The All-Powerful God

Dr. Michael Gleghorn examines the important doctrine of the omnipotence of God, and what it means for God to be all-powerful.

Introducing Omnipotence

When the angel Gabriel appeared to Mary and told her that she would give birth to Israel’s promised Messiah, she was stunned. After all, she was a virgin. How could she possibly give birth to a son? But the angel informed her that God’s power was more than sufficient to accomplish such a thing, “for nothing is impossible with God” (Luke 1:37; NIV).

A foundational element of a Christian worldview is a proper view of God. This article is about God’s omnipotence. Although the term may sound a bit intimidating, it simply means that God is all-powerful. A number of scriptural passages speak to this issue.

For example, through the prophet Jeremiah God warned the people of Judah that because of their wickedness their land would soon be conquered by the Babylonians (Jer. 32:26-35). Nevertheless, God also promised that he would one day restore his people to their land and bless them with great prosperity (Jer. 32:37-44). As if to make clear that the Lord was completely able to fulfill his promise, the context twice leads us to reflect upon the fact that nothing is too difficult for God (Jer. 32:17, 27). The text, therefore, seems to clearly indicate that God is all-powerful, or omnipotent.

This power is revealed in a number of different ways. For example, the creation of the universe reveals his “eternal power and divine nature” (Rom. 1:20; Heb. 1:3). The resurrection of Jesus reveals his “mighty strength,” which not only raised Christ from the dead, but which seated him at the right hand of God, “far above all . . . power and dominion” (Eph. 1:18-23). Finally, his might is also revealed in the gospel, which the apostle Paul described as “the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes” (Rom. 1:16).

In fact, He is often referred to as God Almighty. In the book of Revelation the twenty-four elders who are seated before the throne of God fall on their faces and worship the Lord declaring, “We give thanks to you, Lord God Almighty, the One who is and who was, because you have taken your great power and have begun to reign” (Rev. 11:17).

The cumulative picture is indeed a grand one—and quite naturally leads to the believer’s affirmation that God is all-powerful, or omnipotent. But how is this attribute to be understood? What exactly does it mean to say that God is omnipotent? These are some of the questions with which we’ll grapple in the remainder of this article.

Omnipotence and Creation

The Apostle’s Creed begins, “I believe in God the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth.”[1] Not only does this statement affirm a central (and biblical) Christian truth-claim, namely, that God is the creator of the heavens and the earth (Gen. 1:1), it also clearly links this affirmation with God’s
attribute of omnipotence by referring to him as “God the Father almighty.” By linking God’s omnipotence with creation in this way, the creed reaffirms what the Apostle Paul had previously taught in his letter to the Romans, that God’s “eternal power and divine nature” are “clearly seen in what has been made, so that men are without excuse” (Rom. 1:20).

But why does the Bible, and Christian tradition, link God’s omnipotence with creation in this way? One of the most important reasons is to be found in the Christian doctrine of creation itself. You see, unlike certain pagan doctrines of creation, which taught that the universe was formed out of pre-existent matter, Christianity teaches that God created the universe out of nothing. And when we say that God created the universe “out of nothing,” we are claiming, as the theologian Thomas Torrance reminds us, that the universe “is not created out of anything.” Rather, “it came into being through the absolute fiat of God’s Word in such a way that whereas previously there was nothing, the whole universe came into being.”{2}

Now what’s astonishing about this is that it’s perfectly consistent with today’s standard Big Bang model of the origin of the universe! This is because, as physicist P. C. W. Davies observes, “On this view the big bang represents the creation event; the creation not only of all the matter and energy in the universe, but also of spacetime itself.”{3} Hence, the origin posited by this model is “an absolute origin” out of nothing.{4}

This is why omnipotence and creation are so closely linked in the Christian tradition. It’s one thing to merely form a universe out of pre-existent matter. It is another thing entirely to create a universe out of absolutely nothing! As Christian philosophers Paul Copan and Bill Craig observe, “It is difficult to imagine any more stunning display of God’s almighty power than the world’s springing into being out of nothing, at his mere command.”{5}

**Omnipotence and Morality**

Now you might be thinking that if God is all-powerful, then he can do absolutely anything. But if we adopt this understanding of omnipotence, we quickly run into conflict with the teaching of Scripture, for Scripture tells us plainly that there are some things God cannot do.

For example, in Numbers 23:19 we read: “God is not a man, that he should lie, nor a son of man, that he should change his mind. Does he speak and then not act? Does he promise and not fulfill?” According to this text, God is not the sort of being to tell a lie. When he makes a promise, we can be confident that he will keep it, because God does not lie (see also 1 Sam. 15:29 and Tit. 1:2).

This is particularly important for New Testament believers, for God has made many wonderful promises to those who have trusted Christ for salvation. Is there any reason to fear that God may not keep some of these promises? No, there is not, for as the author of Hebrews reminds us, “it is impossible for God to lie” by making a promise and then failing to keep it. And because of this, our hope in Christ is “firm and secure” (Heb. 6:18-19).

But if we say that God cannot lie, or break a promise, or do anything else that is morally evil, then haven’t we denied that God is all-powerful? Not necessarily. The vast majority of Christian theologians throughout the history of the church have consistently taught that God’s omnipotence does not include the ability to do that which is logically impossible or contradictory.

Of course, there is no contradiction in saying that an omnipotent being can commit a morally evil act. But there does seem to be a contradiction in saying that a completely good, morally perfect being can perform such an act. As a morally perfect being, God not only has no moral faults, but as
James reminds us, he cannot even be tempted by sin and evil (James 1:13). Hence, as one Christian philosopher observes, “for an essentially morally perfect being, doing what is wrong is just a special case of doing what is impossible for that being to do.” {6} And clearly, the inability to do what is morally evil should not be seen as detracting from God’s omnipotence. Instead, it should be viewed as exalting his moral perfection.

**Omnipotence and Freedom**

We’ve seen that omnipotence cannot mean that God can do absolutely anything. For as a morally perfect being, God is incapable of doing what is morally evil. This might lead us to think that God can do anything that is consistent with his morally perfect nature. But most theologians would still reject such a view. They would insist that some things are just logically impossible and that it can’t count against God’s omnipotence to admit that he cannot do such things.

Let’s consider an example. A square is a geometrical object with four angles. A triangle has only three. This being so, what do you think the chances are of constructing a square triangle? Not very good, right? After all, if something has four angles, then it has more than three. And if it has only three angles, then it has less than four. Regardless of how much power one has, a square triangle is a logical impossibility.

With this in mind, let’s now consider another example. Suppose that John is the kind of person who, if married, would always freely seek his wife’s input before making any major financial decision. If this is true, then it would seem that not even God could create John, place him in such circumstances, and have him freely refrain from seeking his wife’s input—for this is simply not what John would freely do in such circumstances.

Of course, God still has plenty of options. He could always refuse to create John, or refuse to let him get married, or refuse to let him be confronted with a major financial decision. Alternatively, God could put John in the circumstances we’re considering, but make him decide not to seek his wife’s input. But what he cannot do is place John in these circumstances and then make him freely decide not to seek his wife’s input. For to make John freely do something is as logically impossible as creating a square triangle. {7}

Of course, God’s inability to perform a logically impossible task can’t fairly count against his omnipotence. For this would suggest “that a task has been specified, that transcends the capacities . . . of Omnipotence. But no task at all has been specified by uttering a self-contradictory . . . mixture of words.” {8} So we needn’t worry that we’ve abandoned the doctrine of omnipotence by admitting that God cannot perform meaningless tasks! We’ve simply clarified the meaning of omnipotence.

**The Importance of Omnipotence**

The doctrine that God is omnipotent, or all-powerful, is, as one philosopher has observed, “not a bit of old metaphysical luggage that can be abandoned with relief.” Instead, it’s “indispensable for Christianity.” After all, God has made many wonderful promises to his people. But if he “were not almighty . . . he might . . . sincerely promise, but find fulfillment beyond his power.” {9} So only if God is omnipotent can we confidently bank on his promises. But this is a bit of a two-edged sword.

On the one hand, the doctrine of God’s omnipotence can be very comforting for believers, who are rightly related to God through faith in Jesus Christ. After all, “God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble” (Psalm 46:1). Whatever problems and difficulties we face in life, our
omnipotent God has more than enough power to see us through. If he chooses, he can easily deliver us from fire or water, sword or famine, sickness or disease. And if he lets us go through such things, he can provide all the grace and strength we need to endure. While the suffering of God’s saints can indeed be great, we must also remember that this life is not the end of our story, for “in keeping with his promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, the home of righteousness” (2 Pet. 3:11). A promise our omnipotent God is more than able to fulfill!

On the other hand, however, an omnipotent Deity is a most frightening prospect for anyone who persists in spurning his love and grace. For as the author of Hebrews reminds us, we are each “destined to die once, and after that to face judgment” (9:27) and “it is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God” (10:31)—especially when that God is all-powerful! It’s a sobering thought to remind ourselves that not one of us can ultimately escape God’s power and judgment. If we make the omnipotent God our enemy, then no one can deliver us from his hand.

Thankfully, however, peace with God is available to anyone who wants it. The Bible tells us that God does not want anyone to perish, but for all to come to repentance (2 Pet. 3:9). He pleads with men to be reconciled to God through faith in Jesus Christ (2 Cor. 5:16-21). “Whoever is thirsty,” he says, “let him come . . . let him take the free gift of the water of life” (Rev. 22:17b). The omnipotent God offers us all good things in Christ—and nothing can prevent him making good on his offer!

Notes

5. Ibid., 26.

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The Value of Christian Doctrine and Apologetics

Dr. Michael Gleghorn makes a case for why Christian doctrine and apologetics are important for spiritual growth and maturity.
Just prior to beginning college, I committed my life to Christ. Naturally, as a new believer wanting to grow in my faith, I embarked upon a program of daily Bible reading. When I came to Paul’s letter to Titus in the New Testament, I was both struck and inspired by a particular command, which I found nestled among others, there in the first chapter.

Paul reminded Titus, whom he had left on the island of Crete, that he wanted him to “straighten out what was left unfinished and appoint elders” in the local churches which had been established (Titus 1:5). After listing various spiritual and moral qualifications that an elder was to have, Paul went on to insist that he must also “hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught, so that he can encourage others by sound doctrine and refute those who oppose it” (Titus 1:9). When I first read those words, it was as if a light went on inside my head and I thought, “That’s exactly what I would like to do! I want to be able to ‘encourage others by sound doctrine and refute those who oppose it’” (Titus 1:9). Paul’s words thus encouraged me to take up, in a serious way, the study of Christian doctrine and apologetics.

But what exactly do I mean by “Christian doctrine” and “apologetics”? At its most basic level, Christian doctrine is essentially the same thing as Christian teaching. Such teaching aims at providing a logically consistent and “coherent explication of what the Christian believes.” Apologetics is a bit more complicated. It comes from the Greek term, apologia, and means “defense.” It was often used in law courts in the ancient world. Indeed, the book of Acts records several instances in which the Apostle Paul was called upon to “make a defense” of himself before various governing authorities, like Felix, Festus, and Agrippa (e.g., Acts 24:10; 25:8; 26:1-2).

