Q & A

1995

THE GOD WE WORSHIP

I am absolutely captured by this phrase that Bob Freeman has come up with, "From Worship to Witness". I was asking him just how that could be interpreted, and I suggested we could be talking about everything from worship to witness by one interpretation. There is a connection between these two words. Yes, yes, yes. And I am absolutely with him. I believe that all true worship eventuates in true witness.

But not everything that passes for worship eventuates in witness, and not everything that passes for witness results from worship, true worship. There's a great deal of witness that is commercial and paper-thin and misrepresents the God we worship, and there is a great deal of worship that is like Pastor Jack said this morning—after the first six months in a new worship mood or mode, it becomes a ritual again. And there's a great deal of worship that does not end up in witness. Witness the very fact (excuse the play on words here) that the charismatic movement is probably the most awesome demonstration of focus on worship of any movement in American history, and yet there's practically no world witness, no mission activity coming out of that movement until just maybe the last few years, and it is still pathetically weak in terms of the muscle power of that movement. So you see it's also true that not all of the revivals in history have eventuated in mission interest. Some of them have—notably the Welch Revival which carried all the way around the world to what is now Northeast India with a remarkable outpouring of faithfulness on the part of people whose lives had been truly transformed.

This morning Jack rattled off this incredible outpouring of ministry that has come from his own experience. Without a trace of pride that I could detect, he said "Look, this has come out of worship." I absolutely believe that! I absolutely believe that! You could not account for that movement. In Southern California there are a lot of movements like that. There is the so-called Chuck Smith, the Calvary Chapel movement; there's the John Wimber movement; there's the John MacArthur movement, and there is the Jack Hayford movement. These are all movements—they're not just churches, they're movements.

I remember John MacArthur looked out on his congregation one time, after they had their new building that seated 3,000 people, and he said "There are a lot of you people who have been here every Sunday warming these pews, sitting here drinking down all this high-quality Bible study, and so forth." He said, "it's time you get out of here and join some other church that really needs help. Go and join some little church and help them get back to the Bible. We need the space you're sitting on for other people who haven't had your opportunities." I've never heard a pastor say that before—"I want you to leave our membership and join another church," but that's what he said!

It is amazing, it is amazing what the Spirit of God can do that was never planned in seminary and is not reflected in seminary courses or strategies. And, again, as Jack said, "We didn't really plan this out. We evolved into it." And I think that's very characteristic of the way God works.

My thought in introducing this topic is not to inform you or to educate you about science. We're all exposed constantly to articles in the L.A. Times. There was a really interesting article the other day about cosmology—that is to say the study of the cosmos, of outerspace, which is such a turbulent field. Every day there's some explosion that goes off and "Oh, now, how are we going to fit this in?" The new information hardly ever fits in with what they already knew. The other day there was an article, a serious article, saying that scientists are beginning to wonder if in fact 98% of the universe is invisible, is dark matter. They don't even know what it is, and we have no way to find out. Now, if all of a sudden we discover that 98% of the universe was there all the time but we didn't know it, and we really have no way to study it except by very indirect inferences, that's really quite amazing!

It reminds me of the time when the foremost American astronomer, a Harvard astronomer, insisted that he could not believe that what we call the Andromeda nebula—which just looked like an ordinary star out there but it didn't move with the other stars in our galaxy—could be another galaxy the size of our galaxy. And it was not very many months before that that many astonomers were very, very reluctant to believe that our Milky Way was itself an entity, a galaxy. And

so, frankly, in this century most of what we know about outer space has come into view.

