

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.{4} 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.{5} 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.{6} 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 Triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem." {7} The views thus differ on the date of Jesus' death, but each can comfortably fit the evidence.{8}

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." {9} 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.[{10}](#) 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.’[{11}](#) 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.”[{12}](#) 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. Gaebeline, vol. 7 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1985), 427.
2. Allen Ross, "Messianic Prophecies," at www.bible.org/page.php?page_id=2764. Accessed on September 6, 2007.

3. See, for example, Matthew 11:27; John 8:58 and 10:30.
4. Gleason L. Archer, Jr., "Daniel," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin, vol. 7 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1985), 114. See also Ezra 7:11-26.
5. J. Dwight Pentecost, "Daniel," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: Old Testament*, eds. John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck (Colorado Springs, CO: Victor Books, 1985), 1362. See also Nehemiah 2:1-8.
6. See, for example, the discussion in Ross, "Messianic Prophecies," at www.bible.org/page.php?page_id=2764. Accessed on September 6, 2007.
7. Ibid.
8. The first holds that He was crucified in A.D. 30, the second in A.D. 33.
9. Pentecost, "Daniel," 1364.
10. Earl S. Kalland, "Deuteronomy," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin, vol. 3 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1992), 122.
11. F. Duane Lindsey, "Zechariah," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: Old Testament*, eds. John 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.
14. Brown, interviewed in Strobel, *The Case for the Real Jesus*, 201.
15. Ibid.
16. Ibid., 213.
17. Ibid.
18. Ibid., 212.
19. For a defense of this important claim, please see some of the excellent articles by William Lane Craig at www.reasonablefaith.org. For more scriptural support, please compare Peter's sermon in Acts 2:22-36 with Psalm 16:8-11.
20. Brown, interviewed in Strobel, *The Case for the Real*

Body and Soul in the New Testament

Dr. Michael Gleghorn draws on John Cooper's book Body, Soul and Life Everlasting to provide an overview of what the New Testament teaches about the body-soul connection.

The Teaching of Jesus

What does the New Testament teach about the nature and destiny of human beings? In a [previous article](#), I discussed what the Old Testament has to say about these issues, giving special attention to the human body and soul. In this article, we'll consider what the New Testament has to say.

About 400 years separate the end of the Old Testament from the beginning of the New. During this so-called "intertestamental" period, Jewish biblical scholars, like the Pharisees, continued to teach and write about what God had revealed in the Hebrew Scriptures. According to John Cooper, the Pharisees taught that when a person dies, the soul leaves the body to continue its existence "in an intermediate state, already enjoying or lamenting the anticipated consequences of God's judgment."[\[1\]](#) Interestingly, both Jesus and the Apostle Paul also seem to have held this view.[\[2\]](#)



Consider, for example, some of the last words spoken by Jesus just prior to His death on the cross. You may remember that

Jesus was crucified between two criminals. While one of these men railed against Jesus, the other (aware of his guilt), asked Jesus to “remember” him when He came into His kingdom (Luke 23:39-42). Jesus responded by promising *this* man that he would join Him “in Paradise” that very day (v. 43). Paradise, in the Jewish thinking of the time, was understood to be a pleasant and refreshing place where the souls of the righteous continue their existence between the death and resurrection of the body.[\[3\]](#)

The body, in other words, may die, but the soul, or person, continues to exist apart from their body. Although this criminal had only hours left to live, his elementary confession of faith in Jesus resulted in Jesus promising him that they would be together in Paradise that very day! This ought to encourage all of us who have put our hope in Christ for salvation. Our bodies may wear out and die. But when they do, we shall go to be with Christ, awaiting the resurrection of our bodies while enjoying the presence of the Lord!

But what about the other criminal, the one who mocked and insulted Jesus? Although we’re not told what happened to him, we know from elsewhere in Scripture that the souls of the unrepentant also continue to exist after the death of the body. In the next section we’ll take a closer look at the fate of the righteous and unrighteous dead.

The Rich Man and Lazarus

What happens to us when we die? Do we continue to exist in some sense? Jesus’ story of the rich man and Lazarus appears to offer some answers to these questions (see Luke 16:19-31). The story concerns a rich man, who lacks for nothing, and a poor beggar, named Lazarus, who is laid at the rich man’s gate (v. 20). The story implies that the rich man could have helped Lazarus, but never did so.

Eventually, both men died. Lazarus is said to be “carried by the angels to Abraham’s side” (v. 22). Essentially, he is depicted as being with the Jewish patriarch Abraham in Paradise. Paradise, you’ll remember, was considered a place of rest and refreshment for the righteous dead. By contrast, the rich man, his body having been buried, finds himself in “torment” in Hades (vv. 22-23). Seeing both Abraham and Lazarus at a great distance, he pleads with them for help. Abraham, however, tells him that this just isn’t possible (vv. 24-31).

What might this story teach us about the nature and destiny of human beings? Though we should perhaps be careful about reading the story too literally, it seems to teach that we will each continue to exist (in some sense) even *after* the death of our body. Moreover, this existence will be experienced as either joyful or sorrowful, depending on our relationship with God. Although the story seems to depict the rich man and Lazarus as if they still have bodies of some sort, John Cooper offers several reasons for believing that the story is using figurative language to describe a time in which these men exist apart from their bodies.[\[4\]](#) This would be the period between the death and resurrection of the body. What are some of the reasons that Cooper offers for this view?

First, at the time Jesus tells this story, He regarded the resurrection as a still future event (see Luke 20:34-36). It is thus unlikely that the story here concerns some sort of literal bodily existence. Second, the story locates the rich man in “Hades”—and this term appears only to be used of the intermediate state, between the death and resurrection of the body.[\[5\]](#) The story thus appears to depict the rich man and Lazarus as consciously existing persons between the death and resurrection of their bodies. And if this is so, then we are *more* than just our bodies (as we’ll see more fully in the next section).

Paul's Heavenly Vision

Do you view yourself as *more* than just your body? Might you also have a soul? We've previously considered evidence for the human soul in the teachings of Jesus. In this section, we'll consider further evidence from the writings of the Apostle Paul. In his second letter to the Corinthians, Paul recounts an extraordinary experience which he had fourteen years earlier (see 2 Corinthians 12:1-4, 7). He describes being "caught up . . . into paradise" and hearing "things that cannot be told, which man may not utter" (vv. 2-4).

For our purposes, the most important element of this experience concerns a peculiar detail mentioned twice by the apostle. According to Paul, he was unsure whether he had this experience while "in the body or out of the body" (vv. 2-3). That is, Paul was unsure whether he had been "caught up into Paradise" (v. 3) in his body, or out of it. But why is this important? Because it shows that Paul regarded the "out of body" option as a genuine possibility.[{6}](#)

You see, many scholars have argued that Paul did not believe in any sort of conscious existence apart from the body. The great New Testament scholar F. F. Bruce claimed that Paul "could not conceive" of a situation in which he might exist and have experiences apart from his body.[{7}](#) Now you might be thinking, "Well wait just a minute. Didn't you say that Paul was unsure whether this experience had occurred while in the body or out of it? Maybe he remained in his body and the experience was just a *vision* of Paradise, occurring while he was in some sort of trance-like state on earth."[{8}](#)

Yes, you're right. That *is* possible (although it doesn't seem consistent with what Paul actually says).[{9}](#) And here's the thing: the very fact that Paul was unsure whether this experience occurred while he was in (or out of) his body, tells us that he regarded the "out of body" explanation as a genuine possibility. And if this is so, then contrary to what

some scholars have said, Paul most certainly *could* conceive of conscious existence apart from his body. Indeed, he thought he may have had just such an experience himself.

But we can take this argument further. For as we'll see in the next section, Paul (like the Pharisees and Jesus), seemed to think that we'll continue to exist and have experiences between the death and resurrection of our bodies.

Our Heavenly Dwelling

When I was a child, our family would occasionally go camping. Although we usually went in a camper, with air-conditioning and beds, I've also spent a few nights camping out in a tent. Most of us have probably had such an experience (though whether we enjoyed it or not is another matter). A tent is basically a portable structure that provides a temporary place to stay while we're away from our permanent home.

In 2 Corinthians 5 the Apostle Paul has a fascinating discussion that touches on some of these issues (see vv. 1-10). The discussion is challenging, but if we consider it step by step, I think we can get a handle on what the apostle is saying. He begins, "For we know that if the tent that is our earthly home is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens" (v. 1).

When Paul writes of "the tent that is our earthly home," he is referring to our physical bodies here and now. If our body is "destroyed," and we die physically, "we have," says Paul, "a building from God . . . eternal in the heavens" awaiting us. According to John Cooper, this "building" can plausibly refer to one of two things.[{10}](#) It *might* refer to our future resurrection body. However, it may also refer simply to "being 'with Christ'." If the second option is meant, then Paul is speaking about going to be "with Christ" at the time of death, in which we are (as he later puts it), "at home with the Lord"

(2 Corinthians 5:8; see also Philippians 1:23).

