20-23).

With Nicodemus we find a man who is open to spiritual issues but who is looking for something, because he came to Jesus. "We know you are a teacher," Nicodemus said; but his problem lay in his understanding of spiritual issues. With the court of the Sanhedrin salvation was a legal issue, which involved the keeping of the Law. If you keep the law, if you do it right, you earn the right to eternity. This would be parallel to Islam where the keeping of the law is the means by which people are perfected.

There are variations in different religions of the world about how to achieve perfection. In Buddhism there is "the way," the eight steps of the path; and if a person can complete this way of living, then he or she can enter into a state of *nirvana*. With Hinduism, people have a chance for living the right life. If a person can live right in this time, then in their next incarnation they can try to do it a little bit better. They work to be better and better in each new life; and if they finally get it right, then they enter into the ultimate state. If they get it wrong, however, they get booted back down to a lower form of life. If they get it wrong twice, they might wind up as a cockroach. This discussion is not meant as a joke. This process is very serious. This concept lies at the heart of Hindu understanding of eternity. The laws of *karma* govern one's destiny. So, even someone with all the outward advantages of life represents the needy, as does Nicodemus coming to Jesus. A religious person who has tried to keep the Law and do it right all of his life, Nicodemus sought out another teacher because something was missing.

THE PROBLEM OF HUMAN NATURE

As they begin to talk, something occurred that has always confused me about the third chapter of John. Nicodemus says, “Jesus, we know you are a great teacher come from God because of all your miracles.” And Jesus replies, “You must be born again.” It seems like a cog has slipped. The flow of words does not fit. What Jesus said does not go with what Nicodemus said. I often wondered if this bothered anybody besides me. I wondered if anyone else ever had trouble seeing the relationship between those two sentences, or if it was just me. Then I began to deal with the whole issue of what John is talking about in his Gospel. Jesus stopped Nicodemus dead in his tracks as if to say: “We are not going to talk about the Law, Nicodemus. We are not going to run down that path. We’re going to deal with your real need. You must be born again.”

The first chapter of John presents the contrast between the Hellenistic worldview of eternity and the view the gospel gives. The third chapter presents the contrast between the gospel and the Jewish worldview of eternity. This understanding of Nicodemus butts heads with Jesus. Jesus puts the issue right up front. He’s saying, “This is not what you’ve always understood. You’ve got to rethink the way you look at the world and eternity.” Jesus starts with the idea that people are the problem; creation is not the problem. Nature, or the material world, is not the problem. It is good. We are the problem, and the kingdom of God is not accessible to us. Try as you might, you cannot get there from here. Jesus is telling Nicodemus, “There is no teaching I can give you, Nicodemus, that will get you to heaven. There is no new trick. There is no method. There is no religious practice. There is nothing you can do. You cannot get into heaven unless you are born again.”

This new line of thought threw Nicodemus for a loop. John captured the emotion of Nicodemus as he struggled: “I don’t understand this. I don’t understand what you are talking about, Jesus.” Jesus explains that people are not by nature children of God. John started his Gospel with this idea in the introduction to the first chapter: “Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God” (John 1:12). People are not naturally children of God. We are naturally creatures of the dust. We may become children of God, but the power to have that experience comes as a second act of creation by God. Becoming a child of God does not come through natural descent. Some thought, “Well, if you’re born of the seed of Abraham, you’ve got it made.” To them, Jesus said, “You’re not children of Abraham. You are children of the devil.” We can forget about inheriting a relationship to God from our family just because our family has always been faithful members of a church. It does not work that

way. Nor do people become children of God through human decision, such as the exercise of spiritual disciplines, attitudes of thinking, or religious practices, all of which might just as easily be counted as superstition. Nor does it happen as the result of a man's will; such as what Abraham did when he wanted to ensure he would have a child when God was not on his timetable. Sarah had not conceived, so he went out and had a child by his wife's servant. We cannot rig our relationship with God. So, children of God are born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or of a man's will, but born of God. Jesus held a dogmatic and uncompromising position on this matter.