How many of you have ever seen this newsletter of the John Templeton Foundation, "Progress in Theology?" Don't feel bad if you haven't seen it. This is Volume 1, Number 1. I'm not sure it's even been mailed. Well, it must have been because this bears the title "March". The man who edits this was here this morning. He's a professor, part-time, at Gordon College and is the executive director of The American Scientific Affiliation, and he works with John Templeton in this Foundation called The Center of Humility Theology. Now that is a very strange combination of words!—"Humility Theology." Theology makes you proud of what you know, doesn't it? How can it be humility theology? He says "The world of the late twentieth century has changed dramatically from the one we knew just a few decades ago, and that change has affected science itself, the historic beliefs of science—he's going to name them off—the tight little mechanisms, the clockwork images, the strict following of cause and effect, the tangibility of matter, the gradual evolutionary climb, even the existence of our own objectivity. These historic beliefs and many more of the most familiar components of our scientific tradition (I can hardly end the sentence!) have all but faded away. Instead we are discovering an exciting world in dynamic flux"—and here's an interesting phrase for you—"an unexpected universe." Our universe is now unexpected! Remember the little dialogue that comes on the screen, "Your computer unexpectedly crashed"? I never know why they had to tell you it was unexpected. You know that perfectly well. Anyway, we are now referring to "an unexpected universe whose mechanisms are ever more baffling and staggering in their beauty and complexity, for predictability itself is now uncertain where matter and energy are interchangeable and where evolutionary change occurs, not gradually by some understandable processs but by leaps and bounds which defy simple explanation.

Physician Lewis Thomas (he's quoting) has said "'The greatest of all the accomplishments of twentieth century science has been the discovery of human ignorance.'" I really want you to believe that that is not just a clever turn of phrase. That happens to be one of the most succinct

summaries of science in the last twenty years. Now I'm not a scientist. I went to engineering school years ago, and I delighted in physics and chemistry, and so forth, and I've been sort of avocationally interested in science across the years. But I didn't have to read this to know that, although I couldn't have possibly put it in such beautiful phraseology. I don't know whether you've noticed, but we are in a series of amazing developments. I've called this "the rising tide of confusion." I think if you want to pick something, or go back to the beginning of this sudden and increasingly rapid rising tide of confusion, you might think of the sputnik, or maybe more reasonably—much more recently—the moon rocks. What a tremendous technological achievement it was! I think we can really be pretty proud of the fact that we actually got to the moon and the men who were there actually got back again. That has got to be one of the most harebrained escapades I have ever imagined! I don't think I would have volunteered for that task. But the most amazing thing is, when we got there and got ahold of a few pieces of matter and brought it back, unexpectedly, we couldn't even figure out what we were looking at. We had never seen anything like this before. The moon rocks to this day are just out of this world! And by "this world" I mean, our little world. And that is an unsettling thing, to put it mildly. But there's a whole series of unsettling things.

Then there is nuclear physics and the subatomic particles, and now I understand they're thinking of canceling this fifty -mile accelerator in Texas, which was a great pork barrel project. They've already spent a couple of billion dollars on it and it'll take another fifteen billion to finish it so they're not going to finish it! But all you need is a 50-mile-around accelerator and we might figure out something more that we can't understand! That's an ambiguous statement. I don't mean to say understand something we didn't understand before—I mean find out something more that we don't understand. As someone put it, the diameter of our knowledge expands, but the circumference of our ignorance expands three times as fast as the diameter—or 3.1415679, or something like that. And that is a humbling series of events.

But not just the great big things; it's also the little things. And I have a fantastic quotation from

a fantastic book. I don't know of any other book that for me, with just a little bit of a scientific background, has been more moving and (you might say) even more permanently helpful and valuable than this book. It's called "The God Who Would Be Known", and the subtitle is "Revelations of the Divine in Contemporary Science". This is a book that was co-authored by this man who came here this morning and who lives in this area, Robert Herman. I mentioned earlier the Professor at Gordon College, John Templeton, and Robert Herman. And one of the fascinating things that they dredge up here is a quotation from Pasquale. I was thinking I would just read it and ask you who you suppose wrote this. It's a long quotation. I can't read all of it, but I'll just read a few sentences: "Let man consider what he is in comparison with all of existence. Let him regard himself as lost in this remote corner of nature, and from the little cell in which he finds himself lodged within this massive universe let him estimate at their true value the earth, kingdoms, cities and himself. What is a man amidst the Infinite?"

But then he goes on. He talks about the other universe infinitesimal. He goes on and on. It's amazing how much he knew about blood and cells and biology, and so forth. He says "This is now a new abyss." I mean out there is an abyss we can't fully understand. If Pasquale couldn't understand it in 1657 and it's even more difficult to understand today, he was really pretty right. But then he goes on to say there's another abyss. "I will point to man not only the visible universe but all that he can conceive of nature's immensity in the womb of the abridged atom. Let him see therein an infinity of universes each of which has its firmament, its planets, its earth, in the same proportion as in the visible world, in each earth. Let him lose himself in wonders as amazing in their littleness as the others in their vastness."

