

ISRAEL Teaching Letter

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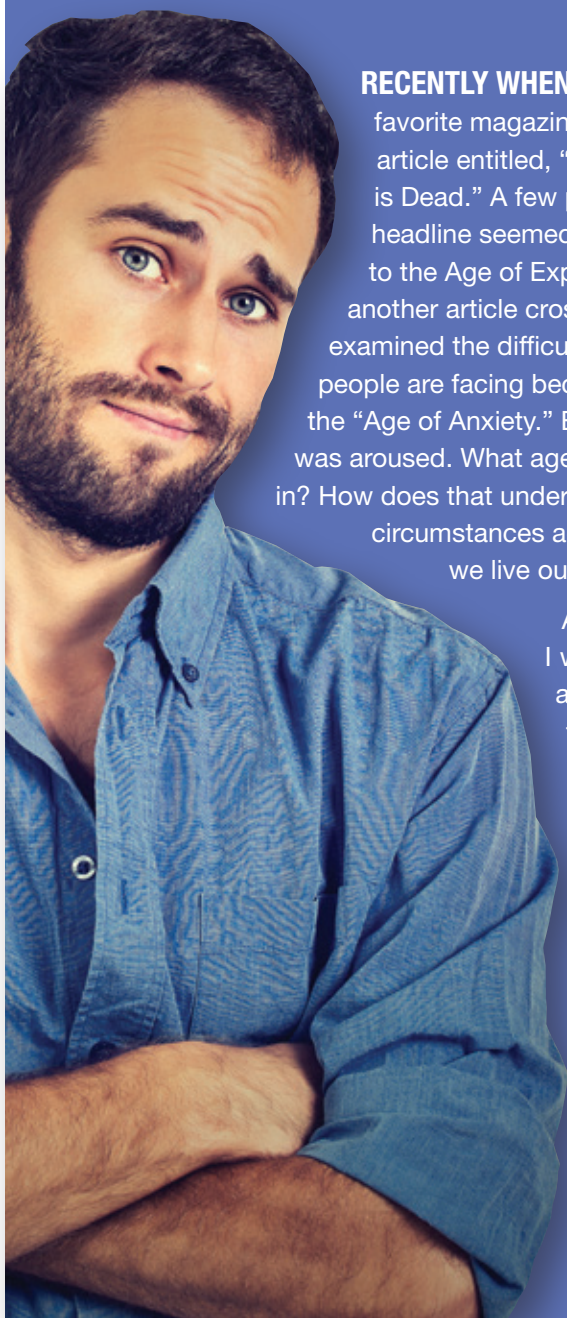
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By Rev. Cheryl L. Hauer, *International Development Director*

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RECENTLY WHEN PAGING THROUGH A

favorite magazine, I was intrigued by an article entitled, “The Information Age is Dead.” A few pages later, another headline seemed to shout, “Welcome to the Age of Experience.” Days later, another article crossed my desk which examined the difficulties today’s young people are facing because we are living in the “Age of Anxiety.” By then, my curiosity was aroused. What age are we actually living in? How does that understanding of our current circumstances actually affect the way we live our lives?

After a lot of research, I was able to find an answer that seemed to enjoy pretty broad consensus. From the psychiatrist to the pastor, the business executive to the college professor, the baby boomer to the millennial, everyone seemed to agree. All those other “ages” are things of the past. Today, we live in the “Age of Cynicism.”