Paul characterizes our present “earthly” state as one of groaning, “longing to put on our heavenly dwelling” that “we may not be found naked” (1 Corinthians 5:2-3). Although these verses are difficult to interpret, it is probable that “nakedness” refers to temporarily existing without a body when we die. If so, then Paul is saying that when we die, we go immediately to be “with Christ.” There we are “at home with the Lord,” awaiting that day in which we will “put on our heavenly dwelling” (v. 2). This likely refers to our resurrection body. At the time of the resurrection, our souls will be united with a glorious new body, so that we might eternally enjoy life with Christ and fellow believers in the new heaven and new earth. We will consider these issues more fully in the next section.

The Resurrection of the Body

The Bible envisions a future time in which all who have died will be raised from the dead into some sort of physical, bodily existence. The New Testament writers refer to this as “the resurrection of the dead” and it will include both believers and unbelievers. Hence Jesus, referring to His own unique role in executing divine judgment, claims that “an hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear His voice and come out, those who have done good to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil to the resurrection of judgment” (John 5:28-29). Although evidence elsewhere in the New Testament suggests that different groups of people may be raised at different times, the key point here is that this event has not yet taken place. It’s still in the future.

Paul says much the same thing in several of his letters. To cite just one example, he tells the Philippians that “we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables

Him even to subject all things to Himself” (Philippians 3:20-21). Elsewhere Paul tells us that our resurrection bodies will be “imperishable,” “powerful,” and glorious (1 Corinthians 15:42-43). It’s incredibly exciting to contemplate the fact that the Lord intends to give his people marvelous new bodies, patterned after his own resurrection body, so that we might enjoy eternal life with him forever. When that day dawns, our joy will truly be complete!

So how might we attempt to summarize our discussion in this article? First, both Jesus and Paul seem to have taught that human beings are (in some sense) composed of both a body and a soul. John Cooper describes the relationship of soul and body as one of “functional holism.” Our body and soul *function* as a thoroughly integrated *whole* during our present earthly lives. But when our body dies, our soul continues to exist, awaiting the resurrection of our body at some future time.[\[11\]](#)

On that day, our soul will be united with our resurrection body, either to enjoy eternal life with Jesus, or face eternal judgment in hell. This, it seems to me, is what the New Testament has to say about the nature and destiny of humanity. In Christ we are offered a sure and steadfast hope for both our soul—and our body!

Notes

1. John W. Cooper, *Body, Soul & Life Everlasting: Biblical Anthropology and the Monism-Dualism Debate* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), Kindle Loc. 1208.
2. J. P. Moreland, *The Soul: How We Know It’s Real and Why It Matters* (Chicago: Moody, 2014), 55, Kindle.
3. This becomes a bit complicated. John Cooper points out that Jewish thinking about the afterlife continued its development during the intertestamental period. While some Rabbis conceived of “Paradise” as a special place for the righteous dead within Sheol, others began to think of Paradise as outside Sheol altogether. Regardless of such differences, however, Cooper reminds us that “Paradise” was understood as

the place “where the blessed dwell with the Lord” (see Cooper, *Body, Soul & Life Everlasting*, Kindle Loc. 1175-1200).

4. Cooper, *Body, Soul & Life Everlasting*, Kindle Loc. 1605; see also Loc. 1592-1607.

5. Again, see Cooper’s discussion in *Body, Soul & Life Everlasting*, Kindle Loc. 1592-1607.

6. Cooper makes this point emphatically in *Body, Soul & Life Everlasting*, Kindle Loc. 1880-86.

7. F. F. Bruce, *Paul: Apostle of the Heart Set Free* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 313; cited in John Cooper, *Body, Soul & Life Everlasting*, Kindle Loc. 1840.

8. This possibility is also mentioned in *Cooper, Body, Soul & Life Everlasting*, Kindle Loc. 1871.

9. Again, see Cooper, *Body, Soul & Life Everlasting*, Kindle Loc. 1872.

10. See Cooper, *Body, Soul & Life Everlasting*, Kindle Loc. 1837.

11. See Cooper’s discussion in *Body, Soul & Life Everlasting*, Kindle Loc. 699-712.

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Friendship with Jesus

Dr. Michael Gleghorn draws on a work by Dr. Gail R. O’Day, “Jesus as Friend in the Gospel of John,”[{1}](#) to explore the perspective of Jesus Christ as a Friend.

What a Friend We Have in Jesus[{2}](#)

In his book, *The Problem of Pain*, C. S. Lewis offers four analogies of God’s love for humanity.[{3}](#) These include the love of an artist for a great work of art, the love of a human being for an animal, the love of a father for his son, and the

love of a man for a woman. Interestingly, he does not consider the analogy of friendship, or love between friends. In one sense it's surprising, for Lewis would later write quite perceptively about friendship in his book, *The Four Loves*.

Of course, at this time in his career, Lewis may not have even thought about the love of friendship in the context of discussing analogies of God's love for humanity. After all, on the surface, the Bible appears to say little about friendship between God and human beings. But saying little is not the same as saying nothing, and the Bible does speak about the possibility of enjoying friendship with God. In fact, the Gospel of John offers a great illustration of this in the life and teaching of Jesus, whom Christians regard as God the Son incarnate. John presents Jesus as a true friend, one who is willing to speak the truth to those He loves and to lay down His life for their benefit.



Consider Jesus' words to his disciples in John 15: "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you" (vv. 12-15).

In this brief passage, Jesus surfaces several important elements of friendship which would have been readily recognized by people in the ancient world. We'll carefully consider each of these elements in this article. For now, however, the key point to notice is that Jesus explicitly refers to His disciples as "friends." Moreover, He also holds out to them the possibility of deepening their friendship with both Him, and one another.

In what follows, we'll unpack many of these ideas further. First, however, we must get a better understanding of how friendship was viewed in the ancient world.

Friendship in the Ancient World

Of course, John's discussion of friendship in his gospel does not occur in a cultural or historical vacuum. Indeed, he seems to have been aware of other such discussions and even enters into a dialogue (of sorts) with some of them. So how was friendship understood in the ancient world?

The most important discussion of friendship in antiquity is probably that found in Aristotle's *Ethics*. As one philosopher observes, "Aristotle's treatise on friendship is comprehensive and confident, as well as undeniably profound."[\[4\]](#) Aristotle views friendship as something like the glue of a community, binding people together in relations of benevolence and love. Such relations are indispensable for the community's health and well-being.[\[5\]](#)

Aristotle describes friendship as "*reciprocated goodwill*" and claims that the highest form of friendship occurs between "good people similar in virtue." The primary virtue of real friends is "loving" one another. And such love is expressed in practical actions, for the virtuous person "labours for his friends" and is even willing to "die for them" if necessary.

Finally, the ancients also viewed "frank speech" and "openness" as essential elements of friendship. According to Plutarch, "Frankness of speech . . . is the language of friendship . . . and . . . lack of frankness is unfriendly and ignoble."[\[6\]](#) The language of friendship thus involves something like "speaking the truth in love" (Ephesians 4:15). Friendship should allow, and even encourage, frank speech. And yet, such speech should always be characterized by love and a genuine desire for the friend's best interest.

Putting this all together, we can see how Jesus' remarks about friendship correlate with the ancient ideals expressed in the writings of men like Aristotle and Plutarch. Just as Aristotle viewed friendship as the glue of a community, so also Jesus seems to envision the formation of a community of friends, who are bound together in love by their shared allegiance to Him. As biblical scholar Dr. Gail O'Day observes, "The language of friendship provided language for talking about the construction of a community of like-minded people informed by a particular set of teachings."[\[7\]](#)

Below, we'll consider how Jesus both models and encourages the ancient ideals of friendship in His life and teaching.

The Language of Friendship

One of the ways in which John shows Jesus demonstrating friendship is through his frank and honest speech. We've seen that in the ancient world, open and honest speech was regarded as one of the hallmarks of friendship. And there are several occasions in which such speech is attributed to Jesus in the Gospel of John (e.g., 7:26; 10:24-30; 11:14; 16:25-33; 18:19-20).[\[8\]](#)

Of course, this doesn't mean that everything Jesus had to say was easy to understand. It wasn't, and even his disciples often misunderstood Him. Nor does it mean that Jesus never taught truths about God by using parables or figurative language. Indeed, He often did. What it does mean, however, is that throughout his Gospel, John repeatedly portrays Jesus as speaking and teaching the truth about God openly and honestly to all who care to listen.

For example, Jesus is described as "speaking openly" while teaching the people in the temple at the Feast of Booths (John 7:14, 26). Moreover, after His arrest, when Jesus is being questioned by the High Priest, He frankly declares to those

present, "I have spoken openly to the world. I have always taught in synagogues and in the temple, where all Jews come together. I have said nothing in secret" (John 18:20). Dr. Gail O'Day observes that Jesus here claims that His entire public ministry has "been characterized by freedom of speech throughout its duration." She writes, "Jesus has not held anything back in His self-revelation but has spoken with the freedom that marks a true friend."^[9]

Finally, we must not forget what Jesus says to His disciples in John 15: "No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you" (v. 15). Here Jesus explicitly refers to His disciples as "friends," claiming that He has "made known" to them everything that He has heard from the Father. Not only does Jesus call His disciples "friends," He also speaks to them in the language of friendship, openly and honestly revealing to them the heart and mind of the Father.