Now this is meaningful to me because I've had some of the same thoughts, without the incredibly articulate statement. But I remember thinking to myself, in fact I actually figured it out once—how much bigger is the biggest object in the universe than man in terms of orders of magnitude? And I figured it was something like thirty-two orders of magnitude larger than the human being. And how much smaller is the smallest thing we know of? Again it was about thirty-

two orders of magnitude. Now, lest you jump to the same conclusion I did for a split second, don't assume therefore that God put man right in the middle of this whole span of reality so that he can enjoy the whole of it, because maybe all we can do is to see about the same distance in one direction into smallness as we can see into largeness. Maybe there's a lot more beyond in both directions.

Anyway, he comes up with this; he states it even better. "He who regards himself in this light will be afraid of himself, observing himself sustained in the body given him by nature between these two abysses of the Infinite and of the nothing. He will tremble at the sight of these marvels, and I think that as his curiosity changes into admiration (worship) he will be more disposed to contemplate them in silence than to examine them in presumption." Science today is shifting (I don't mean everybody; it's only the greatest scientists apparently) but it is shifting from examination with presumption to contemplation with silence.

I hope all of you can at least understand my point of you—that this has everything to do with worship. We're not talking about a different God, and we're not talking about a different arena of awareness from that of which our lay people are aware. Our lay people, especially the scientific members of our congregations and even some of our engineering students, may be much more aware of this whole world, which is rarely mentioned in the pulpit, than are the theologians of our time and the theologically-trained ministers. My fear is that somewhere along the line, which this book amply discusses, there became an artificial opposition between the two facets, the two aspects of the God we worship. And so in my little outline here I have tried to indicate how at this moment of history those of us who worship the God of creation without hesitation are able to recognize that science itself is coming to our aid—it isn't just the moon rocks, nuclear physics, outer space, the big-bang theory, the whole series of unsettling new discocoveries and so forth, even in terms of the rocks or the records of the rocks of our own planet. We used to dig down and say "Oh, this is the Jurassic period," or "Oh, this is the Pleistocene period; we had it all worked out, but somehow this has come apart.

Another thing that's very exciting about living at this moment in history is that there are more scientists alive today than ever lived before. All the scientists who ever lived on this earth and died don't amount to the number that are now alive. For example, all my life I have been studying dinosaurs. It's one of the things that I have been fascinated by. I have been disturbed by something I couldn't fit into my theology, and so I've been reading every book that came out, but I've fallen behind. In just the last ten years more research, more actual digging up of dinosaur bones has gone on than in all previous history. There are now twenty thousand carefully dug up sites, and it is now clear that—what wasn't true before—they are to be found everywhere. They roamed the planet—a very, very amazing set of life. It's like going, let's say, from Peru on the West Coast of South America in a kayak or canoe, or something, over to Australia. Of course I suppose you would do that 500 years ago. What would you find? Every ant, every bird, every moving form of life, every leaf, every plant, every everything would be different. You'd find nothing similar—similar maybe but not anything that could be connected or related to any form of life anywhere else. And this is really unsettling.

But that also is true if you go between what the geologists refer to now as the Extinction Event. It's finally become clear. There are a lot of very adroit phrases to cover things like this in paleontology, and they call it saultism where you have the word sault (like a somersault) meaning to jump, and somehow it dignifies the unintelligible situation by calling it saultism. That is, there is evidence of discontinuity, just plain radical, totally unintelligible discontinuity. And the changes in life forms aren't gradual but sudden, with whole new spheres like the whole dinosaur era. The larger dinosaurs were in the earlier part so they had evolved somehow. They roamed around for a long time, apparently, for all we can tell, there was nothing that preceded them that would have tipped you off, and there is nothing that followed them, except maybe some of these huge crocodiles that are still around—beasts that don't chew, but just tear.

I remember watching on the screen a few days ago this trek of some (I don't know how many) wildebeests across 2,000 miles in Africa, and they came to this stream, all quiet but they suspect-

ed the worst, but they were just terribly thirsty. There werethousands upon thousands crowding down against this river to try to get a little water—the first few hesitantly drinking; everything was quiet—no evidence of any danger—and then "SMASH!". These 10-ton crocodiles blasted out of the water, grabbed ahold of them. They can't chew, they can't bite; they can just drag and grab one by the lower lip and drag them in, and they can only kill an animal by drowning it. And then they tear it to pieces and gulp it.

