

“Three Questions From a Wandering Soul”
Bill Jackson’s Noe Valley Ministry Summer Share
July 9, 2006

QUESTION NUMBER ONE: Is God playing Yo Yo with us?

When I was a kid, I loved astronomy. I built my own telescope, connected my camera up to it; I even built a clock drive and connected it to my telescope mount, so my camera would be able to follow the stars as the earth rotated around its axis.

But the thing I loved to do most was to lie in our yard and look up at a dark, summer night sky. I’d fixate on a faraway star and let my imagination run wild. What if there were intelligent beings on one of its planets? (What does “intelligent” mean in this context anyway?) What were they feeling or thinking? And then my mind would zoom way out and take in thousands of galaxies. Listening to a kind of cosmic soundtrack, I would close my eyes and re-enact the Big Bang – that supposed time some 13 billion years back when all matter exploded from one primordial ball of fire.

This is, of course, a scene so vast and awe-inspiring for a boy’s imagination that thoughts of God—as in the architect of it all—naturally follow close behind. Where did that Big Bang ball of fire come from, anyway? And what, possibly, could be the reason for existence of one tiny little human being hatched in one teeny corner of this vast universe?

Thirty years later, I still pay attention to astronomy. When my July copy of *Scientific American* arrived a few weeks ago, the first article I turned to was on the contributions of the Hubble Space Telescope over the past 16 years. The author describes ten most significant contributions, ending with this one:

In 1998 two independent teams of astronomers dropped a bombshell: the expansion of the universe is accelerating. Astronomers had generally assumed it must be decelerating, because galaxies attract one another gravitationally and should retard their mutual separation. What propels the acceleration is widely considered to be the biggest mystery in physics today. The working hypothesis is that the universe contains some hitherto unseen constituent known as dark energy. A combination of Hubble, ground-based and microwave-background observations suggests that this dark energy makes up about three quarters of the total energy density of the universe.

The acceleration began about five billion years ago, before which time the expansion had been decelerating. In 2004 Hubble discovered 16 distant supernovae that span this crucial transition. These observations placed more meaningful constraints on theories for what the dark energy could be. The simplest (though, in some ways, most mysterious) possibility is that it is a form of energy embodied in space itself, even when otherwise empty.¹

¹ “Hubble’s Top 10,” by Mario Livio, published in *Scientific American*, July 2006 issue, page 49

Wow. The missing $\frac{3}{4}$ of the energy in the universe “is a form of energy embodied in space itself, even when otherwise empty.” And, the theory is, this is the energy that will slow our Universe’s expansion and keep all those galaxies from blowing apart into infinity: we’ll fold back in on ourselves.

Maybe God is like this, too: a kind of energy embodied in space itself—our space, the world we inhabit with our narrow-bandwidth eyes, ears and sense of touch. Like this dark energy, God is invisible. And, like the dark energy is doing for the galaxies, God accelerates us into the unknown, while also holding us close so that *we* don’t blow apart into infinity.

QUESTION NUMBER TWO: What do Warren Buffett and God say to each other?

Many of you probably heard the news a few weeks ago: Warren Buffett, the world’s second richest man, has decided to give 85% of his wealth away to charity, the vast bulk – \$31 billion – to the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

Let’s listen in on a conversation between Warren and Carol Loomis, editor-at-large at *Fortune* magazine.

So your wife said she always wanted to give away more money, faster, than you did?

Yes, she said that many times. As for me, I always had the idea that philanthropy was important today, but would be equally important in one year, ten years, 20 years, and the future generally.

And someone who was compounding money at a high rate, I thought, was the better party to be taking care of the philanthropy that was to be done 20 years out, while the people compounding at a lower rate should logically take care of the current philanthropy.

But that theory also happened to fit what you wanted to do, right?

(He laughs, hard.) And how! No question about that. I was having fun - and still am having fun - doing what I do. And for a while I also thought in terms of control of Berkshire.

I had bought effective control of Berkshire in the early 1970s, using \$15 million I got when I disbanded Buffett Partnership. And I had very little money - considerably less than \$1 million - outside of Berkshire. My salary was \$50,000 a year.

So if I had engaged in significant philanthropy back then, I would have had to give away shares of Berkshire. I hadn't bought those to immediately give them away.

Even so, you and Susie set up the Buffett Foundation way back in the 1960s, which means you obviously expected to be giving away money sometime. What was your thinking back then?

Well, when we got married in 1952, I told Susie I was going to be rich. That wasn't going to be because of any special virtues of mine or even because of hard work, but simply because I was born with the right skills in the right place at the right time.