Judged by the criterion of "frank and honest speech," Jesus thus reveals Himself to be a true friend to His disciples. And as we'll see next, He is willing to do much more than this, for Jesus is willing to lay down His life for the benefit of others.

The Ultimate Demonstration of Friendship

In John 15 Jesus declares, "Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends" (v. 13). Earlier we saw that Aristotle, in his writings on friendship, maintained that the true friend, actuated by genuine goodness, would even be willing to "die" (if necessary) for the sake of a friend.^[10] Of course, as any reader of the Gospels knows, Jesus soon does this very thing, thus demonstrating the greatest possible love according to the ancient ideals of friendship. As Dr. O'Day observes, "Jesus did what the philosophers only talked about—He lay down his

life for His friends.”[{11}](#)

This event is foreshadowed by Jesus in His claim to be the Good Shepherd in John 10. “I am the good shepherd,” He says. “The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep” (v. 11). This claim is one of the seven “I Am” statements of Jesus in the Gospel of John, and it likely involves an implicit claim to deity, for as Edwin Blum has noted, “In the Old Testament, God is called the Shepherd of His people (Psalm 23:1; 80:1-2; Ecclesiastes 12:11; Isaiah 40:11; Jeremiah 31:10).”[{12}](#) One thinks of the way in which David begins Psalm 23: “The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want” (v. 1). The Lord Jesus, as the Good Shepherd of His people, is willing to lay down His life for their benefit (John 10:11).

But Jesus goes further than this, for as Paul tells us, Jesus not only gave His life for His “friends,” but even for His “enemies.” “For while we were still weak,” writes Paul, “at the right time Christ died for the ungodly” (Romans 5:6). “While we were still sinners” (Romans 5:8), and even “enemies,” “we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son” (Romans 5:10). If dying for one’s friends epitomizes the ancient ideal of friendship, dying for one’s enemies far transcends this ideal. It demonstrates the sacrificial love of God for all humanity. While we were spiritually dead, mired in sin and rebellion (Ephesians 2:1-3), God “sent his Son to be the savior of the world” (1 John 4:14).

Aristotle referred to friendship as “reciprocated goodwill.” Jesus demonstrated the greatest possible love and “goodwill” of God by giving His life for the sins of the world (John 1:29). He commands His disciples to reciprocate His goodwill by loving “one another” as He has loved us (John 15:12, 14). By following His command, a community of friends is formed, bound together in love for one another and a shared commitment to Jesus.

A Community of Friends

Jesus calls His disciples “friends” and commands them to “love one another” as He has loved them (John 15:12). Jesus wants His followers to regard themselves not only as *His* friends, but as friends of one another as well. He intends for them to be a community of friends, bound together in their love for one another because of their shared devotion to Him. The sort of love to which Jesus calls them is a costly love, for He desires that His people’s love for one another be an imitation of the love that He has already demonstrated toward them. And what sort of love is this? It’s the kind of love that is willing to give one’s life for the benefit of others, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends (John 15:13).

Now this, I think we can all agree, is a very high calling. Indeed, if we’re honest, I think that we must all admit that, humanly speaking, it is frankly impossible. If some degree of discomfort does not grip our hearts in considering this commandment, then we probably aren’t considering it in all due seriousness. Very few of us will probably ever reach the level of truly loving other believers just as Jesus has loved us, and if any of us do reach it, we probably won’t be able to consistently maintain such love in our daily practice. But Jesus commands us to do it, and we must at least begin trying to do so. But how?

Dr. Gail O’Day, I think, strikes the right tone when she comments: “The disciples begin with the explicit appellation, ‘friend,’ and the challenge for them is to enact and embody friendship as Jesus has done. The disciples know how Jesus has been a friend, and they are called to see what kind of friends they can become. Jesus’ friendship is the model of friendship for the disciples, and it makes any subsequent acts of friendship by them possible because the disciples themselves are already the recipients of Jesus’ acts of friendship.”[\[13\]](#)

We must remember that Jesus is our friend, that He loves us

and provides all that we need to live a holy and God-honoring life. Indeed, He has sent the Holy Spirit to indwell and empower His people for just this purpose. As we trust in Jesus, giving ourselves to Him (and one another) in genuine love and friendship, we will find that we are increasingly obeying His commands and bearing fruit that brings Him glory. So let's commit ourselves to friendship with Jesus, and to those who compose His body, the church (1 Corinthians 12:27; Ephesians 5:23; Colossians 1:24).

Notes

1. Much of the content of this article is indebted to the prior work of Gail R. O'Day, "Jesus as Friend in the Gospel of John," *Interpretation*, 58(2):144-157.
2. The title for this day is indebted to the song, "What a Friend We Have in Jesus." The words to this song were originally penned by Joseph Scriven in the 19th century; they were set to music by Charles Converse in 1868. For a brief history of Scriven and the hymn, please see Terry, L. (2004, July-August). Joseph Scriven's: "What a Friend We Have in Jesus": What a friend we have in Jesus, all our sins and griefs to bear! What a privilege to carry everything to God in prayer! *Today's Christian*, 42(4), 16.
3. C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (New York, NY: Macmillan, 1962), 42-48.
4. Michael Pakaluk (Ed.), *Other Selves: Philosophers on Friendship* (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1991), 28.
5. I am drawing from Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Terence Irwin (Hackett Publishing, 1985), 1155a23-27.
6. Plutarch, *How to Tell a Flatterer from a Friend*, 61; cited in Gail O'Day, "Jesus as Friend in the Gospel of John," *Interpretation* 58(2):147.
7. O'Day, 147.
8. See the discussion in O'Day, 152-57.
9. O'Day, 156.
10. See Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Terence Irwin

(Hackett Publishing, 1985).

11. O'Day, 150.

12. Edwin A. Blum, "John," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: New Testament Edition*, ed. John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck (Victor Books, 1989), 310.

13. O'Day, 152.

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C.S. Lewis as Evangelist

Dr. Michael Gleghorn provides an insightful examination of how legendary Christian author C.S. Lewis used his writing to invite his readers to put their faith in Jesus Christ.

Lewis and Evangelism

"C. S. Lewis never invited unbelievers to come to Jesus. He was a very successful evangelist." So begins Michael Ward's essay "Escape to Wallaby Wood: Lewis's Depictions of Conversion." Ward follows up this provocative comment with others like it. For example, "Einstein failed his entrance exam to the Federal Polytechnic. He was a very successful physicist."[\[1\]](#) What is Ward wanting us to see here?



While he recognizes that his initial statement about Lewis needs some qualification, he's nonetheless put his finger on something very important about Lewis's evangelistic style. For while Lewis had a heart for evangelism, and desired to see men

and women surrender their lives to Christ, he's not the sort of person one would typically think of when hearing the term "evangelist." One might readily describe Lewis as a Christian apologist or imaginative storyteller, a literary scholar or skillful debater, but "evangelist" would probably not top the list. Nevertheless, it's important to remember that Lewis engaged in evangelistic activity in a variety of ways. While he was certainly not a "preaching" or "revivalistic" sort of evangelist, he was a "very successful evangelist" all the same.

Philip Ryken has helpfully described Lewis as a "teaching evangelist," a "praying evangelist," and a "discipling evangelist." Most important of all, however, he refers to Lewis as a "writing" or "literary evangelist." And this is surely correct, for Lewis's greatest "evangelistic impact" has been felt through his books and essays.[\[2\]](#)

Not long before his death, Lewis was interviewed by Sherwood Wirt of the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association. When asked if the aim of Christian writing (including his own writing) was to bring about an encounter between the reader and Jesus Christ, Lewis responded by saying, "That is not my language, yet it is the purpose I have in view."[\[3\]](#) Moreover, in his "Rejoinder to Dr. Pittenger," Lewis frankly confesses that most of his popular Christian books "are evangelistic" in character, and addressed to those outside the Christian faith.[\[4\]](#)

Of course, Lewis was not *merely* a "literary evangelist." While such terminology captures the fundamental way in which Lewis shared his faith, it was certainly not the only way. Moreover, evangelism was not something Lewis did simply because he enjoyed it. He felt an obligation, even a burden, to make Christ known to others.[\[5\]](#) And as we'll see later, these evangelistic concerns and motivations came with a very real cost to Lewis in terms of his professional career and friendships.[\[6\]](#)

The Significance of Lewis's Conversion

If there's one thing Lewis makes clear about his *own* conversion, first to theism and then to Christianity, it's that he felt himself to have been *pursued* by God and *drawn* into relationship with Him. While in one sense he saw his conversion as arising from a "wholly free choice" on his part, he also saw it as resulting from a kind of Divine necessity.[{7}](#) Lewis makes this clear in his spiritual autobiography, *Surprised by Joy*.

Consider the description of his conversion to Theism: "You must picture me alone in that room in Magdalen, night after night, feeling, whenever my mind lifted even for a second from my work, the steady, unrelenting approach of Him whom I so earnestly desired not to meet." Eventually, Lewis tells us, he "gave in, and admitted that God was God, and knelt and prayed," describing himself as "perhaps, that night, the most dejected and reluctant convert in all England."[{8}](#)

Interestingly, before this, Lewis had described God as offering him "a moment of wholly free choice"—an opportunity to either "open the door or keep it shut." He tells us that he chose to open it, but almost immediately relates that "it did not really seem possible to do the opposite." He goes on to speculate that perhaps "necessity" is not "the opposite of freedom."[{9}](#) All of this reveals how significant Lewis found God's involvement in his conversion to actually be.