The National Geographic had an article on this, too. They spent five weeks allowing the crocodiles to get acquainted with them until finally this sort of a thing could be photographed with incredible photographic skill. And here we see it on the screen. It makes the little kids excited. It's a good bedtime story. All of this precedes the sudden appearance of American history's greatest box office triumph, Jurassic Park. How many of you have read about theJurassic Park movie? You know that there is a movie called Jurassic Park—any of you heard about that? Apparently nobody, or maybe it's too late in the afternoon to raise your hand. Some parents don't feel that their kids ought to be exposed to that kind of gory violence. It's an interesting thing that we don't flinch, usually, at animal violence. It's just the way it is. We let the crocodiles tear the wildebeests to pieces; we let the jackals track them down and tear their throats open. That's just the way it is. But when it comes to the dinosaurs, they have 5-foot-long jaws that seem to be designed for nothing but the destruction of other life forms. Now, whose god made them? Was it your God? Was it our God? The scariest thing I have to say to you this week I'll say right now. I can't apologize for this; I just have to tell you honestly that I have come to believe our God was not the designer. And I look at it this way—if we're smart enough as human beings to tinker with the DNA molecule and help people out who have certain genetic deficiencies, and so forth, it's apparently not something that takes divine wisdom. Maybe Satan was smart enough to tinker and tamper and to pervert the intentions of God in some of these strata of life forms. I do not like to try to fit into my theology a God who loves the gory carnage of these massive beasts chewing each other to pieces. I don't think it's good for our children.

I've been translating my way through the book of Romans. I'm up to about the second or third verse of Chapter 12. But when I was in Chapter 8 a few weeks ago I remember reflecting on that phrase "the whole creation groaneth in strength". Our theology normally deals with the fall of man, and then somehow maybe the rest of the world was somehow blighted in the process, but we have a rather provincial view of the clash between Satan and the Living God. I don't mean to cast any discredit on the book of Genesis. I'm only saying that maybe Satan did a few other things besides what's written there. Maybe he—the rulers of this world—you know "we fight not against flesh and blood but against principalities and powers ...."

Maybe what we're talking about when we're talking about missions is a much larger and momentous campaign than merely to straighten out a few human beings. Maybe God is in combat with a force, with a person, with a whole range of perversions larger than we can contemplate in in this wor ld today and in this earth's history alone that is distinctly more than the pietist gospel of personal conversion, which I highly respect. The whole evangelical movement is built on the pietist experience and faithfulness. I have nothing bad to say about the pietists but, even so, it may not be a complete picture of what God is up to.

Now what this does is, it gives us pause. Now I don't apologize for it because this entire newsletter, which I only saw today for the first time, is the publication of this Center for Humility Theology. It seems almost respectable now to be humble in science, and maybe some day in theology. Maybe we'll be able to say "We don't really know," instead of getting nifty answers for everything. This Center's purpose and the Theology of Humility is summed up in a very terse statement at the bottom of the page: "The Theology of Humility recognizes the inadequacy of our senses and our intellect to fully comprehend the Creator who is omniscient, omnipotent, eternal and infinite. Therefore, it encourages thinking which is open-minded and conclusions which are tentative, and encourages diversity as we build on the strengths of the past with new insights from the physical and human sciences." I think that's a very sane and reasonable statement.

I said to one of our staff members a few days ago, I said "I look forward to the day when I'll

go into a church and for the Sunday morning sermon there will actually be a model of a DNA molecule that can be referred to during the sermon." I've seen pastors bring all kinds of things into church to illustrate their sermons. I've never, ever heard a sermon that reflected the kind of reverence for the creation that this little paper and this book does. This book, "The God Who Would Be Known," is a remarkable book. I don't know of any book I've ever seen in my life that deals with reality as does this book; it's not going to go out of date in the sense that what it's describing and the transition in science is a fact. It's one of the most momentous changes in human history from my point of view and from the point of view of these authors. We have been moving forward without any possibility of slowing down in our increasing pride of knowledge and our mastery of matter, science, physics, chemistry, outerspace, medicine. And yet in the last twenty years, it's one of those things like "don't look now but ..." and all these scientists—especially the most eminent of them all—are humble enough to say "we are in over our depth". And this is a very, very different picture than we've ever had before.