Of course, when we’re talking about Christian apologetics, we’re concerned with “making a defense” of the truth-claims of Christianity. The Apostle Peter tells us, “Always be prepared to make a defense to any one who calls you to account for the hope that is in you, yet do it with gentleness and reverence” (1 Peter 3:15). Christian doctrine and apologetics play an important role in the life and health of the church. So please keep reading as we delve more deeply into these issues.

**The Value of Christian Doctrine**

Why is Christian doctrine important for the life and health of the church? The Apostle Paul told Titus that he wanted him to appoint elders in the local church who would be able to “encourage others by sound doctrine and refute those who oppose it” (Titus 1:9). The teaching of sound Christian doctrine is important for several reasons, but for now let me simply mention two. First, sound Christian doctrine helps us to learn what is true about both God and ourselves. Second, it reminds us of the right way to live in light of such truths. And both of these are essential for the life and health of the church.

First, it’s important to know what is true about God and ourselves. Indeed, our eternal destiny depends on it! Not only must we know that God is holy and righteous and will punish all sin, we must also realize that we are sinners (Numbers 14:18; Romans 3:23). But this, in itself, would lead to despair. Hence, we must also understand that God loves us and sent his Son to be the Savior of the world (John 3:16; 1 John 4:14). We need to grasp that forgiveness and reconciliation with God are freely available to those who turn to Christ in repentance and faith (Acts 3:19; 16:31). Sound Christian doctrine is thus essential for salvation (John
But this does not exhaust the importance of Christian doctrine. For once we are saved through faith in Christ, God then calls us to grow up and become like his Son—and this would be exceedingly difficult apart from instruction in sound Christian doctrine. As Christian philosopher Bill Craig observes, “If we want to live correctly for Christ . . . we need to first think correctly about Christ. If your thinking is skewed and off-base, it is going to affect your life and your Christian discipleship.” Indeed, the Apostle Paul contrasts Christian maturity, characterized by genuine “knowledge of the Son of God,” with spiritual immaturity, characterized by a lack of such knowledge and a proneness to being deceived (Ephesians 4:13-14).

God calls us to Christian maturity—and instruction in Christian doctrine plays an important role in our spiritual growth. But there is also a role for Christian apologetics—and we must now turn to consider that.

**A Defense of Christian Apologetics**

Many people question the value of Christian apologetics for the life and health of the church. They contend that it’s impossible to “argue” anyone into becoming a Christian. Instead of making a defense for the truth of Christianity, we ought rather to invest our limited resources in preaching the gospel of Christ, trusting that God will open people’s hearts and draw them to himself. Now while I certainly agree that we should be preaching the gospel, and trusting that God will use it to draw men and women to himself, this negative view of apologetics is frankly unbiblical, untrue, and shortsighted.

In the first place, such a view is unbiblical. Both Jesus and the Apostle Paul used arguments and evidence to convince their listeners of particular theological truths (Matthew 22:15-46; Acts 17:16-34). Moreover, the Apostle Peter tells us to always be ready to “make a defense” (or offer an apologetic) to those who ask about our hope in Christ (1 Peter 3:15). A negative view of Christian apologetics thus runs counter to the teaching of Scripture.

Second, it’s simply untrue that no one ever comes to Christ through apologetic arguments and evidence. Indeed, sometimes the Holy Spirit actually uses arguments and evidence to draw people to Christ! And while such people may admittedly be in the minority, they can be extremely influential in commending the faith to others, for they are often prepared to offer good reasons for believing that Christianity is really true!

Finally, a negative view of Christian apologetics is shortsighted. The great theologian J. Gresham Machen argued that we should aim to create “favorable conditions for the reception of the gospel.” Along these lines, he noted the difficulty of attempting to do evangelism once we’ve given up offering an intellectually credible case for the truth of Christianity. “We may preach with all the fervor of a reformer,” he said, “and yet succeed only in winning a straggler here and there, if we permit the whole collective thought of the nation . . . to be controlled by ideas which . . . prevent Christianity from being regarded as anything more than a harmless delusion.” Machen understood that neglecting apologetics is shortsighted. For unless we offer arguments and evidence, we make it that much easier for people to simply shrug their shoulders and continue ignoring Christianity’s truth-claims.
Having now dismantled the arguments against apologetics, we’ll next consider its benefits for the life and health of the church.

**The Value of Christian Apologetics**

Christian apologetics is concerned to offer a robust defense for the truth of Christianity. Hence, training in Christian apologetics can be of great value for the life and health of the church. This is because such training helps to instill within believers a deep confidence that Christianity is really true. And when one becomes convinced that Christianity is really true, one is typically more likely to share one’s faith with others—and less likely to abandon the faith when confronted with various social, cultural, and intellectual pressures.

Let’s consider that first point, that when one becomes convinced of Christianity’s truth, one is more likely to share this truth with others. Many Christians admit to being hesitant about sharing their faith because they’re afraid someone will ask them a question that they are ill-prepared to answer. Training in apologetics can help counteract this fear. Granted, one may still be asked a question that is difficult to answer. But apologetics training can help alleviate the fear associated with such situations by helping believers understand that good answers are available—even if they can’t remember what those answers are! To give an illustration, if I learn that there is excellent evidence that a particular drug can cure some disease, then I will be far more confident about sharing this fact with others—even if I can’t answer all their questions about how the medicine works. I may not remember exactly how it works, but I do know that there is very good evidence that it works. And knowing this, I will naturally be more confident telling others about it, even if I can’t answer all their questions about how or why.

Moreover, training in apologetics can help insulate believers from abandoning the faith, for they now know that there are good reasons to believe that Christianity is really true. Of course, most people who abandon the faith do so for non-intellectual reasons. Still, as Paul Chamberlain observes, “A number of vocal critics who have moved from Christianity to atheism cite intellectual difficulties with Christianity” as a prime reason for quitting the faith. While apologetics training can’t completely prevent such outcomes, it can make them less likely. After all, it’s far more difficult to abandon a view once you’ve become sincerely convinced of its truth.

**Our Witness to the World**

Over a hundred years ago, the theologian J. Gresham Machen forcefully argued that, for the faithful Christian, all of life—including the arts and sciences and every sphere of intellectual endeavor—must be humbly consecrated to the service of God. Indeed, this should be true not only for every individual Christian in particular, but for the entire church in general. Our witness to the world depends on it.

Machen wrote:

> Christianity must pervade not merely all nations, but . . . all of human thought. The Christian, therefore, cannot be indifferent to any branch of earnest human endeavor. It must all be brought into some relation to the gospel. It must be studied either in order to be demonstrated as false, or else in order to be made useful in advancing the Kingdom of God . . . . The Church must seek to conquer not merely every man for Christ, but also the whole of man.
In this article, we’ve been considering the importance of Christian doctrine and apologetics for the life and health of the church. And clearly, Machen’s proposal cannot be effectively implemented apart from a healthy understanding of these issues on the part of the church. After all, how can “all of human thought” be brought “into some relation to the gospel” unless we first understand what the gospel is? How can views “be demonstrated as false” unless we first have some idea of what’s true—and how to reason correctly about it? How can views “be made useful in advancing the Kingdom of God” unless we first understand such views, along with how and why they can be useful in advancing God’s kingdom? If we are ever to have a hope of carrying out a project like this, in a manner that is both practically effective and faithful to our God, then sound Christian doctrine and apologetics must occupy a central role in our endeavors.

Christian doctrine and apologetics are not antithetical to the life and health of the church. They are rather of fundamental importance. Only by knowing what we believe, and why it’s really true, can we fulfill Peter’s injunction to always be ready “to make a defense” to anyone who asks about our hope in Christ (1 Peter 3:15). And only thus can we progress to true spiritual maturity, avoiding the “craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming” (Ephesians 4:13-14). So if we care about the life and health of the church—along with its witness to the world—we must encourage a healthy dose of respect for sound Christian doctrine and apologetics.

Notes

5. See, for example, the “Testimonials” section of the Reasonable Faith website, accessed August 29, 2018, www.reasonablefaith.org/testimonials.
8. Indeed, entire books have been written to help believers feel better prepared for such conversations. See, for example, Mark Mittelberg, The Questions Christians Hope No One Will Ask: (With Answers) (Tyndale, 2010).
11. Ibid., 6.

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Prophecies of the Messiah

Dr. Michael Gleghorn argues that the Bible contains genuine prophecies about a coming Messiah that were accurately fulfilled in the life, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus.

The Place of His Birth

Biblical prophecy is a fascinating subject. It not only includes predictions of events that are still in the future. It also includes predictions of events that were future at the time the prophecy was given, but which have now been fulfilled and are part of the past. This latter category includes all the prophecies about a coming Messiah that Christians believe were accurately fulfilled in the life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus. If the Bible really does contain such prophecies, then we would seem to have evidence that’s at least consistent with the divine inspiration of the Bible. One can see how an all-knowing God could accurately foretell the future, but it’s not clear how a finite human being could do so. Thus, if there are accurately fulfilled prophecies in the Bible, then we have yet another reason to believe that the biblical worldview is true.

Let’s begin with a prophecy about the Messiah’s birthplace. “Messiah” is a Hebrew term that simply means “anointed one.” When translated into Greek, the language of the New Testament, the term becomes “Christ.” Christians believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah promised in the Hebrew Scriptures (see Mark 14:61-62).

In Micah 5:2 we read, “But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times.” This prophecy was given in the eighth century B.C., more than seven hundred years before the birth of Jesus!

Notice, first, that it refers to a future ruler who will come from the town of Bethlehem. When King Herod, shortly after Jesus’ birth, asked the Jewish religious leaders where the Christ (or Messiah) was to be born, they told him that he was to be born in Bethlehem and cited this verse from Micah as support (Matt. 2:1-6). Both Matthew and Luke confirm that Jesus was born in Bethlehem (Matt. 2:1 and Luke 2:4-7). So He clearly meets this necessary qualification for being the promised Messiah.

But that’s not all. Micah also says that the origins of this ruler are “from of old, from ancient times.” How should we understand this? One commentator notes, “The terms ‘old’ . . . and ‘ancient times’ . . . may denote ‘great antiquity’ as well as ‘eternity’ in the strictest sense.”{1} Dr. Allen Ross states, “At the least this means that Messiah was pre-existent; at the most it means He is eternal.”{2} Micah’s prophecy thus suggests that the Messiah will be a supernatural, perhaps even divine, person. And this astonishing conclusion is precisely what Jesus claimed for Himself!{3}

The Time of His Appearing

Let’s now consider a fascinating prophecy that, in the opinion of many scholars, tells us when the
Messiah would make His appearance. It’s found in Daniel 9.

Daniel was one of the Jewish captives who had been brought to Babylon by King Nebuchadnezzar. The prophecy in Daniel 9 was given in the sixth century B.C. While much can be said about this passage, we must focus on a few important points.