His conversion to Christianity is similarly, if less dramatically, narrated. He writes of feeling "a resistance almost as strong as" his "previous resistance to Theism."[{10}](#) But having been through something similar already, the resistance was "shorter-lived." While being driven to Whipsnade Zoo, Lewis came to believe "that Jesus Christ is the Son of God." He once again speculates about whether this momentous event resulted from freedom or necessity and concludes that maybe the difference in such a case is

inconsequential.{11}

But why is this important for a discussion of Lewis and evangelism? Because it helps us understand how Lewis (on the one hand) could work tirelessly for the salvation of others, while also (on the other) recognizing that God was so powerfully involved in the conversion of a human soul that he (i.e., Lewis) need never worry that such weighty matters depended solely on him. He could thus be a relaxed evangelist, using his gifts to point others to Christ, while also recognizing that salvation is ultimately a work of God.

The Importance of “Translation” in Lewis’s Evangelistic Work

So far, we’ve seen that the most important of Lewis’s evangelism was through his writings. Indeed, the first book Lewis wrote, after becoming a Christian, was *The Pilgrim’s Regress*. Published in 1933, the book bears the rather lengthy subtitle: “An Allegorical Apology for Christianity, Romanticism, and Reason.” And as with so many of the books that followed Lewis’s conversion, it was concerned to commend Christianity to others.

In 1938, Lewis published the first volume of his “Cosmic Trilogy,” titled *Out of the Silent Planet*.{12} In this book, Lewis communicates elements of Christian theology within the context of a science-fiction adventure story. In 1940, he published *The Problem of Pain*, a work of Christian apologetics concerned to address the problem of evil and suffering. As I’ve noted elsewhere, this book “attracted the attention of James Welch, the Director of Religious Broadcasting for the . . . BBC.”{13} Welch wrote to Lewis, asking if he might be willing to compose a series of broadcast talks for the BBC. Lewis accepted the invitation, and the talks he composed eventually became the first book of his now classic statement of basic theology, *Mere Christianity*.{14} These influential

talks were delivered during the years of World War II.

In addition to these now-famous “broadcast talks,” Lewis also spoke to the men and women of the Royal Air Force during the war. Such experiences helped teach Lewis the importance (and even necessity) of “translating” Christian doctrine into terms the average layperson could readily understand. Lewis wanted to communicate Christian truth to his audience, and he realized that to do so effectively, he needed to learn their language.^{15} He thus described his task as “that of a *translator*—one turning Christian doctrine . . . into language that unscholarly people would attend to and could understand.”^{16}

It was Lewis’s skill as a “translator” that made him so successful as a “literary evangelist.” Few writers have been so effective at communicating the essential truths of Christianity to a broad, general, and often unbelieving audience, as C. S. Lewis. Indeed, Lewis placed so much importance on “translating” Christian truth into the language of the average layperson that he thought every ordination exam ought to require that the examinee demonstrate an ability to do it.^{17} And in *Mere Christianity* (along with other works), we get a glimpse of Lewis doing this very thing.

Evangelism in Lewis’s Fiction

In discussing the evangelistic work of C. S. Lewis, we’ve seen how Lewis’s evangelistic concerns impacted his work as a popular Christian apologist. Now it’s time to consider how these same concerns find expression in his fiction. In his essay, “Sometimes Fairy Stories May Say Best What’s to be Said,” Lewis discusses a major motivation for his fictional work. He tells us:

“I wrote fairy tales because . . . I thought I saw how stories of this kind could steal past a certain inhibition

which had paralysed much of my own religion in childhood. Why did one find it so hard to feel as one was told one ought to feel about God or about the sufferings of Christ? I thought the chief reason was that one was told one ought to. An obligation to feel can freeze feelings. And reverence itself did harm. The whole subject was associated with lowered voices; almost as if it were something medical. But supposing that by casting all these things into an imaginary world, stripping them of their stained-glass and Sunday school associations, one could make them for the first time appear in their real potency? Could one not thus steal past those watchful dragons? I thought one could (00W, 37).[{18}](#)

Through his fiction, Lewis helps his readers personally experience the potency of Christian truth. Consider *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*. In that story, Edmund (one of the four Pevensie children who enter Narnia through the wardrobe) initially sides with the White Witch against the great lion Aslan. The Witch has all Narnia under her spell, making it “always winter and never Christmas.”[{19}](#) In his desire to one day be king of Narnia, Edmund betrays his brother and sisters. According to the Deep Magic that governs Narnia, he thus deserves to die.[{20}](#)

But Aslan, the true king of Narnia, intercedes for Edmund, and the Witch renounces her claim on his life. The catch is that Aslan must give his own life in place of Edmund’s. This he willingly does. But like Jesus in the Gospels, death cannot hold him in its power, and he returns to life again. According to one scholar, “the desired response” to this is not so much “to believe in the vicarious suffering of Christ, but to taste it.”[{21}](#) Lewis thus used his fiction as a vehicle for evangelism, helping his readers to “taste” Christian truth in powerful (and even delightful) ways.

The “Cost” of Lewis’s Evangelistic Witness

Although Lewis was not the sort of person one would typically think of when hearing the term “evangelist,” he nonetheless had a heart for evangelism and was motivated to labor for the conversion of others. In fact, Christopher Mitchell has observed that “Lewis perceived evangelism to be his lay vocation, and the means by which he expressed this evangelistic impulse were his speaking and writing.”[\[22\]](#)

While Lewis was not the sort of person to preach a conventional “Come to Jesus” sort of evangelistic sermon, he was nonetheless (as Michael Ward has noted) “a very successful evangelist.”[\[23\]](#) When one considers the vast literary output of Lewis, so much of which had evangelistic intentions, combined with his speaking, preaching, and debating on issues of vital concern to the Christian faith, along with his many prayers for the conversion of others, and generous financial assistance rendered for the cause of Christ, it is clear that the whole tenor of Lewis’s post-conversion life was driven by a strong evangelistic impulse for the salvation of souls. And this in spite of the very costly nature of this witness.

According to Mitchell, Lewis’s evangelistic commitments fostered “ridicule and scorn . . . among his non-Christian colleagues” at Oxford.[\[24\]](#) Indeed, even some of Lewis’s closest friends occasionally felt embarrassed by his “zeal for the conversion of unbelievers.”[\[25\]](#) Many of his colleagues were scandalized by the fact that Lewis used his academic training to write popular-level books in theology and Christian apologetics. No doubt some were also jealous of his ever-increasing popularity with the general public, for Lewis had an uncanny ability to write one book after another that people actually wanted to buy and read.

So *why* did Lewis do it? That’s the question Mitchell asks near

the end of his essay on this topic.^{26} Why did Lewis persist in evangelistic writing and speaking that aroused such scorn from academic colleagues, and occasional embarrassment from friends? Mitchell suggests that it likely had something to do with Lewis's conviction that "There are no *ordinary* people."^{27} Hence, while his evangelistic activities created difficulties for him, difficulties that might easily have been avoided, Lewis was convinced that bringing glory to God through the saving of human souls was "the real business of life."^{28} And whatever abuse, scorn, or discomfort this might cause him personally, he was apparently willing to endure it in order to be found faithful.

Notes

1. Michael Ward, "Escape to Wallaby Wood: Lewis's Depictions of Conversion," in *Lightbearer in the Shadowlands: The Evangelistic Vision of C. S. Lewis*, ed. Angus J. L. Menuge (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1997), 143.
2. See Philip G. Ryken, "Winsome Evangelist: The Influence of C. S. Lewis," in *Lightbearer in the Shadowlands*, 62.
3. C. S. Lewis, "Cross-Examination," interview by Sherwood E. Wirt, in *God in the Dock*, ed. Walter Hooper (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1970), 262.
4. C. S. Lewis, "Rejoinder to Dr. Pittenger," in *God in the Dock*, 181.
5. This would seem to be implied by Lewis's remarks in his sermon, "The Weight of Glory," in *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses*, ed. Walter Hooper (New York, NY: Macmillan, 1980), 18-19.
6. See Christopher W. Mitchell, "Bearing the Weight of Glory: The Cost of C. S. Lewis's Witness," in *The Pilgrim's Guide: C. S. Lewis and the Art of Witness*, ed. David Mills (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 3-14.
7. C. S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy: The Shape of My Early Life* (New York, NY: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1955), 224-25.
8. *Ibid.*, 228-29.
9. *Ibid.*, 224-25.

10. Ibid., 237.

11. Ibid.

12. For readers interested in reading my prior article on this book, please see Michael Gleghorn, "Smuggling Theology into Out of the Silent Planet," Probe Ministries, October 29, 2023, probe.org/smuggling-theology-into-out-of-the-silent-planet/

13. Please see Michael Gleghorn, "C. S. Lewis, the BBC, and Mere Christianity," Probe Ministries, April 24, 2016, probe.org/c-s-lewis-the-bbc-and-mere-christianity/

14. For a helpful discussion of all the issues and concerns surrounding these events, please see Justin Phillips, *C. S. Lewis in a Time of War: The World War II Broadcasts that Riveted a Nation and Became the Classic Mere Christianity* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2002).