I truly believe that maybe, maybe God finds greater responsiveness to his Spirit in certain scientific spheres than He does in the churches themselves. Now I'm not trying to set up two church traditions—one science and one theology—but at the same time I know for a fact that when I went to CalTech years ago I ran into world-famous professors at a school that has more Nobel Prize winners than any other in the world, with burning fire in their eyes. There was a kind of a belief in something that they were truly discovering that was disregarded as irrelevant by worshipful Christians who could sing—I wish Jack Hayford were here so it wouldn't seem as though I was speaking out of class—but I sit there, as you have all done, listening and participating as his marvelous hymn is being sung, his "Majesty". I've often thought, looking around at the people singing that at the top of their voices, "Do we realize how little of His majesty we really know?" Is it really necessary or is it possible for us to understand more of His majesty by simply unbending a little and being willing to read the newspaper when the scientists are coming out with these astounding discoveries, everything like this statement the other day that maybe there is 97% of the universe we've never known about before. Can't we worship more readily when

we finally recognize that even the secular, pompous, academic traditions are being humbled by the complexity of God's creation?

Now, like Jack Hayford who promised you that he wouldn't necessarily deal with the subjects he had announced in the order in which he had announced them, I'm not going to go that far; I'll try to stay within each subject at least, but my outline may fall to pieces.

The fact is that there are enduring mysteries. We do not know—and by now we cannot imagine—and no respectable scientist will propose that we will ever know anything about the origin of the universe. The Big Bang Theory did it. When all of the astronomers and cosmologists came to the place where they realized that there was no more accurate way to describe what they saw than that it all came from a tiny little thing, tinier than the head of a pin, and exploded into reality instantaneously, that's what they were forced, by their mathematics and their rationale, to conclude. Robert Jastro, Director of the Goddard Space Laboratory, said that when they cllimbed to the top of the mountain they realized there were theologians who had been sitting there all the time." The theologians had been saying all along that the universe came out of nothing, but it wasn't until their mathematical equations forced them to acknowledge that that must have been true, and yet there were totally irrational implications of that.

I said to myself, and lots of intelligent people have said "Well, I can't quite believe that Jesus was raised from the dead." Well, O.K., that's a little bit difficult to believe, but I do not know of anything that anyone has ever suggested in all of human history that is more difficult to believe than that this incredibly large universe exploded out of a tiny particle so small you couldn't see it, and it happened instantaneously. That's what they logically concluded. But can they believe it? If they can, they can believe anything. Anything! That is the most difficult to believe proposal that I have ever heard of. That's an enduring mystery.

As I've already said, we don't even understand the difference between matter and radiation. There is no technical distinction any longer. You put one hand against the other, what's bumping? Fields of radiation are bumping. There's no real matter there. Take a respectable atom like

sulphur. When my father went to school it was a marble; when I went to school it was a galaxy, like a solar system with electrons running around the outside. My kids went to school and they got inside the nucleus and lost their way like Alice in Wonderland; there are 32 subatomic particles in beautiful symmetry, but they don't know what they are. There's no matter there. This is what scientists are up against.

But you know, even Michael Faraday a hundred or 150 years ago, a devout scientist, who was one of the greatest Englishmen of science, worked with magnetism, static magnetism and also electromagnetism. He found there was a great similarity between what a lodestone could pick up in terms of metal fragments, and what a little circular coil of wire would pick up. And yet when the current was shut off those metal particles would drop. The magnetism would disappear. Now you go to a wrecking yard and they have huge magnets that pick up junk. They can't get at it mechanically so they just use a magnet to pick it up. And then they bring it to its destination, they turn the current off and it drops down. Oh, we know all about magnetism; we just don't know what it is. Magnetism apparentlyy does not even involve radiation. There's nothing going between this object and that object, and yet they're poled with tremendous force. What is that? We know how it works but we don't know why it works—an enduring mystery of the most simple variety.