I was wired at birth to allocate capital and was lucky enough to have people around me early on - my parents and teachers and Susie - who helped me to make the most of that.

In any case, Susie didn't get very excited when I told her we were going to get rich. She either didn't care or didn't believe me - probably both, in fact. But to the extent we did amass wealth, we were totally in sync about what to do with it - and that was to give it back to society.

In that, we agreed with Andrew Carnegie, who said that huge fortunes that flow in large part from society should in large part be returned to society. In my case, the ability to allocate capital would have had little utility unless I lived in a rich, populous country in which enormous quantities of marketable securities were traded and were sometimes ridiculously mispriced. And fortunately for me, that describes the U.S. in the second half of the last century.²

So...I wonder...what kind of conversation was Warren Buffett having with God thirty years ago?

Did Warren read Matthew chapter 19, where Jesus is speaking to a man who has asked him: "what good must I do to gain eternal life?" Keep the commandments, Jesus answers. I have done this, the man says; what else must I do?

Jesus replies: "If you wish to be perfect, go, sell you possessions, and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come and follow me."

Well, if Warren meditated on this idea thirty years ago, he clearly rejected this idea—and look what happened! As he said:

Someone who was compounding money at a high rate, Mr. Buffett thought, was the better party to be taking care of the philanthropy that was to be done 20 years out, while the people compounding at a lower rate should logically take care of the current philanthropy.

² <http://money.cnn.com/2006/06/25/magazines/fortune/charity2.fortune/index.htm>

So how much capital does God want the virtuous Capitalists of the world to accumulate before they give it away? And I'm talking about the *virtuous* capitalists—the ones like Andrew Carnegie and Warren Buffett who believe that “huge fortunes that flow in large part from society should in large part be returned to society.” Four million? 400 million? Or \$40 billion, like Warren Buffett?

And what of the carnage caused along the way? Warren Buffett lives in somewhat “cleaner” times, but Andrew Carnegie was a ruthless businessman, leveraging the power of his near-monopoly to quash competitors and suppress his workers who tried to organize into unions. But then, in the end, he gave away all that money, and laid the seeds for public libraries around the nation and major philanthropies that have endured for a century.

I think the story of Warren Buffett is interesting because it illustrates on a grand scale some core questions that many modern searching Christians grapple with.

Jesus teaches us a radical love of neighbor, in the here and now. As he journeyed dusty roads, he had little use of the institutions of the day. He lived in a time where there was not nearly the density of capital and people that there is today—the conditions that permitted Warren Buffett to amass and to give away so much wealth.

How times have changed! We are born into a far more complex world, with technologies and institutions that give us enormous leverage—and that can also serve to isolate us profoundly.

When is it right to leverage these technologies and institutions to do more good for more people than previously could ever be imagined? (Bill Gates, for example, hopes to use his billions to cure AIDS and 19 other deadly diseases.)

How do we value the human dislocation caused by technologies and institutions relative to the leverage they offer—the opportunity for doing good over the long term?

And when do we need to reject modern technology and complexity for the sake of our soul—so that we can shut out the “noise” that we need to be free from in order to be closer to God?

QUESTION NUMBER THREE. What could this church congregation be in five years?

As I begin to explore this third and final question, some of you may expect me to discuss the *Center for Community*. I'm not going to do that today as we're coming up on an important meeting of the *Center* board this next week that may clarify some important issues about where we stand and where we are going with this project. Stay tuned.

Instead, I want to talk about the Church itself and share some thoughts I have about where we could take ourselves in the coming years.

Our little band here, of course, swims in a larger sea of Christianity and culture in America. And, as we remind ourselves often, we can be pretty different!

The environmental and religious writer Bill McKibben wrote an essay in Harper's magazine last year called *The Christian Paradox* that sheds valuable light on the state of Christianity in America today. He begins:

Only 40 percent of Americans can name more than four of the Ten Commandments, and a scant half can cite any of the four authors of the Gospels. Twelve percent believe Joan of Arc was Noah's wife. This failure to recall the specifics of our Christian heritage may be further evidence of our nation's educational decline, but it probably doesn't matter all that much in spiritual or political terms. Here is a statistic that does matter: Three quarters of Americans believe the Bible teaches that "God helps those who help themselves." That is, three out of four Americans believe that this uber-American idea, a notion at the core of our current individualist politics and culture, which was in fact uttered by Ben Franklin, actually appears in Holy Scripture. The thing is, not only is Franklin's wisdom not biblical; it's counter-biblical. Few ideas could be further from the gospel message, with its radical summons to love of neighbor. On this essential matter, most Americans—most American *Christians*—are simply wrong, as if 75 percent of American scientists believed that Newton proved gravity causes apples to fly up.³

McKibben goes on to chronicle the corollaries of this dominant American perspective on Christianity : booming mega-churches with drive-through latte stands, sermons about how to discipline your children...