15. C. S. Lewis, "Christian Apologetics," in *God in the Dock*, 94, 98.

16. Lewis, "Rejoinder to Dr. Pittenger," in *God in the Dock*, 183.

17. Lewis, "Christian Apologetics," in *God in the Dock*, 98-99.

18. C. S. Lewis, "Sometimes Fairy Stories May Say Best What's to be Said," in *Of Other Worlds: Essays and Stories*, ed. Walter Hooper (Orlando, FL: Harcourt Brace, 1975), 37.

19. C. S. Lewis, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (New York: Macmillan, 1970), 16.

20. Ibid., 138-39.

21. Doris T. Myers, *C. S. Lewis in Context* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 1994), Kindle edition, loc. 2640.

22. Christopher W. Mitchell, "Bearing the Weight of Glory: The Cost of C. S. Lewis's Witness," in *The Pilgrim's Guide: C. S. Lewis and the Art of Witness*, ed. David Mills (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 3.

23. Ward, "Escape to Wallaby Wood," 143.

24. Mitchell, "Bearing the Weight of Glory," 7. Note: The whole of this paragraph is indebted to Mitchell's discussion in this chapter.

25. Ibid., 6-7.

26. Ibid., 9-14.

27. C. S. Lewis, "The Weight of Glory," 19.

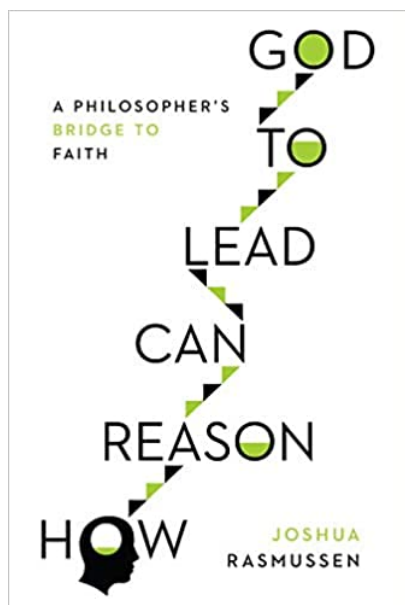
28. C. S. Lewis, "Christianity and Culture," in *Christian Reflections*, ed. Walter Hooper (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), 14.

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How Reason Can Lead to God – Part 2

Dr. Michael Gleghorn continues to make a compelling case for how reason can lead us, step by step, to the logical conclusion of God's existence based on the book How Reason Can Lead to God.

Foundation of Mind



In this article we're continuing our examination of Christian philosopher Josh Rasmussen's book, *How Reason Can Lead to God*.^{1} In [my previous article](#), I introduced the book and showed how Rasmussen began constructing a "bridge of reason" that led to "an independent, self-sufficient, . . . eternally powerful foundation of all reality."^{2}



But Rasmussen goes further, arguing that there must also be “a certain *mind-like* aspect” to this foundation.[{3}](#) And that’s what we’ll explore in this article. We’re going to follow Rasmussen’s lead as he takes us over the “bridge of reason.” And once we’ve taken that final step, we’ll see that it’s led us not to some cold, calculating, “mind-like” reality, but to a very “special treasure.”[{4}](#)

But to begin, why does Rasmussen think that the foundation of all reality must be “mind-like”? To answer that question, consider that one of the things the foundation has produced is *you*—and *you* have a mind. As Rasmussen notes, “you are capable of thinking, feeling, and making decisions.”[{5}](#) Indeed, if you’re awake and functioning normally, you have some awareness of what is going on “around” you—and even of what is going on “within” you. That’s because you possess a conscious (even *self-conscious*) mind. How is this to be explained?

According to Rasmussen there are only two live options: either minds ultimately originate from some sort of “mind-like” or “mental” reality, or else they arise solely from a physical process.[{6}](#) Is one of these options better than the other? Rasmussen thinks so, and points to “a construction problem” with the matter-to-mind option.[{7}](#) Here’s the problem. Just as a black steel pipe cannot be constructed out of emerald green toothpaste, so a self-conscious mind cannot be constructed from mindless particles. Particles just aren’t the right thing for constructing the thoughts, feelings, and purposes of a mind. In order to construct a mind, “mental materials” are needed. Hence, the foundation of all reality *must be* mind-like in order to account for the unique features of self-conscious human minds.[{8}](#)

But at this point, some may raise an objection. After all, if we say there’s a construction problem going from matter to minds, then wouldn’t there also be a problem in saying that an

immaterial mind created the material world? The answer is “No.”

Foundation of Matter

Above, we argued that one can’t explain the thoughts and intentions of human minds by appealing only to material particles. There must rather be an ultimate mind at the foundation of all reality.

But of course, human beings also have *bodies*. And your body (including your brain) is an example of incredible material complexity. Not only that, but in order for you to be physically alive, the “fundamental parameters” of the universe must be delicately balanced, or “fine-tuned,” with a precision that is mind-boggling. As physicist Alan Lightman observes, “If these fundamental parameters were much different from what they are, it is not only human beings who would not exist. No life of any kind would exist.”[\[9\]](#)

How should we account for such complexity? Can we explain it in terms of chance?[\[10\]](#) That’s wildly implausible. And better explanations are available. After all, one could *try* to explain the words of your favorite novel by appealing to “chance.” But is that “the *best* explanation?”[\[11\]](#) Isn’t it far more likely that an intelligent mind selected and ordered the words of that story with the intention of communicating something meaningful to others? While the chance hypothesis is *possible*, is it really *probable*? If we’re interested in truth, shouldn’t we prefer the *best* explanation?

So what *is* a better explanation for the material complexity that we observe—not only in our bodies, but in the fine-tuning of the universe that allows for our existence? If the ordering of the letters and words in your favorite novel is best explained by an intelligent mind, then what about the biological complexity of human beings? Scientists have

observed “that molecular biology has uncovered an analogy between DNA and language.” In short, “The genetic code functions exactly like a language code.”[{12}](#) And just as the words in a novel require an intelligent *author*, the genetic code requires an intelligent *designer*.

Hence, a *foundational mind* offers a good explanation not only for human *minds*, but for the complexity of human *bodies* as well. Moreover, a foundational mind also provides the best explanation for objective moral values.

Foundation of Morals

What is the best explanation for our moral experience in the world? How might we best account for our sense of right and wrong, good and evil? So far, we’ve seen two reasons for thinking that the ultimate foundation of reality is “mind-like.” First, a foundational mind best explains the existence of *human minds*. Second, it also offers the best explanation for the staggering material complexity of the human body and the exquisite “fine-tuning” of the universe that allows for our existence. Might a foundational mind also provide the best explanation for our moral experience? Rasmussen thinks so, and he offers potent reasons for us to think so too.[{13}](#)

Consider our sense of right and wrong. How should this be explained? Rasmussen proposes that our “moral senses are a *window* into a moral landscape.”[{14}](#) Just as our sense of sight helps us perceive objects in the physical world, so our moral sense helps us perceive values in the moral world. Of course, just as our sense of sight may not be perfect, such that a tree appears blurry or indistinct, so also our moral sense may not be perfect, such that a particular action may not be clearly seen as right or wrong. But in each case, even imperfect “sight” can provide *some* reliable information about both the material and moral landscapes.[{15}](#)

How might we best explain both the moral landscape and our experience of it? “Can the particles that comprise a material landscape, with dirt and trees, produce standards of good and bad, right and wrong?”[{16}](#) It’s hard to see how undirected particles could do such a thing. And naturally, they could have no *reason* to do so.

On the other hand, a foundational mind with a moral nature could account for *both* the moral landscape *and* our experience of it. As Rasmussen observes, such a being would account for moral values because of its moral nature.[{17}](#) Further, such a being would have both a *reason* and *resources* to create moral agents (like us) with the ability to perceive these values.[{18}](#) Its reason for creating such agents is that we’re valuable.[{19}](#) A mind-like foundation thus offers a better explanation for human moral experience than mindless particles ever could.

Foundation of Reason

Human minds are special for their ability to reason. This ability helps us think correctly. When we reason correctly, we can begin with certain basic truths and infer yet other truths that logically follow from these. For example, from the basic truths that “all men are mortal” and “Socrates is a man” we can logically infer the further truth that “Socrates is mortal.”

But here an interesting puzzle arises. Where does our ability to reason come from? How might we account for the origin of human reason? And one of the interesting topics tackled by Josh Rasmussen in his book, *How Reason Can Lead to God*, is the origin of reason itself. What’s the best explanation for this incredible ability?

If the universe sprang into being “from nothing, with no mind behind it,” then not only human minds, but even rationality

itself, must ultimately come from mindless material particles.[{20}](#) But as Rasmussen observes, “If people come only from mindless particles, then *reasoning* comes from non-reason.”[{21}](#) But could reason really come from non-reason? Is that the *most plausible* explanation? Or might a *better* explanation be at hand?