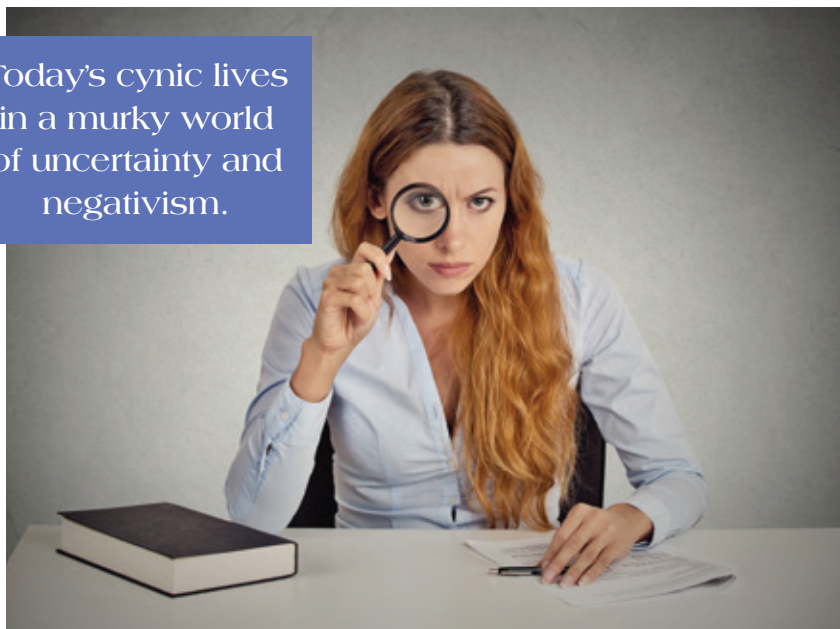
Just What Does that Mean?

It seems the definition of cynicism has undergone a bit of a metamorphosis over the years. To the ancient Greek, the cynic was one whose aim was to live a life of virtue in sync with nature, decrying all worldly desires and possessions. Today, however, the dictionary defines the cynic as a faultfinding critic who believes that people do things only for their own self-interests, leaning toward corruption and the total disintegration of values.

Today's cynic lives in a murky world of uncertainty and negativism. Fueled by a deep mistrust of everything from the government to his next-door neighbor, he easily falls prey to conspiracy theories and the latest fake news to hit social media. Even much that passes for entertainment ridicules his innocence and encourages his skeptical, untrusting worldview.

Of course, a skeptical take on the world around us is not new. As a matter of fact, psychologists tell us that the human brain is wired to have a certain healthy amount of distrust as a form of protection. As Christians, we recognize discernment—the ability to recognize right from wrong and fact from fiction—as a necessary foundation that keeps us from being victimized by false doctrines and deception. But experts fear that modern society's skepticism has ceased to be healthy. Cynicism is rife with mistrust of government, politicians and journalists at an all-time high. Unfortunately, that wariness also applies to organizations that past generations recognized as institutions dedicated to the good of society including the Church. Thirty years ago, nearly 50% of American citizens trusted that the government was concerned with the best interests of the people.

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Today, that number has fallen to a meager 16%. In 1959, 56% of the British public believed that the people around you, including your neighbors, were basically trustworthy. Today, less than 20% of Brits feel that way.

What about the Younger Generation?

Recent studies done by the University of Georgia and Harvard University have revealed that millennials comprise the most cynical generation in history. According to the results of both studies, the past decade has “seen an unraveling of many baseline assumptions: a college degree means a good job after graduation; the government respects citizens’ privacy; climate change is still a long way off; the adults running things know what they are doing.” The foundations on which past generations built their lives seem to have crumbled under the feet of today’s young people, creating a generation that has in large measure lost the ability to trust.

It is not just an American issue. Similar studies done in Europe and Australia reveal similar results. Today’s young people were raised with access to more information and more opportunity than any generation in history but with it came a disintegration of faith in the world around them. With all of that information at their fingertips, anyone with an opinion has become an expert and everyone with a smartphone a reporter. A certain laziness and naiveté means facts are not checked and social media spreads real news and fake news equally. This unfortunately creates an environment in which everybody believes everything and consequently nobody really believes anything.

In general, millennials are the least likely to trust organized institutions including the Church; the most likely to distrust their fellow man; and the least likely to accept what their parents say as true. Raised to believe that they are the “special” ones, the studies say they are unlikely to give others the benefit of the doubt while believing that somehow they will be able to make their own individual dreams come true.

What about the Church?

At the risk of sounding cynical, it seems that this problem is as prevalent in the Church as it is in secular society. Cynicism is often born of disappointment, the product of pain and a feeling of helplessness. Unfortunately, as the past few decades have seen well-known Christian leaders fall prey to sin and abuses in the Church become fodder for public ridicule, disillusionment among those in the pew has grown exponentially. With that disillusionment has come a certain apathy and indifference. The same “bad news sells, good news doesn’t” attitude that is prevalent in the world has infiltrated the church, creating a culture of discontent.