To begin, verse 24 gives us the time parameters during which the prophecy will unfold. It reads, “Seventy ‘sevens’ are decreed for your people and your holy city to finish transgression, to put an end to sin,” and so on. Although we can’t go into all the details, the ‘seventy ‘sevens’” concern seventy distinct seven-year periods of time, or a total of 490 years.

Next, verse 25 tells us that from the issuing of a decree to rebuild Jerusalem until the coming of the Messiah, there will be a total of sixty-nine “sevens,” or 483 years. There are two views we must consider. The first holds that this decree was issued by the Persian ruler Artaxerxes to Ezra the priest in 457 B.C. Adding 483 years to this date brings us to A.D. 27, the year many scholars believe Jesus began His public ministry! The second view holds that the reference is to a later decree of Artaxerxes, issued on March 5, 444 B.C. Adding 483 years to this date takes us to A.D. 38. But according to this view, the years in question should be calculated according to a lunar calendar, consisting of twelve thirty-day months.

If each of the 483 years consists of only 360 days, then we arrive at March 30, 33 A.D. Dr. Allen Ross says “that is the Monday of the Passion week, the day of the Triumphant entry of Jesus into Jerusalem.” The views thus differ on the date of Jesus’ death, but each can comfortably fit the evidence.

Finally, verse 26 says that after the period of sixty-nine “sevens” the Messiah will be “cut off” and have nothing. According to one scholar, “The word translated ‘cut off’ is used of executing . . . a criminal.” All of this fits quite well with the crucifixion of Jesus. Indeed, the accuracy of this prophecy, written over five hundred years before Jesus’ birth, bears eloquent testimony to the divine inspiration and truth of the Bible.

The Nature of His Ministry

In Deuteronomy 18:15 Moses told the Israelites, “The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own brothers. You must listen to him.” This verse promised a succession of prophets who would speak God’s words to the people. Ultimately, however, it refers to Jesus Christ. One commentator notes that the Messianic interpretation of this passage is mentioned not only in the New Testament, but also among the Essenes, Jews, Gnostics, and others. Peter explicitly applied this passage to Jesus in one of his sermons (Acts 3:22-23).

But not only was the Messiah to be a great prophet, it was also foretold that he would be a priest and king as well. The prophet Zechariah was told to make a royal crown and symbolically set it on the head of Joshua, the high priest. The Lord then said, “Here is the man whose name is the Branch . . . he will . . . sit and rule on his throne. And . . . be a priest on his throne. And there will be harmony between the two” (Zechariah 6:12-13). The title “Branch” is a messianic title.

So the scene symbolizes the future Messiah, here referred to as “the Branch,” uniting the offices of king and priest in one person.

But why is it important that the Messiah be a priest? As a prophet he speaks God’s word to the people. As a king he rules from his throne. But why must he also be a priest? “Because priests dealt with sin,” says Michael Brown, a Christian scholar who is ethnically Jewish. “Priests bore the iniquities of the people on their shoulders.” And this, of course, is precisely what Jesus did for us: “He . . . bore our sins in his body on the tree” (1 Pet. 2:24).
Dr. Brown points to a tradition in the Talmud that says that on the Day of Atonement there were three signs that the animal sacrifices offered by the high priest had been accepted by God. According to this tradition, in the forty years prior to the temple’s destruction in A.D. 70, all three signs turned up negative every single time. {13} Dr. Brown comments, “Jesus probably was crucified in A.D. 30, and the temple was destroyed in A.D. 70.” {14} So during this forty-year period God signaled that he no longer accepted these sacrifices. Why? Because final atonement had been made by Jesus! {15}

**The Significance of His Death**

Without any doubt, one of the most astonishing prophecies about the promised Messiah is found in Isaiah 52-53. The verses were written about seven hundred years before the birth of Jesus. They largely concern the death of the Lord’s “Suffering Servant.” According to many scholars, a careful comparison of this passage with the Gospels’ portrayal of Jesus’ suffering and death reveals too many similarities to be merely coincidental.

In some of the most-cited verses from this intriguing passage we read: “He was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed. We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all” (Isa. 53:5-6). Here we have a vivid depiction of substitutionary atonement. The Lord lays upon His servant “the iniquity of us all” and punishes him “for our transgressions.” In other words, God’s servant dies as a substitute in our place. This is precisely what Jesus claimed for himself, saying, “the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45).

The parallels between Isaiah’s “Suffering Servant” and Jesus are certainly impressive. But some scholars have suggested that Isaiah’s “servant” is actually the nation of Israel and not the Messiah. Dr. Michael Brown dismisses this notion however, insisting that ‘nowhere in the . . . foundational, authoritative Jewish writings do we find the interpretation that this passage refers to the nation of Israel. References to the servant as a people actually end with Isaiah 48:20.” {16} What’s more, he says, “Many . . . Jewish interpreters . . . had no problem seeing this passage as referring to the Messiah . . . By the sixteenth century, Rabbi Moshe Alshech said, ‘Our rabbis with one voice accept and affirm . . . that the prophet is speaking of the Messiah, and we shall . . . also adhere to the same view.’” {17}

For his part, Dr. Brown is so convinced that this passage prophetically depicts the suffering and death of Jesus that he feels “as if God would have to apologize to the human race and to the Jewish people for putting this passage into the scriptures” if Jesus is not the one in view! {18} Although this is a strong statement, it’s not unjustified. For Isaiah 53 not only foretells the death of God’s servant for the sins of the people, it also implies his resurrection!

**The Mystery of His Resurrection**

In the opinion of many scholars, Isaiah 53 not only foretells the death of God’s servant; it also implies his resurrection from the dead!

It’s important to notice that Isaiah 53 makes it absolutely clear that the Messiah is put to death. It says that “he was cut off from the land of the living” (v. 8), and that ‘he poured out his life unto death” (v. 12). On the other hand, however, it also says that ‘he will see his offspring and prolong his days” (v. 10), and that after his suffering “he will see the light of life and be satisfied” (v. 11). So the
text teaches both that the Messiah will die and that he will live again. And although the passage
doesn’t explicitly teach the Messiah’s resurrection, it’s certainly consistent with it. This is really
staggering in light of the compelling historical evidence for the death and resurrection of Jesus!{19}

Let’s now pause to consider what we’ve learned in this brief article. Micah 5:2 teaches that the
Messiah would come out of Bethlehem, the birthplace of Jesus. Also, by teaching the preexistence, or
even eternality, of the Messiah, the prophecy suggests that he’ll be a supernatural, possibly even
divine, figure. In Daniel 9:24-27 we saw that the Messiah would appear to Israel sometime around
A.D. 27 – 33, precisely the time of Jesus’ public ministry! Deuteronomy and Zechariah teach that the
Messiah would minister as prophet, priest, and king. As a prophet, Jesus spoke God’s word to the
people. As a priest, he offered himself as a perfect sacrifice for our sins. And while he didn’t reign as
king during his first advent, he was called “the king of the Jews” (Matt. 27:11, 37). And Christians
believe that he’s in some sense reigning now from heaven and that he’ll one day reign on earth as
well (Luke 1:32-33). Finally, Isaiah 53 teaches that the Messiah would die for our sins—and then
somehow live again. This is consistent with the New Testament’s record of Jesus’ substitutionary
death and bodily resurrection.

Of course, we’ve not been able to consider all the prophecies. But hopefully enough has been said to
conclude with Dr. Brown that if Jesus isn’t the Messiah, “there will never be a Messiah. It’s too late
for anyone else. It’s him or no one.”{20} Well, you’ve now heard the evidence; the verdict is up to
you.

Notes

1. Thomas E. McComiskey, “Micah,” in The Expositor’s Bible Commentary, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein,
   vol. 7 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1985), 427.
   September 6, 2007.
3. See, for example, Matthew 11:27; John 8:58 and 10:30.
   7 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1985), 114. See also Ezra 7:11-26.
   Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck (Colorado Springs, CO: Victor Books, 1985), 1362. See also Nehemiah
6. See, for example, the discussion in Ross, “Messianic Prophecies,” at
7. Ibid.
8. The first holds that He was crucified in A.D. 30, the second in A.D. 33.
10. Earl S. Kalland, “Deuteronomy,” in The Expositor’s Bible Commentary, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein,
   vol. 3 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1992), 122.
   F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck (Colorado Springs, CO: Victor Books, 1985), 1558. See also Zechariah
   3:8.
12. Michael Brown, interviewed in Lee Strobel, The Case for the Real Jesus (Advance Reader Copy)
   (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2007), 199.
13. See Babylonian Talmud, Yoma 39a.
15. Ibid.
16. Ibid., 213.
17. Ibid.
18. Ibid., 212.
Gospel Truth or Fictitious Gossip?

Dr. Michael Gleghorn provides good reasons to believe that the stories about Jesus were reliably preserved by his followers before being recorded in the Gospels.

Forgetting What Lies Behind?

It was late at night and the university library was about to close. I was feverishly working to complete a project for one of my classes. A bell sounded, indicating it was time to shut down and leave the building. As I and a few other students began shutting down our computers to go home for the night, a security guard suddenly began yelling at us to leave the building immediately! Apparently we weren’t moving quickly enough, and the guard, probably tired from a long day at work, was quite irritated. We told her we would leave as soon as we could, but it would take us a few minutes to pack up. Annoyed, she wrote down our names and threatened to report us to the administration. We, in turn, returned the favor, taking down her name and saying that we would report how rudely we were treated.

When I got back to my apartment, I immediately wrote down what had happened. I wanted to be sure that if I was contacted by the administration, I would have an accurate report of the evening’s events. Knowing how fallible human memory can be, I wanted to write everything down while it was still fresh in my mind. Most people would say this was a wise thing to do.

But it raises an interesting question about the New Testament Gospels. Although liberal and conservative scholars differ a bit over when these documents were written, most would agree that the earliest Gospel (probably Mark) was written anywhere from twenty to forty years after Jesus’ death. And the latest, the Gospel of John, probably dates to around sixty years after Jesus’ death.

But why did they wait so long to write their accounts? Some scholars say this was plenty of time for Jesus’ followers to distort and embellish their Master’s original words and deeds. Consequently, they insist, by the time the ministry of Jesus was recorded in the Gospels, it had already reached a form that was partly fictional. In short, the oral tradition which lies behind the Gospels is alleged to have been corrupted before the Gospel writers ever “put pen to papyrus.”

{1} In the words of the Jesus Seminar:
The Jesus of the gospels is an imaginative theological construct, into which has been woven traces of that enigmatic sage from Nazareth—traces that cry out for liberation from those whose faith overpowered their memories. The search for the authentic Jesus is a search for the forgotten Jesus.

Is this true? Did the faith of Jesus’ earliest followers really overpower their memories of what Jesus said and did? Is our faith in the Gospels well-placed—or misplaced? In the remainder of this article we’ll see that there are good reasons to believe that the Gospel writers told us the “Gospel truth” about Jesus!