The atheistic scientist J. B. S. Haldane once observed, “If my mental processes are determined wholly by the motions of atoms in my brain, I have no reason to suppose that my beliefs are true . . . and hence I have no reason for supposing my brain to be composed of atoms.”[{22}](#) For Haldane, if human reason arises entirely from a non-rational historical and physical process, then we have little reason to think that our beliefs are true.

Fortunately, there’s a way out of this difficulty. We can suggest that human reason comes from an ultimately *rational* foundation. In that case, reason comes from reason. We’ve already seen that the best way to account for minds, matter, and morals is by positing a foundational Mind as the source of all reality. And this is also the best way to account for human reason as well. As Rasmussen notes, “by anchoring reason in the nature of the foundation, we can explain how the foundation of all existence can be the foundation of minds, matter, morals . . . and reason itself.”[{23}](#)

In the next section we will follow Rasmussen “to the treasure at the end of the bridge of reason.”[{24}](#)

Perfect Foundation

In this article we’ve seen that a foundational Mind offers the best explanation for the existence of human minds and bodies, moral concepts, and even reason itself. In my previous article, we saw that this foundation is also independent, self-sufficient, and eternally powerful. Today, with some

final help from the Christian philosopher Josh Rasmussen, we want to pull together the various strands of this discussion to see what unifies the various features of this foundation into a single, coherent being. What sort of being might all these features point to? According to Rasmussen, they all point to a *perfect* being. But why does he think so?

Rasmussen argues that a perfect being must have two essential features. First, it must have no defects, or imperfections. And second, it must have “supreme value.”[{25}](#) In other words, a perfect being cannot possibly be improved.

But why think the foundation of all reality is a perfect being? Simply put, the concept of perfection enables us to account for all the characteristics of this being that reason has revealed to us. Perfection accounts for this being’s independent, self-sufficient, and eternally powerful nature. It also accounts for how this being can be the ultimate foundation of other minds, astonishing material complexity, morality, and reason itself. As Rasmussen observes, “Perfection unifies all the attributes of the foundation” and “successfully predicts every dimension of our world.”[{26}](#)

A perfect being is thus the foundation of “every good and perfect gift” that we possess and enjoy, and must surely be described as “the greatest possible treasure.”[{27}](#) Moreover, since this being possesses “the maximal concentration of goodness, value, and power imaginable,” it can only properly be termed “God.”[{28}](#) Thus, by following the “light of reason” to the end of the “bridge of reason,” we have arrived not at meaninglessness or despair, but at “the greatest possible treasure,” the self-sufficient, eternally powerful, supremely rational, and perfectly good, Creator God.

If you would like to explore the work of Josh Rasmussen further, I would recommend reading his book, *How Reason Can Lead to God: A Philosopher’s Bridge to Faith*. You can also visit his website at joshualrasmussen.com.

Notes

1. Joshua L Rasmussen, *How Reason Can Lead to God: A Philosopher's Bridge to Faith* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2019).
2. See my previous article, "[How Reason Can Lead to God, Part 1.](#)"
3. Rasmussen, *How Reason Can Lead to God*, 75.
4. Ibid., 8.
5. Ibid., 76.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid., 77.
8. Ibid., 92. The phraseology of "mental materials" in the previous sentence is also borrowed from Rasmussen.
9. Alan Lightman, "The Accidental Universe," Harper's, December 2011, harpers.org/archive/2011/12/the-accidental-universe/, cited in Rasmussen, *How Reason Can Lead to God*, 95.
10. Rasmussen deals with this option, as well as several others, in *How Reason Can Lead to God*, 95-108.
11. Ibid., 95.
12. Walter L. Bradley and Charles B. Thaxton, "Information and the Origin of Life," in *The Creation Hypothesis: Scientific Evidence for an Intelligent Designer*, ed. J. P. Moreland. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 205.
13. Ibid., 109-24.
14. Ibid., 110. Rasmussen takes the terminology of a "moral landscape" from Sam Harris's book, *The Moral Landscape: How Science Can Determine Human Values* (New York: Free Press, 2011).
15. Rasmussen, *How Reason Can Lead to God*, 110-11.
16. Ibid., 119.
17. Ibid., 121.
18. Ibid., 121-22.
19. Ibid., 122.
20. Ibid., 133.
21. Ibid., 133-34.
22. Haldane, J. B. S., *Possible Worlds*, 209, as cited in C. S. Lewis, *Miracles: A Preliminary Study* (New York, NY: Macmillan,

1960), 15.

23. Rasmussen, *How Reason Can Lead to God*, 135.

24. Ibid., 136.

25. Ibid., 137-38.

26. Ibid., 148.

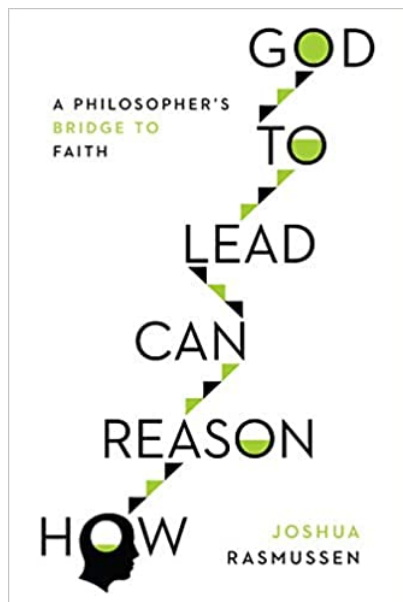
27. Ibid. See also James 1:17.

28. Rasmussen, *How Reason Can Lead to God*, 148.

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How Reason Can Lead to God – Part 1

Dr. Michael Gleghorn makes a compelling case for how reason can lead us, step by step, to the logical conclusion of God's existence.



In 2019 the Christian philosopher Josh Rasmussen published a little book with the intriguing title, *How Reason Can Lead to God: A Philosopher's Bridge to Faith*. Rasmussen earned his Ph.D. in philosophy from the University of Notre Dame and currently teaches philosophy at Azusa Pacific University.

The book, dedicated to Rasmussen's "skeptical friends," aims "to mark out a pathway . . . that can inspire a greater vision of the ultimate *foundation* of everything."[\[1\]](#) Now admittedly, this is a tall order. And it leads Rasmussen into some deep philosophical waters. Still, he claims to be writing for a broad audience of truth-seekers—and he has largely managed to make the book accessible to the educated layperson. One reviewer characterized the result of Rasmussen's effort as both an "original presentation of cutting-edge philosophy of religion, and an engaging personal invitation to reason one's way to God."[\[2\]](#)



Now I realize that you may be thinking, "Well, this doesn't apply to me. I'm not interested in such 'heady' things as this." But do you know someone who is? Perhaps a son or daughter, spouse or co-worker? If so, you'll want to keep reading, for this may be just the sort of thing they need. Rasmussen wrote the book for those who need to think their way carefully through the issues. The sort of person who is not content to dodge difficult questions or settle for superficial answers.

Several philosophers have praised Rasmussen's efforts. Robert Koons, of the University of Texas at Austin, describes the book as "winsome and engaging, drawing the reader into a thrilling adventure . . . of the existence and nature of reality's ultimate foundation."[\[3\]](#) And J. P. Moreland, of Biola University, compares the study with C. S. Lewis's *Mere Christianity* and claims that "Rasmussen's argument for God is developed with such precision and care that, quite frankly, it could not be improved."[\[4\]](#)

With praise like this for Rasmussen's book, I hope you'll agree that it's worth our time and effort to take a deeper look at its contents. What is Rasmussen's argument for God? How does he develop it? Why does he refer to it as a "bridge to faith"? What sort of materials does he use in constructing

his “bridge”? We’ll begin our inquiry in the same place that Rasmussen does, with the deceptively simple observation that *something exists*.[{5}](#)

The Blob of Everything

Let’s begin by considering the book’s subtitle: *A Philosopher’s Bridge to Faith*. What sort of bridge is this? As you might expect, since Rasmussen is a philosopher, this is a “bridge of reason.” But it has an interesting destination, for it leads not to skepticism, but to faith.[{6}](#)

Rasmussen constructs his bridge very carefully. He wants every step in his construction project to be reasonable. In order to accomplish this, he seeks to use quality materials and first-rate tools. His

materials are statements that anyone can see are clearly true. His tools “are rules of logic.” By carefully selecting his materials, and conscientiously using his tools, he constructs “a bridge of reason that leads . . . to a special treasure.”[{7}](#)

Rasmussen begins his project with the claim that something exists. Although few will object to such a claim, some may still have doubts. After all, what if everything you think you experience is just an

illusion? Well, in that case, “the experience of your illusion exists.” Moreover, *you* exist. If you didn’t, you couldn’t have any doubts about reality. In order to have such doubts, you must *first* exist. Thus, Rasmussen’s first claim, that something exists, seems quite secure.[{8}](#)

Next, Rasmussen bundles every existing thing, of whatever sort, into a comprehensive whole, which he aptly dubs the “blob of everything.” This “blob” includes every existing thing, the totality of reality. Since every existing thing is included in the “blob of everything,” there is nothing

“outside” or “beyond” it. It is *everything*. Hence, the blob cannot have its cause, or reason for being, in anything outside it (for, of course, there *isn't* anything outside the blob of *everything*).[{9}](#)

Now this is strange! My car, cat, and computer were each created by causes beyond themselves. My car had a car maker. My cat had parents. But something about the “blob of everything” isn't like this. It has what Rasmussen calls a *foundational layer* that doesn't depend on anything outside itself for its existence. We'll consider the nature of this “foundation” more carefully next.[{10}](#)

Probing the Foundation

As we just noted, there isn't *anything* outside “the blob of everything.” And hence, there isn't anything *outside* the blob that could cause, or explain, its existence.