Then Jesus elaborated that the kingdom of God is for those born of the Spirit of God: "I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit" (John 3:5-6). The whole idea of flesh involves more than just being physical, though being physical is a part of it. In First Corinthians, Paul went back to the same idea. He said, "I declare to you, brothers, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable" (1 Cor. 15:50). The flesh and blood is going to wither away, but what is left when the flesh and blood withers away? This issue lies at the heart of the real problem with human nature. A change of nature must take place for a person to exist in heaven. Jesus said:

I tell you the truth, we speak of what we know, and we testify to what we have seen, but still you people do not accept our testimony. I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe; how then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things? No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven—the Son of Man. (John 3:11-13)

Our little five-year-old daughter asks the big questions: Why can't I see God? That's a big question. The longer people linger around church, the more they train themselves not to ask that question and the more they view it as a child's question. Nonetheless, it remains one of the ultimate questions. That is what Jesus is talking about here. You cannot see God. That is the problem of the human race. We cannot see God. God is here. Why can't we see God?

HOLINESS AND SINFULNESS

Adam and Eve saw God. Why can't we see God anymore? Moses made one request of God. Moses wanted to see the glory of God (Exod. 33:17-23). It was not a big request. Many other people have wanted to see God. We often misrepresent how God answered Moses. The way we often talk about

it, we represent God as saying, "If you look at me I'll kill you." That's not what God said. He said, "You cannot behold me and live." Those are two radically different ideas about why people cannot look at God. "If you look at me I'll kill you," is a threat. This view accuses God of threatening to punish people for looking at him. "You cannot behold me and live," is a warning to protect Moses. God withholds his glory from the human race because to behold the glory of God is to be destroyed.

Why? God is holy; we are sinful. Holiness and sinfulness cannot coexist. In that opening passage of John we read, "The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness overcometh it not" (John 1:5, KJV). Darkness cannot exist where there is light. My daughter Rebecca once asked me, "When Jesus comes back and when we see Jesus, will it hurt our eyes?" That question reflects remarkable insight. I do not think it will for those who are in Jesus. That's what Jesus tried to make Nicodemus understand.

People cannot endure right now the contrast between themselves and the glory of God. Isaiah experienced shock when he had his vision of God. He was in the Temple in the year that King Uzziah died, and he saw the Lord high and lifted up. It was a traumatic moment for Isaiah because Isaiah knew the scripture that if you behold God you die. He viewed it as a threat. He did not behold God; he had a vision of God. There is a big difference. God gave him a vision, and smoke filled the Temple. He was clouded. He was shielded, but nonetheless this was traumatic. He cried, "Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!" (Isa. 6:5 RSV). Here is a man who is scared nearly to death. Then an angel took a burning coal from the altar and pressed it against the lips of Isaiah, and his lips were cleansed. Now, remember, this is a vision. This is not physically happening. God is not torturing Isaiah. God is giving Isaiah an understanding of what God will do about what stands in the way of human experience with God.

At this point Isaiah was dealing with the same kind of issue as Nicodemus. He worried about how to have a relationship with God. Something was wrong, but he did not know what. With Isaiah, it was graphic. When he finally comes into the presence of God, he thinks, "Oh, goodness, now I know what it is. I am a prophet. My responsibility is to talk about God and my mouth is filthy. The holy things that I say are filthy." When you do your very best, it's filthy. That doesn't seem fair, does it? That is what Nicodemus was concerned with: the legal issues of being fair.

Zechariah had a vision of Joshua the high priest standing before the throne of God with Satan accusing him (Zech. 3:1-10). Joshua appears in his priestly garments, the ones described in the law of Moses. These beautiful, holy, pure garments are filthy rags. They are torn and stained, polluted and

vile. The scene is almost comical because Satan stands pointing his finger and saying, "See! See! See! Destroy him quick." But, instead, the Lord has Zechariah covered with a new robe. This episode corresponds to the New Testament terminology, "robe of righteousness" that covers up and puts away that which is vile and offensive and a barrier. God does something about the problem. God changes the reality of the situation. This episode corresponds to what Jesus says to Nicodemus. The situation has to change. Our nature has to be changed. That transformation has to happen, because people are broken, needy, and cannot quite pull it off by themselves.