**Why the Wait?**

Do the New Testament Gospels accurately preserve for us the things which Jesus said and did? Many liberal scholars don’t think so. They maintain that the oral tradition upon which the Gospels are based became quickly corrupted by the early church. If they’re right, then some of what we read about Jesus in the Gospels never really happened. As some of the fellows of the Jesus Seminar put it:

> Scholars of the gospels are faced with a problem: Much of the lore recorded in the gospels and elsewhere in the Bible is folklore, which means that it is wrapped in memories that have been edited, deleted, augmented, and combined many times over many years.

This raises some important questions for us to consider. How carefully was the oral tradition about the words and deeds of Jesus transmitted in the early church? Does the evidence indicate whether or not it was corrupted before the Gospels were written? And why on earth did the Gospel writers wait so long to write their accounts?

Let’s begin with that last question. Why did the Gospel writers wait so long to record the ministry of Jesus? Let me offer two responses to this question. First, compared with other ancient biographies that are generally considered reliable, the Gospels were written relatively soon after the events they narrate. The Gospels were written anywhere from twenty to sixty years after the death of Jesus. Although this may initially seem like a long time, it’s still well within the lifetime of eyewitnesses who could either confirm or contradict these accounts of Jesus’ public ministry. By contrast, “The two earliest biographies of Alexander the Great were written . . . more than four hundred years after Alexander’s death . . . yet historians consider them to be generally trustworthy.” Comparatively speaking, then, the Gospel writers really didn’t wait long at all to write their accounts.

Secondly, however, we may not even be looking at this issue correctly. As the authors of the recent book, *Reinventing Jesus*, point out:

> It might be better to ask, Why were the Gospels written at all? If we think in categories of delay, then this presupposes that the writing of the Gospels was in the minds of these authors from the beginning. However, this is almost certainly not the case. What was paramount in the apostles’ earliest motives was oral proclamation of the gospel.

In the early years of the church the story of Jesus was being told and retold by eyewitnesses of these events. But still, some might ask, might these “events” have become gradually embellished with the story’s retelling, so that what’s recorded in the Gospels is no longer trustworthy?

**To Tell the Old, Old Story**

How accurately was the oral tradition about Jesus’ life and ministry preserved before being written
down? Was it corrupted by his earliest followers prior to being recorded in the Gospels? Many liberal scholars think so. But there are good reasons to think otherwise.

In the first place, we must remember that “the interval between Jesus and the written Gospels was not dormant.”{6} In fact, this period was filled with a tremendous amount of activity. The earliest followers of Jesus told and retold his story wherever they went. This is important, for as a recent book on Jesus observes:

If the earliest proclamation about Jesus was altered in later years, then surely first-generation Christians would know about the changes and would object to them. It would not even take outsiders to object to the “new and improved Christianity,” since those who were already believers would have serious problems with the differences in the content of their belief.{7}

Not only this, but New Testament scholar Craig Blomberg lists many other reasons for believing that this oral tradition was accurately transmitted by Jesus’ earliest followers.{8} First, Jesus’ followers believed that He “proclaimed God’s Word in a way which demanded careful retelling.” Second, over ninety percent of his teachings contained “poetic elements which would have made them easy to memorize.” Third, “the almost universal method of education in antiquity, and especially in Israel, was rote memorization, which enabled people accurately to recount quantities of material far greater than all of the Gospels put together.” And fourth, “written notes and a kind of shorthand were often privately kept by rabbis and their disciples.” Although we can’t be sure that any of Jesus’ disciples kept written notes of His teachings, it’s at least possible that they did.

Finally, we must bear in mind that the Gospels are not the product of merely one person’s memories of the events of Jesus’ life. Instead, the oral tradition which lies behind the Gospels is based on numerous eyewitness reports. This is extremely important, for as the authors of Reinventing Jesus remind us, the disciples’ “recollections were not individual memories but collective ones—confirmed by other eyewitnesses and burned into their minds by the constant retelling of the story. . . . Memory in community is a deathblow to the view that the disciples simply forgot the real Jesus.”{9}

What About the Differences?

Thus, there are excellent reasons for believing that the first Christians accurately preserved and transmitted the stories about Jesus before they were recorded in the New Testament Gospels. But if this is so, then how do we explain the fact that the sayings of Jesus and his disciples are sometimes worded differently in different Gospels?

To cite just one example, consider the different ways in which the Gospel writers record the dialogue between Jesus and his disciples on the occasion of Peter’s famous confession at Caesarea Philippi. Jesus begins by asking his disciples a question, but Matthew, Mark, and Luke each word the question differently. Matthew records Jesus asking, “Who do people say the Son of Man is?” (Matt. 16:13).{10} But in Mark the question reads a bit differently, “Who do people say I am?” (Mark 8:27). And in Luke it’s a bit different still, “Who do the crowds say I am?” (Luke 9:20).

Not only is the precise wording of Jesus’ question different in each of these Gospels, but the wording of Peter’s response is as well. In Matthew, Peter answers, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God” (16:16). But in Mark he simply says, “You are the Christ” (8:29), and in Luke, “The Christ of God” (9:20).

Now clearly these are not major differences. In each case the gist of what’s said is the same. But we must also acknowledge that in each case the details are different. What’s going on here? If the
stories about Jesus were accurately preserved before being recorded in the Gospels, then why are
there these subtle, yet real, differences in the words attributed to Jesus and Peter in each of these
three accounts? Or to put this question in the words of Darrell Bock, how are we to understand such
sayings in the Gospels—are they live, jive, or memorex?{11}

On the one hand, the view which says such sayings are merely unhistorical “jive” just doesn’t do
justice to the evidence we’ve already considered regarding how carefully the oral tradition about the
life of Jesus was transmitted by his earliest followers. Nor does this view adequately account for both
the internal and external evidence for the historical reliability of the Gospels.{12}

On the other hand, the “memorex” view, which holds that the Gospel accounts of Jesus’ spoken
words represent the exact words He spoke on the occasions reported, doesn’t seem to square with
the actual evidence of the Gospels themselves. The Gospel writers do, as we saw above, report the
words of Jesus and his disciples differently, and this is so even in cases where we can be quite
confident that the incident occurred only once.

This leaves us with only one more option to consider.

A “Live” Option

Dr. Darrell Bock has persuasively argued for what he calls a “live” option in explaining the
differences between the Gospel accounts.{13} He describes this option this way:

Each Evangelist retells the . . . words of Jesus in a fresh way . . . while . . . accurately presenting
the “gist” of what Jesus said. . . . [T]his approach . . . recognizes the Jesus tradition as “live” in
its dynamic and quality. We clearly hear Jesus . . . but . . . there is summary and emphasis in the
complementary portraits that each Evangelist gives . . . .{14}

In other words, the Gospel writers are not always giving us Jesus’ exact words, but they are always
giving us his genuine voice. This distinction is absolutely necessary. For one thing, it helps explain
the observed differences among Jesus’ sayings in the Gospels. It also sits well with the fact that most
of these sayings had already been translated by the time they were first recorded. You see, most of
Jesus’ original teaching would have been done in Aramaic, the dominant language of first-century
Palestine. The Gospels, however, were written in Greek. Since “most of Jesus’ teaching in the
Gospels is already a translation,” we’re not reading his exact words even when we’re reading the
Gospels in Greek.{15} Finally, Jesus’ longest speeches can be read in a matter of minutes. Yet “we
know that Jesus kept his audiences for hours at a time (e.g., Mark 6:34-36).” It seems evident, then,
“that the writers gave us a . . . summarized presentation of what Jesus said and did.”{16}

But if the “live” option is correct, and the Gospels don’t always give us Jesus’ exact words, does this
mean that their reports of Jesus’ teaching are untrustworthy? Not at all. The way in which the
Gospel writers recorded the words and deeds of Jesus was totally consistent with the way in which
responsible histories were written in the ancient world. As Dr. Bock observes, “the Greek standard
of reporting speeches required a concern for accuracy in reporting the gist of what had been said,
even if the exact words were not . . . recorded.”{17}

This is exactly what a careful study of the Gospels reveals about the way in which their authors
reported the words of Jesus. Although these writers lived before the invention of audio recorders,
they nonetheless strove to honestly and reliably record the gist of Jesus’ teachings. We can therefore
read these documents with confidence that they are telling us the “Gospel truth” about Jesus in a
fresh and dynamic way.
God Space: Where Spiritual Conversations Happen Naturally

Dr. Michael Gleghorn offers an introduction and overview of Doug Pollock's book by the same title. Those who want to learn more about how to have natural and effective spiritual conversations are encouraged to read (and apply) Pollock's book for themselves.

Creating God Space
If you’re a Christian, you probably wrestle from time to time with how best to share your faith with non-Christian friends and family. I mean, let’s face it. We often want to share our faith. But we’re a bit confused (maybe even overwhelmed) with how to go about it in a natural and non-threatening way. Is there a way to have spiritual conversations naturally?

According to Doug Pollock, the answer is “Yes”—and it all begins with something he calls “God Space.” “I often wonder,” he says, “what would happen if . . . the body of Christ could create low-risk, high-grace places for people to pursue their need to have spiritual conversations.” But Doug not only wonders about it, he’s also spent the better part of his adult life actually doing it—and training others to do it too. Although he’s had many roles, he’s probably best known for his work as an author, speaker, and evangelism trainer for Athletes in Action. His passion, however, is pointing people to Christ through spiritual conversations in which people have the freedom to simply be themselves.

You see, Doug believes that people actually want (and even need) to have such conversations. Moreover, they’re often even willing to have them. The problem, of course, is that such conversations can often seem intimidating—even threatening—to both Christian and non-Christian alike. So Doug advocates creating a “safe space” in which to have such conversations. But he warns us that for many non-Christians in our world today, the church is often not perceived as safe. Hence, he says, if we want to reach people for Christ, then we’ve got to go to them—and help create a “safe space” for spiritual conversations right where they are.

Doug calls it “God Space” —a space where “God is . . . encountered in . . . ways that address the longings and cries of the heart.” In God Space “the ‘unworthy’ feel safe enough to bring their real selves . . . into the light, and to journey, one step at a time, toward the magnetic pull they sense deep in their souls.” It’s a space where “spiritual curiosity is aroused, and the message of Christianity becomes plausible.”

Does this sound like something you’d be interested in learning more about? Then keep reading as we consider Doug’s book in more detail.

**Spiritual Conversation-Killers**

Doug Pollock offers some great advice about how to have natural, non-threatening spiritual conversations with those who don’t know Christ. Before discussing this advice in more detail, however, we first need to pause and consider some of the ways in which we might unintentionally shut-down, or “kill,” a spiritual conversation before it even has a chance to get going.

Doug describes ten “spiritual conversation-killers” in his book. Although we can’t discuss them all, we’ll at least mention a few of them. To get started, think of the non-Christian people you know and interact with on a somewhat regular basis. How many of them would be interested in having a “low-risk, high-grace” spiritual conversation with you? If your answer is few to none of them, then you might be guilty of the most basic spiritual conversation-killer of them all: “an unbelieving heart.” If we assume that the non-Christians we know aren’t interested in talking about spiritual things, then we probably won’t have many spiritual conversations with them.