What are we to make of this? Notice, first, that since the blob includes *everything* that exists, it includes many things that depend on other things for their existence. For example, the blob contains things like weasels, watches, and waffles and each of *these* things depend on *other* things for their existence. Baby weasels depend on mommy and daddy weasels. Watches and waffles depend on watch- and waffle-makers.

But notice: not everything in the blob can be like this. After all, if everything in the blob depended on something else for its existence, then we would have a serious problem—for the “blob of everything” does not depend on anything else for *its own* existence. Attempting to build such a blob using only dependent materials (that is, materials that depend on something outside themselves for their existence) would commit what Rasmussen calls a “construction error.”[{11}](#) One cannot construct an independent, self-sufficient reality (like the “blob of everything”), using only dependent parts. That would

be like trying to construct a black steel pipe using nothing but toothpaste! No matter how much toothpaste you have, you will never construct a black steel pipe with such materials.{12}

So here's the problem. The "blob of everything" includes many things with a dependent nature (like weasels, watches, and waffles). At the same time, the blob (as a whole) depends on nothing outside

itself for *its* existence. How is this possible? Clearly, the blob must contain some special ingredient that does not depend on anything else for its existence. Rasmussen calls this ingredient the "foundation." {13} It has an independent, self-sufficient, necessary nature. It's the sort of thing that *must* exist, no matter what. {14} It must therefore be eternal (i.e. without beginning or end) and provide "an ultimate foundation for everything else." {15}

Eternal Power

This "foundation" that is self-sufficient doesn't need a cause for its existence. It exists on its own. It's the sort of thing that *must* exist, that cannot *not* exist. And for this reason, the foundation must be eternal. That is, it must have always existed. Finally, it must also be powerful. But why?

Well, consider first that "power exists." Rasmussen observes that there are only two ways of explaining this. The first suggests that power "came into existence from nothing." The second says that power is eternal and has always existed. Which way is more reasonable? {16}

Well, suppose that power came into existence from nothing. The difficulty here is that something cannot come from nothing without a cause. And if there isn't anything, then there cannot be a cause. Moreover, we must remember that "nothing" is *not* anything. It is the absence of anything. It thus has no

potential to produce anything. It has no power or potential because it *isn't* anything. Something cannot come from nothing, then, because “nothing” has no power or potential to produce anything.[{17}](#)

Thus, Rasmussen claims that reason itself drives us to suggest “a power that exists on its own, by its own nature.” In other words, since power exists, and since it can only come from something powerful, there must be an *eternal power*. That is, there must be a power that has always existed. This power never *became* powerful; it *has always been* powerful. Fortunately, this conclusion agrees with reason, unlike the view that power came from nothing.[{18}](#)

Rasmussen sums it up this way: “The foundational power is eternal.”[{19}](#) Now this is quite astonishing. By thinking very carefully and following the light of reason, we have arrived at a foundation of all reality that is independent, self-sufficient, necessary, and eternally powerful. But we can go even further. By considering some of the things that the foundation has produced, we can learn even more about its nature.

Implications

Let's recap: beginning with the simple (and undeniably true) statement that *something exists*, we have watched Rasmussen carefully construct a bridge of reason that has led (so far) to an independent, self-sufficient, eternally powerful foundation of all reality. But Rasmussen goes still further. For if this foundation is the ultimate source of all other things, then we can learn something about the nature of the foundation by considering some of what it has produced.

For example, it is doubtless true that one of the most important things the foundation has produced is *you*—a human being. But what sort of thing are you? And what might this

tell us about the foundation's nature?

Rasmussen examines four aspects of human beings that reveal some important characteristics of the foundation.^{20} First, human beings have minds. We are not like rocks, papers, or scissors. We are self-conscious beings, aware of our own existence. We can think, feel, make plans, and work to accomplish them. Second, we have bodies. We are not disembodied minds, souls, or spirits. There is a complex physical (and physiological) dimension to our being. Third, we are moral agents. We experience a moral dimension to our existence. We sense that some things are good and that others are evil. We recognize that it is good to be kind to other persons and bad to harm them. Finally, we are rational agents. We can “see” or discern certain logical and mathematical truths. For example, we can “see” that two plus two equals four and that “nothing is both true and false at the same time.”^{21}

If we ultimately depend for our existence on a self-sufficient and eternal foundation, then what might this tell us about that which brought us into being? Although the details will have to wait for the next article, the various characteristics of human beings mentioned above point to “a certain *mind-like* aspect of the foundation.”^{22} Indeed, we might even say that these characteristics reveal a foundation with mental, moral, rational—and even personal attributes!

Our goal for the [next article](#), then, is to consider each of these characteristics in greater detail, showing how each one plausibly leads to a personal foundation of existence.

Notes

1. Joshua L. Rasmussen, *How Reason Can Lead to God: A Philosopher's Bridge to Faith* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2019), ix.
2. Todd Buras, review of *How Reason Can Lead to God: A*

Philosopher's Bridge to Faith, by Joshua L. Rasmussen, *Philosophia Christi* 21, no. 2 (2019): 453.

3. Robert Koons, Endorsement, *How Reason Can Lead to God*, frontmatter.

4. J. P. Moreland, Endorsement, *How Reason Can Lead to God*, frontmatter.

5. Rasmussen, *How Reason Can Lead to God*, 9.

6. Ibid., 8-18.

7. Ibid., 8.

8. Ibid., 9.

9. Ibid., 11-13.

10. Ibid., 19-34.

11. Ibid., 22.

12. This illustration is indebted to others like it offered in Rasmussen's book.

13. Ibid., 19-34.

14. Ibid., 31.

15. Ibid., 34.

16. Ibid., 56-7.

17. William Lane Craig, "Questions About Leibniz's Cosmological Argument," Reasonable Faith, August 10, 2014, accessed May 24, 2020,

www.reasonablefaith.org/writings/question-answer/questions-about-leibnizs-cosmological-argument/

18. Rasmussen, *How Reason Can Lead to God*, 57.

19. Ibid., 60.

20. Ibid., 75-135.

21. Ibid., 131.

22. Ibid., 75.

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.”[\[1\]](#) 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.[\[2\]](#) 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.^{3} 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.”^{4}

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.”[\[5\]](#) 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.”[\[6\]](#) 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.[\[7\]](#) 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."[{8}](#)

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.[{9}](#) 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.[{10}](#)

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.[{11}](#)

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.”{12} 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?”{13} 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.{15}

The word of God is powerful. Paul describes it as “the sword of the Spirit.”{16} And the author of Hebrews tells us it can “judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart.” {17} 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.”{18} The key point here, of course, is *asking for permission*. This is important and Doug encourages us to always make a habit of it.{19} 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.^{20} 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."^{21}

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!{22}

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

1. Doug Pollock, *God Space: Where Spiritual Conversations Happen Naturally* (Loveland, CO: Group, 2009), 11-12.
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.
8. Pollock, *God Space*, 65.
9. See Doug's chapter, "Listening Your Way Into Spiritual Conversations," in Pollock, *God Space*, 53-64.
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.
16. Ephesians 6:17.
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.

The All-Present God

“As Charles Haddon Spurgeon once observed, there are very few things as uplifting for the heart and the mind as a serious study of the being and attributes of God. Hopefully, this little article on God’s omnipresence will encourage some others to take up such studies for themselves. They won’t be disappointed.” –Dr. Michael Gleghorn

Introduction



We can never get away from God. To some, this is quite threatening. To others, it is merely irritating or annoying. But for those who know and love God, it is deeply comforting and consoling, for it means that we are never alone.

In this article, I want to discuss an attribute of God that is often referred to as *omnipresence*. It’s a big word, but all it means is that God is present everywhere. It was while meditating on this attribute that David was led to pen the oft-quoted verses of Psalm 139:

Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there. If I rise on the wings of the dawn, if I settle on the far side of the sea, even there your hand will guide me, your right hand will hold me fast (vv. 7-10).[\[1\]](#)

Clearly David took comfort in the fact that he could never get away from God, that there was nowhere he could go where God was not.

In a similar manner, King Solomon also spoke of God's omnipresence in his prayer at the dedication of the temple in Jerusalem. He said, "But will God really dwell on earth? The heavens, even the highest heaven, cannot contain you. How much less this temple I have built!" (1 Kings 8:27). Here, Solomon recognizes that unlike human beings, God's presence cannot be localized to merely one place on the earth. Indeed, the universe itself is not sufficient to contain the being of its Creator!

So how is the doctrine that God is everywhere present to be understood? And what practical applications might this have for our lives?