In the book of Malachi, Malachi describes this confrontation of coming into the presence of God and what it means. Malachi presents a scary image. Malachi says that God is "like a refiner's fire" (Mal. 3:2). Handel picked up on that phrase and incorporated it into *Messiah* as one of those wonderful and haunting parts of the oratorio. But what is a refiner's fire? If God is like a refiner's fire, what does that mean? When a gold miner digs a ton of ore, a certain part of that, but not much of it, would be gold. To get the gold out, all of the rock is broken up into little pieces and put in a pot, a big pot, a cauldron, and the heat is put to it. It gets hotter until, like a volcano, the rock becomes molten liquid. As it flows, the junk separates from the gold. The gold is removed and the junk is poured out. God is like a refiner's fire. All the junk is melted away so just the purity is retained. The problem for people rests in how much purity is present.

Psalms 90:5-6 speaks of people as grass that grows up in the morning, is cut down at midday, and withers in the sun until there is nothing left. The psalms also speak of people as mist that comes up in the morning; but when the sun comes out, the blazing sun, we are gone. Unless something happens to who we are, nothing will remain when we come into the presence of the Lord. We will be like morning mist. Because flesh and blood cannot inherit the Kingdom, you must be born from above. God must transform you.

In the background of all of this discussion lies the judgment, the final appearance before God at death. At the conclusion of the conversation with Nicodemus, John records these words:

"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son. This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that his deeds will be exposed." (John 3:16-20)

The last judgment is not a trial. Americans tend to think of it as a trial. For at least one hundred fifty years we have dealt with it as a trial. In the story “The Devil and Daniel Webster” whether or not one goes to heaven is determined by a court case complete with evidence and arguments. Evidence is weighed; and if you were a little bit worse than you were good, you go to hell. That is a common American understanding of what the judgment is, though it does not represent a biblical understanding of it.

The judgment will not be a court case at the end of time, to hear evidence. In the American legal system justice is portrayed with a blindfold and a scale in which justice sees nothing and has no opinions, but in the Bible God sees everything. Nothing is hidden and there are no questions of whether something is “sort of” good or “sort of” bad. The last judgment is simply a matter of making the judgment.

In the beginning, God made a judgment. God saw the light that it was good. That was the first judgment. The last judgment will be a simple declaration: one is a goat, and another a sheep (Matt. 25:31-33). God knows the difference between a goat and a sheep. Sheep over here. Goats over there. God will declare the judgment, a declaration of the way things are. Jesus talked about this idea in the Sermon on the Mount. He said one’s behavior is set by one’s nature. Whether or not you can keep the Law is based on your nature. He said, “A bad tree cannot bear good fruit” (Matt. 7:18). It cannot do it.

When I was a little boy, my grandmother had a neighbor with an apple tree. My grandmother received a gift of apples from the next-door neighbor one day. She thanked her so very much at the front door. I went with her into the kitchen where she put them all into the trash can. She said, “They’re no good. They’re hard. They’re wormy. They’re pithy. It’s bad fruit.” The tree had not been taken care of; it could not produce good fruit.

HOW GOD CHANGES HUMAN NATURE

Jesus also said that one’s nature is set by one’s relationship to him (Matt. 7:21-23). He said in the judgment there will be people who say, “Oh, Lord, Lord, look at all the good things we did.” And he will say, “I’m sorry. I never knew you. Depart from me.” In him we are able to fulfill the will and purposes of our own creation. “I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing” (John 15:5).

That is the bad news about human nature. The good news is that Jesus Christ came into the world to change our nature and to make us children of God. God makes that change of nature happen when we trust him. The

change of nature is quantitative. Eternity means the change of nature has an enormous dimension. Eternity is a long time. So it has to do with amount, but it also has to do with quality. It is abundant. Jesus said, "I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full" (John 10:10). God wants people to have real life, and to taste the sweetness in life. That kind of life happens because his Holy Spirit comes into us, abides with us, stays with us, and changes us. The apostle Paul explained it this way, "If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!" (2 Cor. 5:17). Two thousand years later, he still offers the same change of nature to people living today that he offered to Nicodemus.

CONCLUSION

In the rationalistic period of modernity, Christians always had the danger of expressing their faith in precise, systematic form that often sounded like legal argument. Even while claiming salvation by grace, Christians could sound like legalists. The spirituality of the New Testament, however, is a relational matter and a highly personal matter. It actually fulfills the longing the postmodern person has for personal relationship as we saw in chapter 1. Rather than the impersonal spirituality of *Star Wars*, which leaves a person alone and without purpose, the gospel offers a spirituality based on personal relationship with God who gives purpose to life. The gospel story has within it the answer to a spiritual longing people are once again expressing.