And Doug says this is a big mistake. “I’ve had spiritual conversations with people all over the world,”
he writes, “including the supposed ‘tough places.’ I think it’s because the Holy Spirit has given me a conviction that if God has put eternity in every person’s heart, which is what Ecclesiastes 3:11 tells us, then all people were made for spiritual conversations.” So let’s not “kill” an opportunity for spiritual conversations because of unbelief. Instead, let’s assume that if we approach such conversations wisely, we’ll find people eager to talk with us.

Okay, so how do we approach such conversations wisely? In my opinion, the best way to have good spiritual conversations is simply to apply some of the very same principles that go into having good conversations of any sort. For example, how well would my conversation go if I was disrespectful of the other person’s beliefs or opinions? Or what if I came across as harsh, combative, or domineering? Would such conversations be successful? Probably not. And if that’s the case with everyday conversations, then it’s probably the case with spiritual conversations too. So if we want to have good spiritual conversations, we need to be humble, gracious, kind and polite. If not, we’ll probably “kill” whatever spiritual conversations we might otherwise have had. And when that happens, no one wins.

Wondering Your Way Into Spiritual Conversations

In God Space: Where Spiritual Conversations Happen Naturally, Doug has four great chapters on noticing, serving, listening, and wondering your way into spiritual conversations. For our purposes, let’s direct our attention to that final chapter, which involves “wondering” our way into spiritual conversations. “Of all the things you’ll read in this book,” Doug tells us, “this chapter holds the most promise if you truly want to see the quality and quantity of your spiritual conversations increase.”

So how does it work? How do we wonder our way into spiritual conversations? As Doug lays it out for us, there are essentially two steps. First, we have to be really good listeners. If we’re not actively listening to what people are telling us, then we’re not going to have much to wonder about. That’s because we wonder our way into spiritual conversations by asking good questions about what another person is telling us. That’s step two. After listening carefully to what the other person is saying, we begin to wonder “out loud” by asking questions that are relevant to the conversation we’re having.

According to Doug, “good wondering questions” will “flow naturally out of your context and . . . conversations.” They reveal “that you have listened thoughtfully.” They “are open-ended and promote more dialogue and reflection.” They “probe sensitively and reflectively into someone’s belief systems.” And finally, such questions encourage “others to investigate the Christian life” for themselves.

So by listening carefully and asking good “wondering” questions about what you’re being told, you can open the door to all sorts of spiritual conversations. Doug even offers some examples of “good ways to start wondering.” Suppose your conversation partner has made an interesting claim or expressed an intriguing perspective on some issue. You might respond by saying, “That’s an interesting perspective; I’m wondering how you arrived at that conclusion?” Notice how such a question not only demonstrates an interest in, and respect for, the other person and their views—it also serves to keep the conversation moving forward in a positive direction. Indeed, once you get a knack for listening carefully and asking good wondering questions, who knows how many spiritual conversations you might find yourself having!

Bringing the Bible Into Your Conversations

Let’s now discuss Doug’s advice about bringing the Bible into our conversations.
The word of God is powerful. Paul describes it as “the sword of the Spirit.” And the author of Hebrews tells us it can “judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart.” Indeed, it’s partly because the Bible is so powerful, that we need to be careful about the way in which we bring it into our conversations.

As Doug reminds us, “If people sense you’re trying to use the Bible as an authoritative ‘crowbar’ to beat them into submitting to your viewpoint, your conversation is likely over. However, if you humbly ask for permission to introduce the Scriptures into your dialogue, ‘deep spiritual magic’ begins to happen.” The key point here, of course, is asking for permission. This is important and Doug encourages us to always make a habit of it. After all, if the person has given you permission to share something from the Bible, then they won’t feel awkward or threatened when you do so. And if they haven’t given you permission, then it’s probably better just to wait and pray for a more opportune time.

Okay, that sounds good. But how can we know when it’s right to ask for permission? Here we need a measure of wisdom and even plain common sense. In general, however, when the person expresses an interest in some issue about which the Bible speaks, it might be a good time to ask for permission to share what the Bible says. Doug gives the example of talking with some non-Christian college students about the meaning of love. The students were intensely interested in this topic, but they were having a hard time defining what the word even meant. After discussing the issue for a bit, Doug asked for permission to share what the Bible has to say about love. Having gotten their permission, he directed them to the famous love passage in 1 Corinthians 13. Primed and ready, the students eagerly listened to what the Bible had to say. Its message had suddenly become relevant to them, for it spoke directly to an issue about which they cared deeply.

If we could learn how to introduce the Bible like that, our non-Christian friends might be more eager to hear what it says. In the next section we’ll conclude our discussion of Doug’s book by considering “missed opportunities” and “burned bridges.”

**Missed Opportunities and Burned Bridges**

We’ve considered several ways to improve our conversations, but it’s easy to make mistakes. So now we’ll consider Doug’s advice about “missed opportunities” and “burned bridges.” Can “missed opportunities” be reclaimed and “burned bridges” be rebuilt? And if so, then how do we do it?

Let’s first consider missed opportunities. Suppose you had a conversation with a neighbor who made a comment that left a wide-open door for spiritual conversation—and you said . . . nothing. We’ve probably all had conversations like this. Maybe the comment caught us off guard, and we just weren’t sure how to respond. Or maybe we felt too tired, or scared, or something else. Whatever the reason, we can “reclaim” such missed opportunities. It’s often not even that hard. Doug tells of missing out on a great opportunity because he just wasn’t sure what to say. About a month later, however, he got another opportunity. He told the person that he’d been thinking a lot about a comment which they had previously made. Intrigued, the person asked what it was—and almost immediately they were right back where they had left off a month earlier!

Okay, that’s the easy one. But what if we didn’t remain silent. What if we said the wrong thing—and now feel like we’ve burned our bridges with another person? Granted, this is more difficult. But Doug throws down a challenge. For once we recognize and admit our mistake to ourselves, we can then confess it to God and bring the issue before Him in prayer. After praying about it, Doug says, we can actually go to the person and let them know that we’ve been thinking about how we “come across” in spiritual conversations. We can even ask if they’d be willing to give us “some honest feedback” about how others might perceive us in this area. And if so, then we can listen carefully
and apologize for any mistakes we might have made. Of course, we can’t predict how the other person will respond. But by taking this approach, we can go a long way toward restoring the relationship.{23}

If you’d be interested in creating some “God Space” for your own conversations, then I encourage you to get (and read) Doug’s book for yourself. I think you’ll be really glad you did.

Notes

2. For more on Doug, check out his website: www.godsgps.com/
3. Pollock, God Space, 16.
4. The citations in this paragraph can be found in Pollock, God Space, 20-21.
5. This is “Killer 1” in Doug’s view. See Pollock, God Space, 24.
6. Ibid., 25.
7. In what follows, I briefly mention several of the spiritual conversation-killers which Doug discusses on pp. 29-32. Specifically, Doug mentions conversation “killers” like disrespect, control, judgment and combativeness.
10. Ibid., 14.
11. All of the quoted material in this paragraph comes from a section on “Good Wondering Questions” in Pollock, God Space, 73.
12. See the examples under this section heading in Pollock, God Space, 73.
13. Ibid., 73.
14. This is one way in which Doug likes to refer to non-Christians. See Pollock, God Space, 16.
15. See Pollock’s chapter 9, “Bringing the Bible into your Conversations,” in God Space, 87-99.
17. Hebrews 4:12 (NASB).
18. Pollock, God Space, 95.
19. Ibid., 93.
20. See the discussion in Pollock, God Space, 90-94.
21. Doug discusses this topic in chapter 10, “Reclaiming Missed Opportunities and Rebuilding Burned Bridges,” 100-106.
22. Doug shares this story on pp. 101-103.
23. The citations in this paragraph come from Doug’s discussion on p. 106.

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Dealing with Doubt in Our Christian Faith

Dr. Michael Gleghorn points out that it is not having doubts about our Christian faith that is an issue, but rather how we respond to that doubt. Attacking this issue from a biblical worldview perspective, Michael helps us understand our doubts and respond to them as an informed Christian.
Help! My Doubts Scare Me!

Have you ever doubted your faith? We all have doubts from time to time. We may doubt that our boss really hit a hole-in-one at the golf course last weekend, or that our best friend really caught a fish as big as the one he claimed to catch, or that the strange looking guy on that late night TV show was really abducted by alien beings from a distant galaxy! Sometimes the things we doubt aren’t really that important, but other times they are. And the more important something is to us, the more personally invested we are in it, the scarier it can be to start having doubts about it. So when Christians begin to have doubts about something as significant as the truth of their Christian faith, it’s quite understandable that this might worry or even frighten them.

Reflecting on this issue in *The Case for Faith*, Lee Strobel wrote:

For many Christians, merely having doubts of any kind can be scary. They wonder whether their questions disqualify them being a follower of Christ. They feel insecure because they’re not sure whether it’s permissible to express uncertainty about God, Jesus, or the Bible. So they keep their questions to themselves—and inside, unanswered, they grow and fester . . . until they eventually succeed in choking out their faith.\(^1\)

So what can we do if we find ourselves struggling with doubts about the truth of Christianity? Why do such doubts arise? And how can we rid ourselves of these taunting Goliaths?

First, we must always remember that sooner or later we’ll probably all have to wrestle with doubts about our faith. As Christian philosopher William Lane Craig observes, “Any Christian who is intellectually engaged and reflecting about his faith will inevitably face the problem of doubt.”\(^2\) Doubts can arise for all sorts of reasons. Sometimes they’re largely intellectual. We might doubt that the Bible is really inspired by God or that Jesus was really born of a virgin. But doubts can take other forms as well. If a person has experienced great sorrow or disappointment, such as personal wounds from family or friends, the loss of a job, a painful divorce, the death of a loved one, or the loss of health, they may be seriously tempted to doubt the goodness, love, and care of their heavenly Father.\(^3\)

Whenever they come and whatever form they take, we must each deal honestly with our doubts. To ignore them is to court spiritual disaster. But facing them can lead ultimately to a deeper faith. As Christian minister Lynn Anderson has said, “A faith that’s challenged by adversity or tough questions . . . is often a stronger faith in the end.”\(^4\)

It’s Not All in Your Head!

Sometimes people have sincere doubts about the truth of Christianity, intellectual obstacles that hinder them from placing their trust in Christ. In such cases, Christians have an obligation to respond to the person’s doubts and make a humble and thoughtful defense for the truth of Christianity. Nevertheless, as Craig observes, it’s important to realize that “doubt is never a purely intellectual problem.” Like it or not, there’s always a “spiritual dimension to the problem that must be recognized.”\(^5\) Because of this, sometimes a person’s objections to Christianity are really just a smokescreen, an attempt to cover up the real reason for their rejection of Christ, which is often an
underlying moral or spiritual issue.

I once heard a story about a Christian apologist who spoke at a university about the evidence for Christianity. Afterward, a student approached him and said, “I honestly didn’t expect this to happen, but you satisfactorily answered all my objections to Christianity.” The apologist was a bit startled by such a frank admission, but he quickly recovered himself and said, “Well that’s great! Why not give your life to Christ right now, then?” But the student said, “No. I’m not willing to do that. I would have to change the way I’m living, and I’m just not ready to do that right now.”