In his book, *Faith Without Illusions: Following Jesus as a Cynic-Saint*, Andrew Byers defines a Christian cynic as one who through painful disillusionment comes to embrace reality with an embittered spirit. It is a sickness.

Cynicism is becoming vogue in many Christian circles as a self-identifying trademark of a new spirituality—edgy spirituality of the jaded.



Byers says cynicism is the “new spirituality.” So many believers have now slid into those dark pits that cynicism is becoming vogue in many Christian circles as a self-identifying trademark of a new spirituality—edgy spirituality of the jaded. Since cynicism is emerging as a hip new way to be “spiritual,” religious disenchantment is often hailed as a spiritual virtue. How do you know if you’re a Christian cynic? Byers provides a brief description:

They would never be caught in public wearing the ridiculous T-shirt they got at the legalistic dating conference from earlier days in the youth group. Christian cynics would be humiliated if anyone found the old ‘What Would Jesus Do?’ bracelet buried in their desk drawer. They would listen to the Christian pop music radio station only for laughs. They would try to avoid displaying too much emotion during a worship service or answering correctly too many questions at the Bible study, lest they suffer from the dreaded accusation of being ‘hyper spiritual.’ On a graver note, Christian cynics sometimes delight in watching fellow believers tread on life’s land mines, and their flaunted skepticism can even become the means by which the faithful forsake their faith.

We often refer to the Bible as the guidebook for life. Not only does it call us back to a life of faith and obedience, but it tells how to achieve those goals.



Take heart! As in other circumstance we might face in life, the Bible holds the answers to our questions and the solution to our problems. In its pages were a fair share of cynics. Those Israelites who rebelled against Moses' leadership and found fault with every decision he made are an example. Their cynicism was toxic, as it is today, and God's displeasure was more than obvious. Among the prophets, Jonah stands out as a disillusioned and distrustful fellow whose cynicism caused him to hope that the Ninevites would refuse repentance and suffer the eternal consequences.

Of course, the rest of God's prophets were also those who recognized sin in the camp, pointed out the errors of leadership and were seemingly discontented with the status quo. But they could hardly be called cynics. In fact, they repeatedly cried out against the very hallmarks of cynicism, begging God's people to recognize their own indifference, apathy and discontentment. Their message of doom to wicked leadership always carried an alternative outcome. In other words, theirs was always at bedrock a message of hope.

"Turn back to the faith of your fathers," they implored God's people. Return to the trust and obedience that led Abraham to travel to a land that he did not know, leaving all that was familiar behind to become the father of the Jewish



nation, and Moses to be transformed from a murderer turned shepherd to the redeemer of the Israelites and the greatest prophet in all of Judaism. That same simple call to faith and obedience is the answer to the problems facing Christians today.

Think on These Things

We often refer to the Bible as the guidebook for life. Not only does it call us back to a life of faith and obedience, but it tells how to achieve those goals. Psalms, Proverbs, the *Torah* (Gen.-Deut.) and the Writings of the Apostles (New Testament) are filled with God's instructions on fighting temptation, fleeing the enemy and living in joyful relationship with Him. Cynicism is a joy-stealer and the path to freedom from it begins with the renewing of our minds. Distrust and discontent must be replaced with faith and gratitude. There is no other pattern more appropriate to follow than that laid out in Philippians 4:8:

Finally, brethren, whatsoever thing are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely; if there be any virtue, if there be any praise, think on these things (KJV).



Absolute
Incontrovertible
Irrefutable
Incontestable
Inarguable
Unchanging

“Think on these things,” we are told, strongly implying that we are not to be enslaved by our own toxic thinking. Paul makes it clear that we are to take control over our thought processes and train our minds to focus on that which is not only pleasing to the Lord but will bring us freedom from the negativity that entraps us. Certainly, a closer examination of the instructions he gave the Philippians is warranted!

Whatsoever Things are...