Respectable scientists are actually coming up with theories for the origin of life on this planet which involve space people landing from outerspace and thus providing the explanation for these suddenly-appearing ancient civilizations. The fact that there are respectable secular scientists making proposals like that—that some of the civilizations in this planet came from outerspace civilization—simply proves how mysterious is the evidence we have. That's a pretty much what a mathematician would call a skyhook. It certainly removes the problem!

But it is true that many of the most ancient civilizations don't seem to have any precedent. For example, Abraham walked away from Samaria—a very, very advanced civilization. His children went to school and studied how to extract the cube root manually with their clay tablets. We

don't even bother anymore with the square root manually in oour society. That civilization was going downhill for 800 years, but we don't know when it went uphill.. We don't know how it got started; it just appeared. And this seems to be true in many other situations.

I'm going to stop for some questions, so you think about it a little further. We talked about the DNA molecule, and so forth. Every breakthrough of understanding leads us into huge new caverns of ignorance. (That's my phrase; it was before I read this one from Pasquale.)

The potential for worship is the thing, of course, that draws me to this subject. I do not think we can go on much longer in the world in which we live with this astounding transformation of the scientific community—and not just of the human beings in that community but of the evidence at which they are looking. We can't go on much longer worshiping a 13th-Century deity. When you look at our hymnbooks you'll find birds and bees and flowers and sunsets. You will not find DNA molecules or radioactive phenomena. They're just as amazing as birds. Why is a bird so much more worshipful a phenomenon in terms of God's creative power than the nerve system of that bird—or the DNA molecule which is found in every single cell of that bird's body? Every single cell of that bird's body, millions upon millions of cells, has within it a DNA molecule (this binary helix which I look forward to seeing on the platform of a church someday), and that one molecule alone has more atoms than all the stars in the Milky Way which has over two billion. Now this is what Pasquale was saying. Honestly, I really hope that you can believe that this is the same God that we find in the hymnbook and that someday somebody will write a hymn that talks about what everybody is reading in the newspaper but never gets in the hymnbooks or never gets into the sermons. The God we worship does not include the God of science, the grandeur, the incredible realities of science. One reason I bring this up is because it relates to the other subjects.

Christy, of course, only had one shot. He went the whole way this morning, and revealed his ultimate motivation in terms of evangelizing the world. I might as well confess that, too. You can not go to China today and talk sensibly about Christianity if you don't know any science, nor can

you go to Singapore, or anyplace else in the world. Don't look now, but the God we worship is more fully understood in scientific terms than in theological or Biblical terms. Talk about a point of contact. The four modernizations of China that Deng Xiaoping brought in and pushed forward some years ago were the four major emphases of the missionary movement. People who went to Gordon College and studied science went to China and wrote books in the Chinese language that were more up-to-date than our own elementary school texts because it takes a few years for the laboratory to get into the local school. Now this was part of the impact of Christianity. And I've got to mention, since I mentioned Gordon, what I would call the Judson fallacy; fortunately, Judson wasn't the only one but he was one of the few who had this fallacy. In all the many marvelous things he did, he paused, dealing with these tribal people out in the mountains of Burma, at the point where they misunderstood the moon cycles. They had their own folklore explanation of it. He said "I don't want to tell them what's really happening because I don't want to take advantage of their ignorance. I don't want to win them to Christ on the basis of my scientific knowledge." I would have to call this "The Judson Fallacy". "The heavens declare the glory of God." We were singing, weren't we, this morning "declaring His glory in all the earth"? We have to talk about what's happening with the moon.

I lived with these mountain Indians for ten years, and I would take them into a dark room and take a fly spray and spray water out into the air and then shine a flashlight and by that means show them how a rainbow is produced. I would show them an orange with a flashlight and move the flashlight, and then they would only see part of the orange to illustrate how they would see part of the moon. These people were pathetially grateful. They were scared of the rainbow. Whenever you see a rainbow, I told them, you know the sun is exactly behind you, just as the flashlight is the source of that light that is refracted in each globule. I merely told them what it is that God had created. I was sharing His glory with them. The Biblical, the Hebrew word for glory includes wavelengths and refractions of light and different colors, and we owe to these people this information. Our missionary movement will fall flat on its face if it cannot imbibe and be a carrier vehicle for the latest, the very best, and the most humble scientific knowledge.