In this case all the student’s reasons for doubting the Christian faith had, by his own admission, been satisfactorily answered. What was really holding him back were not his doubts about the truth of Christianity, but a desire to live life on his own terms. To put it bluntly, he didn’t want God meddling in his affairs. He didn’t want to be morally accountable to some ultimate authority. The truth is that a person’s intellectual objections to Christianity are rarely the whole story. As Christian scholar Ravi Zacharias observed, “A man rejects God neither because of intellectual demands nor because of the scarcity of evidence. A man rejects God because of a moral resistance that refuses to admit his need for God.”

Unfortunately, Christians aren’t immune to doubting their faith for similar reasons. I know of a young man who had converted to Christianity, but who’s now raising various objections to it. But when one looks beneath the surface, one sees that he’s currently involved in an immoral lifestyle. In order to continue living as he wants, without being unduly plagued by a guilty conscience, he must call into question the truth of Christianity. For the Bible tells him plainly that he’s disobeying God. Of course, ultimately no one is immune to doubts about Christianity, so we’ll now consider some ways to guard our hearts and minds.

I Believe, Help My Unbelief!

As He came down the mountain, Jesus was met by a large crowd of people. A father had brought his demon-possessed son to Jesus’ disciples, but they were not able to cast the demon out. In desperation the father appealed to Jesus, “If You can do anything, take pity on us and help us!” Jesus answered, “If You can! All things are possible to him who believes.” The father responded, “I do believe; help my unbelief.”

Can you identify with the father in this story? I know I can. Oftentimes as Christians we find that our faith is in precisely the same state as this father’s. We genuinely believe, but we need help with our unbelief. It’s always been an encouragement to me that after the father’s admission of a faith mixed with doubt, Jesus nonetheless cast out the demon and healed the man’s son. But of course no Christian should be content to remain in this state. If we want to grow in our faith and rid ourselves of doubts, what are some positive steps we can take to accomplish this?

Well, in the first place, it’s helpful to be familiar with the “principle of displacement.” As Sue “Archimedes” Bohlin, one of my colleagues, has written:

> The Bible teaches the principle of “displacement.” That is, rather than trying to make thoughts shoo away, we are told to replace them with what is good, true, and perfect (Phil. 4:8). As the truth comes in the lies are displaced—much like when we fill a bathtub too full of water, and when we get in, our bodies displace the water, which flows out over the top of the tub.

Once we grasp this principle, a number of steps for dealing with doubt quickly become evident. For one thing, we can memorize and meditate upon Scripture. We can also listen attentively to good
Christian music. Paul speaks to the importance of both of these in Colossians 3:16: “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God.”

In addition, we can read good Christian books that provide intelligent answers to some of the questions we might be asking. Great Christian scholars have addressed almost every conceivable objection to the truth of Christianity. If you have nagging doubts about some aspect of your faith, there’s almost certainly a work of Christian scholarship that speaks to it in detail. Finally, we must never forget that this is a spiritual battle. So let’s remember to put on the full armor of God so we can stand firm in the midst of it!

**Faith and Reason**

How can we know if Christianity is really true? Is it by reason, or evidence, or mystical experience? Dr. Craig has an answer to this question that you might find a bit surprising. He distinguishes between knowing Christianity is true and showing that it’s true. Ideally, one attempts to show that Christianity is true with good arguments and evidence. But Craig doesn’t think that this is how we know our faith is true. Rather, he believes that we can know our faith is true because “God’s Spirit makes it evident to us that our faith is true.”

Consider Paul’s statement in Romans 8:16, “The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God’s children.” Since every believer is indwelt by God’s Spirit, every believer also receives the Spirit’s testimony that he is one of God’s children. This is sometimes called the “assurance of salvation.” Dr. Craig comments on the significance of this:

> Salvation entails that God exists, that Christ atoned for our sins . . . and so forth, so that if you are assured of your salvation, then you must be assured of . . . these other truths as well. Hence, the witness of the Holy Spirit gives the believer an immediate assurance that his faith is true.

Now this is remarkable. For it means we can know that Christianity is true, wholly apart from arguments, simply by attending to the witness of the Holy Spirit. And this is so not only for believers but for unbelievers, too. For the Spirit convicts the unbelieving world of sin, righteousness, and judgment, particularly the sin of unbelief. So when we’re confronted with objections to Christianity that we can’t answer, we needn’t worry. First, answers are usually available if one knows where to look. But second, the witness of the Spirit trumps any objections we might encounter.

Consider an illustration from the Christian philosopher Alvin Plantinga. Suppose I’m accused of stealing a document out of a colleague’s office. Suppose I have a motive, an opportunity, and a history of doing such things. Suppose further that someone thought they saw me lurking around my colleague’s office just before the document went missing. There’s much evidence against me. But in fact, I didn’t steal the document. I was on a walk at the time. Now should I doubt my innocence since the evidence is against me? Of course not! For I know I’m not guilty!

Similarly, writes Dr. Craig, “I needn’t be shaken when objections come along that I can’t answer.” For my faith isn’t ultimately based on arguments, but on the witness of God’s Spirit.
We’ve seen that both Christians and non-Christians can have doubts about the truth of Christianity. We’ve also seen that such doubts are never just an intellectual issue; there’s always a spiritual dynamic that’s involved as well. But since we’ll probably never be able to fully resolve every single doubt we might experience, I would like to conclude by suggesting one final way to make our doubts flee before us, much as roaches flee to their hidden lairs when one turns on the light!

In John 7:17 Jesus says, “If anyone chooses to do God’s will, he will find out whether my teaching comes from God or whether I speak on my own.” Here, Jesus frankly encourages us to put His teachings to the test and see for ourselves whether He really speaks for God or not. As biblical scholar Merrill Tenney comments, “Spiritual understanding is not produced solely by learning facts or procedures, but rather it depends on obedience to known truth. Obedience to God’s known will develops discernment between falsehood and truth.”

Are we really serious about dealing with our lingering doubts? If so, Jesus says that if we resolutely choose to do God’s will, we can know if His teaching is really from God!

Sadly, however, many of us will never take Jesus up on His challenge. No matter how loudly we might claim to want to rid ourselves of doubt, the truth is that many of us just aren’t willing to do God’s will. But if you are, then Jesus says that “you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.” In other words, we can know by experience that Jesus is from God, that His teachings are true, and that He really is who He claimed to be!

As Christian philosopher Dallas Willard observes, the issue ultimately comes down to what we really want:

The Bible says that if you seek God with all your heart, then you will surely find him. Surely find him. It’s the person who wants to know God that God reveals himself to. And if a person doesn’t want to know God—well, God has created the world and the human mind in such a way that he doesn’t have to.

The psalmist encourages us to “taste and see that the Lord is good.” If we do, we can know not only that God is good, but also that He exists. And even if we still have some lingering doubts and unanswered questions in the back of our minds, as we surely will, they’ll gradually fade into utter insignificance as we become more intimately acquainted with Him who loves us and who reconciled us to Himself through the death of His Son!

Notes
4. Ibid., 326.
5. Craig, Hard Questions, Real Answers, 33.
10. See Ephesians 6:10-20.
11. This section is largely just a summary of the discussion of faith and reason in Craig, Hard Questions, Real Answers, 35-39.
12. Ibid., 35.
A Pilgrim’s Progress: Suffering in the Life of John Bunyan - A Christian View of Suffering

Dr. Michael Gleghorn considers the lessons presented by the life and writings of the famous author of The Pilgrim’s Progress to give each of us a better understanding of the role of suffering in the lives of followers of Christ.

A Suffering Pilgrim

John Bunyan is known to most people today as the author of The Pilgrim’s Progress, a book he began writing in prison. It tells the story of “Christian,” who makes his way from the “City of Destruction” (which represents this world) to the “Celestial City” (which represents Heaven). It’s been described as “perhaps the world’s best-selling book” (after the Bible), and has been “translated into over 200 languages.” {1} Written in the form of an allegory, it essentially relates the story of Bunyan’s own Christian journey. {2} And just as his life was full of trials and suffering, so also “Christian” must face many hardships and difficulties as well.

Bunyan was born in England in 1628 at a time of great political and religious unrest. In 1644, at just fifteen years old, both his mother and sister died within a month of each other. Later that year, “when Bunyan had turned sixteen, he was drafted into the Parliamentary Army and for about two years was taken from his home for military service.” {3} He married in 1648, at about the age of twenty, but his wife died just ten years later, leaving him with four children, the oldest of whom was blind. He married again the following year, in 1659, but incredibly, just one year after this, “Bunyan was arrested and put in prison.” {4} His wife, who was pregnant at the time, suffered a miscarriage, probably because of the added stress which this ordeal created. She was then left to care for Bunyan’s four children while he spent the next twelve years in jail. {5}
As you can see, Bunyan was no stranger to suffering. Indeed, he had an intimate, firsthand acquaintance with heartache, trials, and difficulties. But what crimes had he committed to be cast into prison? Essentially, the charges against him were two: first, "he refused to attend the services of the Established church" of England; and second, he "preached to unlawful assemblies."{6} You see, Bunyan had converted to Christianity during his first marriage and had become a powerful and respected preacher. But in the volatile political and religious climate of that day, the freedom of Nonconformist preachers like Bunyan eventually came to an end. And when it did, he was arrested and put in prison.

In the remainder of this article we’ll look at some of the trials this man endured, how he responded to them, and what they might teach us as we each make our own spiritual journey.

The Pilgrim’s Conversion

The Pilgrim’s Progress is one of the best-selling Christian books of all time. But as Bunyan tells us in another of his books, the autobiographical Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners, before becoming a Christian he had few equals in “cursing, swearing, lying and blaspheming the holy name of God.” Indeed, prior to his marriage, he says he was “the very ring-leader of all the youth . . . into all manner of vice and ungodliness.”{7}

Bunyan’s young wife had a very godly father. When he died, he left her two books which she brought into her marriage: The Plain Man’s Pathway to Heaven and The Practice of Piety. According to Bunyan, although these books did not awaken him to his “sad and sinful state,” they nevertheless did arouse within him “some desires to religion.”{8} One of the practical effects of these new desires was Bunyan’s regular attendance at a local church.

Soon Bunyan also began to read the Bible. He then came under such powerful conviction of sin that he scarcely knew what to do. “Sin and corruption,” he wrote, “would as naturally bubble out of my heart, as water would bubble out of a fountain. . . . I thought none but the devil himself could equalize me for inward wickedness and pollution of mind.”{9} Bunyan was plunged into a state of despair over the greatness of his sin which, he tells us, “continued a long while, even for some years together.”{10}

Eventually, after years of spiritual and emotional agony, Bunyan described “what seemed to be the decisive moment.”{11} He was heading into the field one day when suddenly this sentence broke in upon his mind: “Thy righteousness is in heaven.” At this, he says, “I . . . saw . . . that it was not my good frame of heart that made my righteousness better, nor yet my bad frame that made my righteousness worse: for my righteousness was Jesus Christ himself, the same yesterday, and today, and for ever (Heb. 13:8).” “Now,” he said, “did my chains fall off my legs indeed . . . my temptations also fled away . . . now went I . . . home rejoicing, for the grace and love of God.”{12}

After years of spiritual anguish, Bunyan had been set free by the grace of God from some of his worst fears and torments. But as we’ll see, this was not to be the end of his experience with suffering. As one set of trials was ending, another was soon to begin.