“Think on these things,” Paul said. The Greek word used here is *logizomai* which means to put together with one’s mind, to count, to occupy oneself with reckonings or calculations. It is a word that was widely used by Greek philosophers to refer to the understanding and application of factual information. But Paul elevated its meaning to include the element of faith in God, orienting our minds not to just any facts, *but facts established by Him*, occupying ourselves with what commentators call “six ethical terms.”

It all starts with truth. At the heart of cynicism is a failure or inability to determine what is actually true and what is not. Truth is challenged at every turn, yet “facts” are accepted without any substantiation. Your truth may not be my truth, and some believe there is no truth. But God says differently. There is truth and we find it in His word.

The Greek word for truth in this passage is *aletheia*. It appears 187 times in the Writings of the Apostles (N.T.) and refers to that which is reliable, constant, sure and unchanging. It is often used to speak of Jesus/Yeshua Himself. According to Dr. J. D. Watson in his book, *A Word for the Day*, the fundamental concept to understand about truth is that it is absolute, incontrovertible, irrefutable, incontestable, inarguable and unchanging. If something is true, it is always true and can never be untrue.

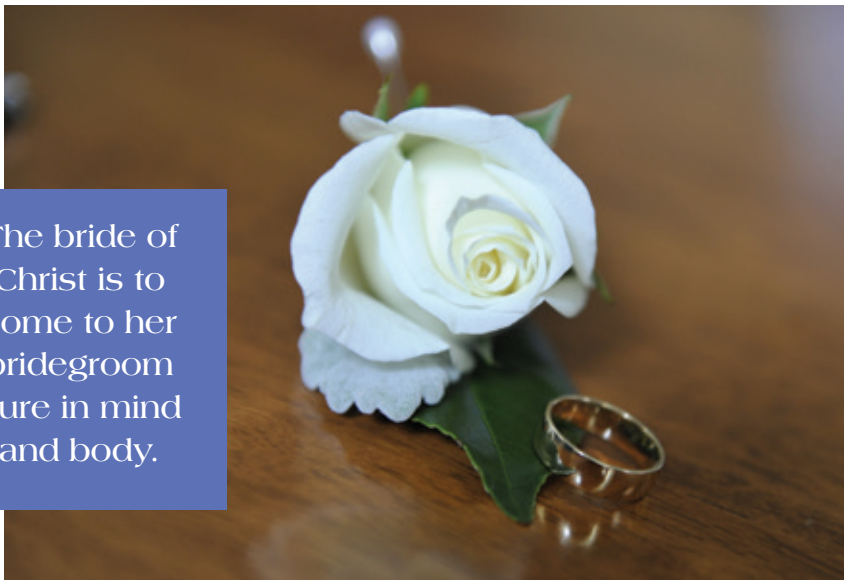
When Scripture tells us that we are to think on that which is holy; that His Word is truth and will set us free; that the joy of the Lord is our strength; that we

are to come to Him as little children; that faith and forgiveness are a reality; and a life of contentment is ours for the taking...it is all true, real truth. As Dr. Watson says, no matter what the question, no matter what the issue, let our motto ever be, "What saith the Scripture?" Because it is the only truth.

The word for honest is *semnotes*. It refers to that which is sublime, majestic, holy, evoking reverence, denoting the majesty of deity...and even at times the grandeur of man. It is used here to denote an ethical outlook resulting in decency and orderliness. The honest man is the one found in Isaiah 66:2 who is of a contrite spirit and trembles at the word of God; or Psalm 119:11, the one who has hidden the word of God in his heart that he might not sin. It is the man to whom the truth of God's word is reality and determines his thoughts, actions and reactions. Like Jeremiah, he has eaten the Words of God and they are the rejoicing of his heart (Jer. 15:16).

Purity is next on our list and the Greek word used here is *hagnos*. It originally referred to that which was ritually clean but eventually evolved to include cleanliness on every level. Christians are to purify themselves, living lives of moral chastity, sexual purity, even purity from false doctrine. The bride of Christ, Paul says, is to come to her bridegroom pure in mind and body.