...how to reach your professional goals, how to invest your money, how to reduce your debt." On Sundays children played with church-distributed Xboxes, and many congregants had signed up for a twice-weekly aerobics class called Firm Believers. A list of bestsellers compiled monthly by the Christian Booksellers Association illuminates the creed. It includes texts like *Your Best Life Now* by Joel Osteen—pastor of a church so mega it recently leased a 16,000-seat sports arena in Houston for its services—which even the normally tolerant *Publishers Weekly* dismissed as "a treatise on how to get God to serve the demands of self-centered individuals."

...

Not that any of this is so bad in itself. We *do* have stressful lives, humor *does* help, and you *should* pay attention to your own needs. I have no doubt that such texts have turned people into better parents, better spouses, better bosses. It's just that these authors, in presenting their perfectly sensible advice, somehow manage to ignore Jesus' radical and demanding focus on others. It may, in fact, be true that "god helps those who help themselves," both financially and

³ "The Christian Paradox: How a faithful nation gets Jesus wrong," by Bill McKibben, as published in *Harper's Magazine*, August 2005, page 31

emotionally. (Certainly fortune does.) But if so it's still a subsidiary, secondary truth, more Franklinity than Christianity. You could eliminate the scriptural references in most of these bestsellers and they would still make or not make the same amount of sense.

I think that's what many of our neighbors and friends in Noe Valley and our City do: they behold the sight of Christian evangelicals like Pat Robertson and they're moved to eliminate the scriptural references in their lives. They note, as do many of us, that in some of the countries of the world where people actually do ensure that everyone has health care and where they have cut back on carbon emissions—places like Norway and Sweden—these are places where religion is relatively unimportant. So many of our neighbors give up on “church.” Often, they choose to be “spiritual, but not religious.”

McKibben one more time:

The tendencies I've been describing—toward an apocalyptic End Times faith, toward a comfort-the-comfortable, personal-empowerment faith—veil the actual, and remarkable, message of the Gospels. When one of the Pharisees asked Jesus what the core of the law was, Jesus replied:

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it, You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.

Love your neighbor as yourself: although its rhetorical power has been dimmed by repetition, that is a radical notion, perhaps the most radical notion possible. Especially since Jesus, in all his teachings, made it very clear who the neighbor you were supposed to love was: the poor person, the sick person, the naked person, the hungry person. The last shall be made first; turn the other cheek; a rich person aiming for heaven is like a camel trying to walk through the eye of a needle. On and on and on—a call for nothing less than a radical, voluntary, and effective reordering of power relationships, based on the principle of love.

I think that sums it up pretty well: “A call for nothing less than a radical, voluntary, and effective reordering of power relationships, based on the principle of love.”

An act, which is not particularly scalable. Unless you're a Marxist, you're probably not going to believe that you can tackle this project at the level of the nation, the state, or even the City of San Francisco.

But our small band of 50 or 75: we could make this more clearly our *collective* project. I know we already have the Mercy and Justice Committee, and we do Habitat for Humanity, and we serve in a homeless shelter. We do a lot.

But we could more explicitly make it our mission to tackle one issue *collectively*. Let's say we wanted to work on homelessness in Noe Valley and beyond. Really tackle it. Could we open up part of our building now, soon, to help our homeless brethren with a

safe place to rest? Could we buy the building next door and turn it into a shelter—one fueled by the love and care of Noe neighbors as well as served by competent professionals? (Glenda Hope thinks that’s a great idea—and that we should focus on homeless *seniors*.) What might we do with our property on 24th street? What community organizations might we partner with?

McKibben writes that “The Gospel is too radical for any culture larger than the Amish to ever come close to realizing.” So, I say, let’s stay involved with our country and our city, fighting for civil rights and social justice in the halls of power. But, at the same time, let’s take a few more risks to live into Jesus’ call right here and now—together—in this faith community.

Let’s retreat, for the part of our lives that we dedicate to Noe Valley Ministry, from the compromises and conflicts that we all encounter as we deal with modern technology and large institutions, and let’s reorder a few power relationships, based on love, right here and now.

Like the dark energy that is accelerating the expansion of the universe, God is here amongst us to accelerate us toward our own frontiers of relationships based on love. The universe is waiting and watching.