The Pilgrim’s Imprisonment

According to Bunyan, five or six years after his conversion, in about the year 1655, some of the believers in his local congregation began entreating him “to speak a word of exhortation unto them.”{13} Although initially hesitant, Bunyan agreed to their request “and suddenly a great
preacher was discovered.”{14} Apparently, word spread quickly through the English countryside. According to one author, “In the days of toleration, a day’s notice would get a crowd of 1,200 to hear him preach at 7 o’clock in the morning on a weekday.”{15}

Unfortunately, it was not to last. In 1660, the same year in which Charles II was brought home as king in the Restoration of the Monarchy, John Bunyan was arrested and imprisoned “for preaching without state approval.”{16} Officially, he was charged with being in violation of the Elizabethan Conventicle Act of 1593. According to this Act, anyone found guilty of “abstaining from coming to church to hear divine service, and . . . being a common upholder of several unlawful meetings . . . could be held without bail until he or she submitted to the authority of the Anglican church.”{17} As a Nonconformist preacher, this Act applied to men like Bunyan.

What’s interesting, however, is that Bunyan could have gone free at any time, so long as he agreed to give up preaching. But as he was firmly persuaded that he had been called by God to this ministry, he was completely unwilling to abandon his calling. He thus spent the next twelve years in prison, largely cut off from his wife, children, friends, and church.

I say “largely cut off” for, strange as it may seem, it appears that Bunyan was occasionally let out “to see his family or make brief trips.”{18} Of course, this was the exception and not the rule. Nevertheless, by “the standards of the seventeenth century the conditions in which he was held were not particularly brutal.”{19} On the other hand, Bunyan was largely fortunate in this respect: “hundreds of Dissenters died in prison, and many more came out with their health broken by foul, over-crowded conditions.”{20}

Although these qualifications must be admitted, we must never lose sight of the fact that Bunyan was willing to endure twelve long years of this suffering, rather than agree to give up preaching. And thankfully, as we’ll see, God brought a great deal of good out of His faithful servant’s suffering.

The Pilgrim’s Writings

Most people today know John Bunyan as the author of The Pilgrim’s Progress, but this is just one of many works written by the metal-worker turned minister. His first book was written in 1656, when he was twenty-eight years old. But by the time of his death, some thirty-two years later, he had authored fifty-seven more!{21} John Piper notes:

The variety in these books was remarkable: books dealing with controversies (like those concerning the Quakers . . . justification and baptism), collections of poems, children’s literature, and allegory (like The Holy War and The Life and Death of Mr. Badman). But the vast majority were practical . . . expositions of Scripture built from sermons for the sake of . . . helping Christian pilgrims make their way successfully to heaven.{22}

What’s especially astonishing about the size and variety of Bunyan’s literary legacy is that it came from a man with almost no formal education. As a child Bunyan had been taught to read and write, but nothing more. He had no university or seminary degrees in which to boast. And yet his diligent study of the Bible, born mainly out of a burning desire to find peace with God, made Bunyan mighty in the Scriptures. Indeed the Bible, more than any other book, would be the primary influence upon his many writings. So evident was this to Charles Spurgeon, the famous nineteenth century Baptist preacher, that he once wrote of Bunyan:
He had studied our Authorized Version . . . till his whole being was saturated with Scripture; and though his writings are . . . full of poetry, yet he cannot give us his Pilgrim’s Progress—that sweetest of all prose poems—without continually making us feel and say, “Why, this man is a living Bible!” Prick him anywhere; and you will find that his blood is Bibline, the very essence of the Bible flows from him. {23}

Not even his suffering in prison could dampen Bunyan’s enthusiasm for the Word of God or for writing. Indeed, if anything, it increased it. Some of his best-known works were written from the confines of a prison cell. These include Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners, written during his first imprisonment, as well as The Pilgrim’s Progress, apparently completed during a second, briefer period of imprisonment in 1677. {24} Bunyan’s writings are surely one of his greatest gifts to the church.

Lessons from a Suffering Pilgrim

A thoughtful examination of John Bunyan’s reflections on the purpose and value of suffering can give us much wisdom in how best to deal with it in our own lives. Near the end of his spiritual autobiography, Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners, he appended a brief account of his imprisonment in the Bedford jail. In it, he tells of how he tried to prepare himself for imprisonment, and possibly even death, when he realized that he might soon be called upon to suffer for the cause of Christ. Naturally, as one might well expect, one of the things he did was pray. He was particularly concerned to ask God for the strength to patiently endure his imprisonment, even with an attitude of joy (Col. 1:11). {25}

However, it’s the second thing he says that I find especially interesting and helpful. He reflects on the words of the apostle Paul in 2 Corinthians 1:9: “[W]e had the sentence of death within ourselves in order that we should not trust in ourselves, but in God who raises the dead” (NASB). Commenting on this verse, he then makes the following two observations:

By this scripture I was made to see that if ever I would suffer rightly, I must first pass a sentence of death upon everything that can properly be called a thing of this life, even to reckon myself, my wife, my children, my health, my enjoyments and all, as dead to me, and myself as dead to them. . . . The second was, to live upon God that is invisible; as Paul said in another place, the way not to faint, is to look not at the things that are seen, but at the things that are not seen; for the things that are seen are temporal; but the things that are not seen, they are eternal. {26}

Bunyan realized that, like it or not, suffering, pain, loss and death would all come to him in one way or another. Indeed, sooner or later every single one of us must ultimately face these terrifying realities. How, then, can we best prepare to meet them? As Bunyan reminds us, if we only prepare for prison, say, then we will be unprepared for beatings. But if we stop our preparation with beatings, then we will be unprepared for death. But we cannot evade or cheat death forever. And thus, concludes Bunyan, “the best way to go through sufferings, is to trust in God through Christ, as touching the world to come; and as touching this world.” {27} This was how Bunyan lived, and with God’s help it was also how he died. May the eternal and unseen God grant each of us the grace to follow his example.

Notes
“Where Are the Rest of Jesus’ Teachings?”

I have been searching for text/documents/anything that Jesus taught. He had over three years of anointed ministry, and only a few lines in the Gospels are recorded. Where is the rest of His teachings? I doubt that He wrote them down to a great extent, but surely some of his followers wrote down His teachings.

It’s great to hear about your excitement for the teachings of Jesus! May the Lord increase your tribe!

There is, unfortunately, a lot of nonsense written about Jesus—both at the scholarly and popular...
level (though doubtless more at the popular level). The fact of the matter is that the earliest and best historical evidence concerning Jesus and his teachings is to be found in the New Testament. Nothing else even comes close.

Of course, Jesus is mentioned in some ancient non-Christian sources. I have written a brief article about it here: probe.org/ancient-evidence-for-jesus-from-non-christian-sources-2/

Additionally, the Gospel of Thomas appears to contain some of Jesus’ actual sayings. According to New Testament scholar Bart Ehrman, probably about 1/3 of this gospel contains actual sayings of Jesus (or something close), about 1/3 of the sayings are full-blown Gnosticism (espousing things that Jesus never taught), and the final 1/3 are somewhere in between these two.

But here’s the thing. The Gospel of Thomas is an early second century production. The other apocryphal and pseudepigraphical gospels are later still. By contrast, all of the New Testament documents (including the four gospels) are first century productions. So bottom line: if you want to know what Jesus really taught, you need to read the New Testament (and the NT gospels in particular). Indeed, the reason scholars think that some of the sayings in the Gospel of Thomas are probably authentic sayings of Jesus is because they are consistent with sayings we find in the New Testament Gospels—the earliest and most historically trustworthy documents we have concerning the life and teachings of Jesus.

A few other books you might enjoy by good, solid, evangelical Jesus scholars:


May the Lord greatly bless you in your studies!

Shalom in Christ,

Michael Gleghorn

Posted April 27, 2017
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“I Stopped Believing After Visiting an Atheist Webpage; Can God Forgive Me?”

I accepted Christ but then I went to the atheistic page that convinced me and I stopped completely
believing for a few days. Later, I realized it was a mistake and repented. Can God forgive me? Am I apostate? Hebrews 6:4-6 is why I’m afraid.

Thanks for your letter. Hebrews 6:4-6 is a highly disputed passage with a variety of interpretations on offer. Fortunately, however, I do not think that we really need to delve into any of these in your case. The sort of sin that is in view in Hebrews 6:4-6 appears to be a very willful and determined apostasy from Christ. It appears to picture someone who, in spite of numerous spiritual benefits experienced, nonetheless turns his back on Christ and utterly rejects Him forever. In other words, the passage seems to suggest that anyone who has committed this sin will never turn to God again in repentance. Their heart has been (or is) irrevocably hardened against God and they will not repent.

But this is clearly not you! As you say in your letter, you realized that you had made a mistake and you thus repented and turned back to God. Sometimes atheist websites can seem convincing and a believer might be temporarily fooled by them, so to speak. But for a true believer, this will be very temporary indeed (as again, your own case shows). For the true believer has the witness of the Holy Spirit within him (or her) self—and this witness testifies to the truth of Christ with all of the authority of God himself!

The bottom line, I think, is this: anyone who is willing to repent of their sin and turn to Christ for forgiveness and salvation cannot have committed this sin. For the person who has committed this sin is irrevocably hardened against God and will never again be brought to repentance.

One final note. As believers it is important for us to grow in our understanding of the riches of our faith. Although some believers are called by God to engage with the material on atheist websites, the Lord always prepares such believers exceedingly well beforehand. Personally, I would encourage you as a brother in Christ to stay away from the atheist websites. The fact is, these sites are utterly wrong in their denial and rejection of God. They will not encourage nor build you up in your faith. Instead, I would recommend daily reading (and actually studying) your Bible, getting involved with a good Bible-believing and Bible-teaching church (and small group), and reading good works of theology and Christian apologetics. Take the time to carefully read something like John Calvin’s Institutes of the Christian Religion, for example. And for apologetics, read the articles on the Probe website (www.probe.org) — and check out the material as well on William Lane Craig’s site, Reasonable Faith (www.reasonablefaith.org). Don’t waste your time—I say this in all seriousness—with atheist websites. Rather, go deep in your study of the Bible, Christian theology, and Christian apologetics. You won’t regret it!

Shalom in Christ,

Michael Gleghorn

Posted April 27, 2017
Those Admirable English Puritans

Michael Gleghorn corrects a number of misunderstandings and stereotypes about the Puritans, suggesting there is much about them to admire.