The Greek word *dikaïos* comes next, as we are instructed to think on that which is just. It means that which is upright and, like its Hebrew counterpart *saddiq*, righteous. The *Tanakh* (Old Testament) tells us that there is no one truly righteous but God Himself and the Writings of the Apostles (N.T.) teach that Jesus/Yeshua is the righteousness of the Christian. Matthew Henry made it practical when he wrote, "Whatsoever things are agreeable to the rules of justice and righteousness in all our dealings with men and without the impurity or mixture of sin."

A close-up photograph of a single white rose with a yellow center, resting on a dark wooden surface. A gold wedding ring is placed next to the rose, partially overlapping its base. The background is softly blurred.

The bride of
Christ is to
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We are to think
and talk about
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However, the word has another connotation. We are not just to meditate on the righteousness of God, but on the righteousness that we can find in others if we look for it. We should occupy our thoughts with planning our own righteous deeds and behave in such a way that we inspire righteous behavior in others.

The same is true of those things that are lovely, or *prosphilos* in Greek. According to *Vine's Expository Dictionary*, it means acceptable, pleasing and amiable. In *A Word for the Day*, it is further explained to mean that which engages affection, or that which calls forth love. Like righteousness, thinking on those things that are lovely should inspire us to actions that pertain to love; eschewing lying, stealing, cursing, gossiping and other ungodly behaviors; eliciting affection from God and others through our deeds of love and kindness.

What about good report? We are to think and talk about things that are actually worthwhile and edifying, careful not to offend, but majoring on those things that are positive and constructive rather than on negativity and faultfinding.

Our instructions end with two “if there be anythings...” They are virtue and praise. Paul obviously wants to make sure that his directives are all inclusive. The word used for virtue is *arête*. In classical Greek, it spoke of excellence of any kind, even mental excellence or physical power. It spoke of the highest good of humanity.

Dr. Watson suggests that Paul uses the word to encourage the Philippians to think even on the good found in human morality. If there is *anything* excellent, moral or valuable, even in human virtue, think on it.

Finally, Paul encourages us to think on that which is praiseworthy. In the Greek, it is a compound word formed by *epis* which means upon and *ainos* which means praise. In other words, it speaks of commendation, approval, applause or public recognition. It is used 17 times in the Writings of the Apostles (N.T.) and most often refers to the praise or commendation that is due God. Paul is telling us

to think on things that are worthy of public commendation, worthy of applause, deserving of approval. Primarily they should be those things that give God the glory and honor that He deserves.

Where Do We Go from Here?

If we look back on our earlier discussion of cynicism, we could create a long list of attributes that are hallmarks of the condition, among them a lack of faith, distrust, apathy, negativity and more. However, a careful comparison reveals that virtually all of them are dealt with in Paul's six "whatsoevers" and two "if there be anys." That doesn't mean that the solution is easy, however.

Referring again to *A Word for the Day*, we are told:

We have to make deliberate choices to think profitable thoughts. Our minds will not automatically drift into these channels. Most of us are mentally lazy. And because of the fall, we have a bias toward the degenerate. The secret of a godly thought-life is an active assertion of the will, in cooperation with the Holy Spirit, to "think on these things."

As we prayerfully admit and repent of our cynicism, the Lord will be quick to respond with forgiveness and the empowerment to change our world view. However, as we do so, the fruit of the spirit will become apparent in our lives: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness and self-control will replace the negativity that entrapped us. The joy of the Lord will in fact become our strength. Truth will be on our lips, contentment in our hearts and love in our every action. All we have to do is a little spiritual and mental exercise...think on these things.

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Scripture is taken from the New King James Version, unless otherwise noted.

TERMINOLOGY:

Many of our readers are seasoned supporters of Israel while others are just beginning to understand the importance of standing with God's chosen nation; some prefer the use of Hebrew names and terms, while others are comfortable with more traditional Christian terminology. Because we want to show respect to all of our readers while providing an enjoyable educational experience, we are making every effort to use both terms whenever possible. The following are some of the most common examples:

- Jesus (*Yeshua*)
- *Tanakh* (Old Testament or O.T.) – *Tanakh* is an acronym used in Judaism which stands for *Torah*, *Nevi'im* or Prophets and *Ketuvim* or Writings.
- Writings of the Apostles (New Testament or N.T.)
- *Torah* (Gen.–Deut.)

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