Introducing the Puritans

J. I. Packer begins his book, *A Quest for Godliness: The Puritan Vision of the Christian Life*, by comparing the English Puritans to the California Redwoods. He writes, “On . . . the northern California coastline grow the giant Redwoods, the biggest living things on earth. Some are over 360 feet tall, and some trunks are more than 60 feet round.”{1} A bit later he draws this comparison: “As Redwoods attract the eye, because they overtop other trees, so the mature holiness and seasoned fortitude of the great Puritans shine before us as a kind of beacon light, overtopping the stature of the majority of Christians in most eras.”{2}

Of course, in our day, if people think of the Puritans at all, it’s usually only for the purpose of making a joke of one kind or another. As one author notes, “the Puritans are the only collective stock-in-trade that virtually every cartoonist feels free to use to lampoon society’s ills.”{3}

But who were the Puritans really? When did they live? And, most importantly, why should we care?

Many scholarly studies of English Puritanism begin by noting the variety of ways in which the term “Puritanism” has been used and defined. Christopher Hill begins his book, *Society and Puritanism in Pre-Revolutionary England*, with a chapter entitled, “The Definition of a Puritan.”{4} And John Spurr, in his book on English Puritanism, has an introductory section on “Defining Puritans.”{5} But we’ll leave it to the scholars to haggle over details. For our purposes, it’s good enough to say that the Puritans were English Protestants who were influenced by the theology of the Reformation. They were zealous to “purify” not only the Church of England, but also their society, and even themselves, from all doctrinal, ceremonial, and moral impurity—and to do so for the glory of God.{6} The time period of English Puritanism spans roughly the years between 1550 and 1700.{7}

So that’s who the Puritans were, but why on earth should we care? Personally, I think it’s because the Puritans can offer us a great deal of wisdom, wisdom that could really benefit the church and society of our own day. As Packer reminds us, “The great Puritans, though dead, still speak to us through their writings, and say things . . . that we badly need to hear at the present time.”{8}

The Puritans and God

Before going any further, we need to come right out and admit that, at least on the popular level, the Puritans really seem to suffer from an “image problem.” According to J. I. Packer, “Pillorying the
Puritans . . . has long been a popular pastime.” Likewise, Peter Marshall and David Manuel observe that “Nearly everyone today seems to believe that the Puritans were bluenosed killjoys in tall black hats, a somber group of sin-obsessed, witch-hunting bigots.” Of course, like Packer, they regard this view as “a monstrous misrepresentation.” But when a view is so widely held, we seem to be in for an uphill battle if we want to suggest some ways in which the Puritans were admirable!

So where do we begin? Let’s briefly consider the way in which Puritans sought to live their lives before God. The Westminster Shorter Catechism, a teaching device highly esteemed by many Puritans, begins by asking, “What is the chief end of man?” That’s a great question, isn’t it? They answered it this way: “Man’s chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever.”

Now what follows if this answer is correct? Well first, it would mean that human life is objectively full of meaning, value, and purpose, for God exists and (as General Maximus asserted in the hit movie, Gladiator) “what we do in life echoes in eternity.” But second, in claiming that “man’s chief end” consists not only in glorifying God in the here and now, but also in enjoying Him forever, we see the potential for the complete and eternal fulfillment of human existence. For what could be better than enjoying God, the greatest good, forever and ever?

The Puritans and Books

Now some may have thought of the Puritans as ignorant, or anti-intellectual—people who either feared or hated learning. But this, claims Leland Ryken, is “absolutely untrue.” Indeed, he says, “No Christian movement in history has been more zealous for education than the Puritans.” Many leaders of the Puritan movement were university educated and saw great value in the life of the mind. One can list individual Puritans who were interested in things like astronomy, botany, medicine, and still other subjects from the book of nature.

Above all, however, Puritanism was a movement which prized that greatest of all books, the Bible. Puritans loved their Bibles—and deemed it both their joy and duty to study, teach, believe and live out its promises and commandments. According to Packer, “Intense veneration for Scripture . . . and a devoted concern to know and do all that it prescribes, was Puritanism’s hallmark.”

Indeed, so great was this Puritan veneration for Scripture that even those without much formal education often knew their English Bible exceedingly well. A great example of this can be seen in John Bunyan, the famed author of The Pilgrim’s Progress. Although he did not have much in the way of formal education, one of his later editors declared (doubtless with some exaggeration) that “No man ever possessed a more intimate knowledge of the Bible, nor greater aptitude in quoting it than Bunyan.”

For Puritans like Bunyan, the Bible was the inspired word of God. It was thus the highest court of appeal in all matters of Christian faith and practice. Indeed, since the Bible came from God, it was viewed as having the same divine authority as God himself. It was therefore worth one’s time to know the Bible well, and to be intimately familiar with its contents. As two contemporary scholars...
of Puritanism remind us, the Bible was both “the mirror before which each person could see the . . .
status of one’s soul before God, and the guidebook for all human behavior . . .”[20]

The Puritan stress on knowing, believing, and obeying God’s inspired word is refreshing. What might
the church in America look like if it really recaptured this Puritan vision for the importance of
Scripture? Here the writings of the Puritans can still be a valuable resource for the church
today, which is yet another reason for seeing them as admirable.[21]

**The Puritans and the Church**

Even in our own day, the Puritans remain fairly well-known for their desire to “purify” the Church of
England from anything which, in their estimation, smacked of doctrinal, moral, or ceremonial
impurity.[22] The Puritans were passionate about the purity of the church. But how were they
to determine if a particular doctrine or practice was suspect?

For the Puritans, it was only natural that God’s inspired word, the Bible, should serve as the final
authority in all such matters. If a doctrine was taught in Scripture, then it should also be taught in
the church. And if not, then it shouldn’t. The same standard would apply to all moral and ceremonial
issues as well. Scripture was to have the final word about whether any particular doctrine or
practice was, or was not, to be taught or permitted in the church of God.[23] Of course, this is right
in line with what we said above about the Puritan devotion to Scripture.

But once one is committed to judging everything within the church according to the standard of
Scripture, it probably won’t be long before one’s view of the church undergoes a similar biblical
scrutiny. Such scrutiny soon led Puritans to “the notion that the church is a spiritual reality.” The
church is not the building in which the redeemed gather to meet, it is rather “the company of the
redeemed” themselves.[24] Doubtless this was one of the reasons why the Puritans were eager to
purify not only the church, understood in a corporate sense, but themselves as individuals as well.

It also helps explain the Puritans’ devotion to both the fellowship of the saints and the discipline of
an erring brother or sister in the faith. The Puritan pastor Richard Sibbes urged God’s people “to
strengthen and encourage one another in the ways of holiness.”[25] And Robert Coachman
reminded his readers that “it is no small privilege . . . to live in . . . a society” where one’s brothers
and sisters in Christ “will not suffer them to go on in sin.”[26]

But isn’t it all too easy to allow Christian fellowship to lapse into something that is superficial,
boring, and sometimes even frankly unspiritual? Yes; and this is why the great English Puritans are
quick to remind us (sometimes in the most forceful of ways) that we must continually seek, in
our fellowship together, to promote both faith and holiness, along with a deep love and reverent fear
of the Lord our God. And isn’t that an admirable reminder?

**The Puritans on Marriage and the Family**

If there’s one thing that almost everyone thinks they know about the Puritans it’s that they “were
sexually inhibited and repressive,” right?[27] But just how accurate is our knowledge about the
Puritans on this score? Well according to some scholars, it’s wide of the mark indeed.[28]

Of course, it’s certainly true that the Puritans believed, just as the New Testament teaches, that
human sexual behavior should be enjoyed only within the marriage relationship between a husband
and wife. And naturally enough, they disapproved of any sexual behavior outside of this relationship.
But within the union of heterosexual marriage, the Puritans were actually quite vocal proponents of
a rich and vibrant sex life. Indeed, one Puritan author described sex as “one of the most proper and
essential acts of marriage” and encouraged married couples to engage in it “with good will and delight, willingly, readily and cheerfully.”{29} And need I add that the Puritans thought it important to practice what they preached?!

But with Puritan couples so “readily and cheerfully” enjoying their sexual relationships within marriage, they naturally had to give some serious thought to the raising of children and the purpose of the family! So what did they have to say about such matters?

For the Puritans, the family ultimately had the same purpose as the individual; namely, “the glory of God.” The reason this is important, notes Ryken, is that “it determines what goes on in a family,” by setting “priorities in a spiritual rather than material direction.”{30}

The Puritans rightly saw that if one wants a spiritually healthy church and a morally healthy society, one must first have spiritually and morally healthy individuals and families—for the former are inevitably composed of the latter.{31} Hence, if we want healthy churches and societies, we must also prize healthy individuals. And such individuals are best produced within spiritually and morally healthy families.

Now I personally find it difficult to argue with the Puritan logic on this point. And although they lived in a different era, Puritan views on the purpose of the family really seem to offer “some attractive possibilities for our own age.”{32}

And now we’ve reached the end of our discussion of English Puritanism. Of course, the Puritans also had their faults—and I’ve no desire to pretend otherwise.{33} But I hope you’d agree that there’s much to admire about these oft-maligned and misrepresented giants of the past. And I also hope this might encourage you to read (and profit from) these giants for yourself!

Notes

1. J. I. Packer, A Quest for Godliness: The Puritan Vision of the Christian Life (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1990), 11. I should probably note that the California Department of Parks and Recreation gives figures slightly different from those in Packer’s book, but this is really immaterial for my purposes in this article. See, for example, “How Big are Big Trees,” California Department of Parks and Recreation, accessed February 12, 2015, www.parks.ca.gov/?page_id=1146.

2. Packer, A Quest for Godliness, 11.


6. Definitional help was gathered from the sources cited above, as well as the article by Mark A Noll, “Puritanism,” in Evangelical Dictionary of Theology, ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984), 897-900.

7. Packer, A Quest for Godliness, 11.

8. Ibid., 16.
9. Ibid., 21.


11. Ibid.

12. According to Packer, the Puritan Richard Baxter used this catechism to help instruct (and encourage) his parishioners in the truths of the Christian faith. See Packer, *A Quest for Godliness*, 45.


17. See the brief discussion in Charles Pastoor and Galen Johnson, *The A to Z of the Puritans* (Lanham, MY: Scarecrow Press, 2009), s.v. “Science.”


21. Packer says much the same thing. See *A Quest for Godliness*, 16.

22. For the Puritans, of course, this was typically some vestige of Roman Catholicism. I purposefully chose not to mention this on the radio, however, because I did not want any of our listeners to somehow get the mistaken idea that this was an anti-Catholic program. It’s not. My purpose in this program is to extol the virtues of the Puritans—not to vilify some other segment of the Christian community.

23. Leland Ryken has an excellent discussion of this issue in his chapter on “Church and Worship” in *Worldly Saints*, 111-135. See particularly pp. 112-115.

24. This, and the previous quotation, are both taken from Ryken, *Worldly Saints*, 115.


28. See, for example, Ryken’s chapter on “Marriage and Sex” in *Worldly Saints*, 39-55.


31. Ryken provides numerous examples of this view from the writings of Puritans in *Worldly Saints*, 74-5; 84-7.

32. Ibid., 73.


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