To begin, it is helpful to observe that just as the doctrine of God's eternity attempts to explain how God is related to time, the doctrine of omnipresence attempts to explain how He is related to space. Does God completely transcend space? That is, might He exist completely "outside" or "beyond" our spatial universe in some sense? Or is it better to think of Him as existing everywhere throughout all space? Then again, could it be the case that He somehow exists both within *and* beyond the created order? Obviously, these are deep and difficult questions. But since thinking through such things is part of what it means to love God with our minds, let us ponder these matters as carefully as we can (Mark 12:30).

God and Space

Other Scriptures certainly seem to affirm God's omnipresence. God asks the prophet Jeremiah, "Am I only a God nearby . . . and not a God far away? . . . Do I not fill heaven and earth?" (23:23-24). Here the Lord affirms that He is present everywhere, that there is nowhere in heaven and earth where He is not. But how should we understand this?

Should we think of God as "spread out" through the universe like an invisible gas? Although this might be the mental image

which most naturally suggests itself to our minds, we should carefully avoid embracing it. After all, "God is spirit" (John 4:24). And a spirit, unlike a gas, is a *non-physical* entity.{2} If we think of God as being spread throughout the universe like an invisible gas, then we might be tempted to think of God as only *partially present* at any one place. For instance, we might come to believe that there is a small amount of God in our bedroom, even more of Him throughout our house, and more still in the three-mile radius around our house. And this, I'm sure you would agree, is crazy!{3} We *don't* want to think of God's omnipresence in *these* terms.

Instead, if we want to think of God as existing everywhere in space (and many theologians would caution us against this), then we ought to think of Him as being *fully present* at every point of space *at the same time*. Now admittedly, this is a difficult concept to grasp. But an analogy may help to clarify the point.

A number of Christian theologians and philosophers have suggested that we should think of God's relationship to the world as similar to the soul's relationship to the body. On one construal of this view, the soul is held to be "spatially present in the body," but "not extended throughout it." Instead, it's thought to be "somehow wholly present at all points in its body." In a similar way, it is said, we can also think of God as being "spatially located in the universe" and yet "wholly present at every point in it." {4}

Of course, it must be emphasized that this is *only* an analogy. I'm certainly *not* suggesting that the world really *is* God's body!{5} The analogy is intended simply to help us understand *one way* in which God might be thought of as omnipresent. But it's not the only way.

God and Spacelessness {6}

Many Christian philosophers do not believe that we should

think of God as *literally present in space*. Instead, they believe that God completely transcends space, existing “beyond” or “outside” the spatial universe which we inhabit. But if this is so, then how do they think the doctrine of God’s omnipresence should be understood? Moreover, *why* do they believe that God is not present in space?

Let’s take the second question first. Why think that God isn’t present in space? Well, say these thinkers, consider the doctrine of creation. God created the universe *ex nihilo*, or “out of nothing.” Literally nothing existed (except God) “before” He brought the universe into being.[{7}](#) In other words, prior to creation, not even space existed. Rather, space is brought into being by God at the moment of creation.[{8}](#) But if God does not exist in space *prior* to creating the universe, then why should we think that He is located in space *after* bringing the universe into being? According to this view, there just isn’t any good reason for thinking that He is.

But wait a minute! If God isn’t located in space, then how can it still be said that He’s present everywhere? Doesn’t this amount to a denial of God’s omnipresence? According to proponents of this view, we should understand God’s omnipresence to mean that He both *knows* what is happening everywhere in space and that He is *active* at every point in space.[{9}](#) In other words, God not only knows what is happening everywhere on earth, He also knows what is happening elsewhere in our solar system and in every galaxy of the universe. Moreover, He is continually exercising His power to sustain the universe in being and He is able to act anywhere He desires throughout this vast cosmos which He has created. Hence, even if God is not *literally* present in space, advocates of this view still insist that He both knows what is happening and is able to exercise His power anywhere in the world at any time He chooses.

Having now considered the two major views regarding how we

should understand the doctrine of God's omnipresence, we'll briefly look at some of the difficulties that are raised by this doctrine.

Difficulties with Omnipresence

Recall how David in Psalm 139 affirms that there is nowhere he can flee from God's presence, for God is present everywhere. But this raises a difficulty, for elsewhere in the Bible David says something which seems to directly contradict this sentiment.

Pursued by Saul in the Desert of Ziph, David, who had the opportunity to kill Saul but humbly refused, pleaded with Saul not to shed his blood "far from the presence of the Lord" (1 Sam. 26:20). But wait a minute! If God is present everywhere, as David elsewhere affirms, then what sense does it make to speak of dying far from the presence of the Lord? How can one be far from the presence of the Lord if the Lord is present everywhere?

It seems to me that the best way of handling these difficulties is to make an important distinction regarding the way in which God is everywhere present. What I mean is this. Although God is present everywhere, He is *uniquely present* at certain times and places when He desires to reveal Himself in some special way.

The best example of this is the unique incarnation of God the Son in the man Christ Jesus. Jesus was one person with two natures, one divine and one human. According to His divine nature, He remained omnipresent even during His time on earth. Yet in his human nature, Jesus was limited (like all other men) to a particular time and place. And it was in this more limited sense that God specially chose to reveal Himself to us. Hence, in the Gospel of John we learn that God's grace and truth, His love and salvation, His blessing and glory, are all uniquely revealed in the person of Jesus Christ. [\[10\]](#)

In a similar way, concerning the example of David above, we can say that while God was certainly present in the Desert of Ziph, He had chosen to specially reveal Himself to the people of Israel. He was thus present to the people of Israel in a way that He was not present to the other nations. It is in this sense that David pleads with Saul not to shed his blood “far from the presence of the Lord.”

The Importance of Omnipresence

Let’s think about this in terms of a “good news/bad news” approach, beginning with the “bad news” first. Although God’s omnipresence, considered in itself, is really only good news, there is certainly a sense in which sinful men and women, much like you and me, might be tempted to regard this doctrine as bad news. Why is that?

Well, if God is always present, then like it or not, every evil thought, word, or deed that we think, say, or do is always done directly in His presence! That’s a sobering thought, isn’t it? There is literally *nothing* that we can ever do in a hidden or secret way. Whenever we lie or steal, commit adultery or take God’s name in vain, we do so in the presence of the God to whom we are all ultimately accountable. Indeed, Jesus warned that on the day of judgment we will even have to give an account for every “careless word” which we have spoken (Matt. 12:36)! This, at least for sinners like ourselves, is what we might call the bad news of God’s omnipresence.

But as I said previously, the reality is that God’s omnipresence is actually very good news. For it means that no matter what our circumstances, God is always present! When we’re anxious or scared, God is there. When we’re under pressure at work or having difficulties in a relationship, God is there. Yes; even if we’re sick or dying, God is present then, too. David wrote in the Psalms, “Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they

comfort me" (Psalm 23:4). For the one who's been reconciled to God through faith in Jesus Christ, the fact that God is always present is very "good news" indeed!

I hope you can see that the doctrine of God's omnipresence is not just an interesting issue for philosophers and theologians to ponder (although it is certainly that). It's also an extremely practical doctrine that is highly relevant to almost every aspect of our lives. For wherever we go, whatever joys we encounter or difficulties we face, God is there. And for the Christian, He is present as our Protector, Savior, Counselor, and Friend!

Notes

1. All Scriptural citations are taken from the New International Version of the Bible.
2. See, for example, Jesus' remarks in Luke 24:39: "Look at my hands and my feet. It is I myself! Touch me and see; a ghost does not have flesh and bones, as you see I have."
3. I got this insight from William Lane Craig, "Doctrine of God," Part 8 [Podcast] (accessed August 2010), available from <http://bit.ly/9ruR74>.
4. These quotations come from the discussion in J. P. Moreland and William Lane Craig, *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 509-10.
5. Of course, some theologians (e.g., Process theologians) do believe that the universe is God's body. According to them, God is like the soul of the world (which is His body). This view is usually termed *panentheism*, which is not the same as pantheism.
6. This section is particularly indebted to the discussion of omnipresence in Moreland and Craig, *Philosophical Foundations*, 509-11.
7. I put "before" in quotation marks since, if God is timeless without creation, there really isn't literally any temporal moment "before" God brings the universe into being. The

universe, along with time itself, simply has its beginning at the moment of creation. Nevertheless, for the purpose of communicating to our radio audience in the limited amount of time available, it is much easier to simply say “before” creation.

8. Moreland and Craig, *Philosophical Foundations*, 510.

9. Ibid., 510-11.

10. In this regard, please see John 1:1, 14-18; 3:16-21.

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Ancient Perspectives on Happiness

After examining several pagan view of happiness from the ancient world, Dr. Michael Gleghorn argues for the view of Christian philosopher Augustine.

The Declaration of Independence says that all men “are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights,” including “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.”[\[1\]](#) Although we could say a lot about this statement, I want to focus on that very last phrase: the pursuit of happiness. What exactly is happiness? And how should we pursue it in order to have the best chance of attaining it? These questions not only interest us, they also interested some of the greatest thinkers from the far-flung past.

So what *is* happiness? An online dictionary says that happiness “results from the possession . . . of what one considers good.”[\[2\]](#) A good start, but it raises another question, namely, what should we consider *good*? Many things can be described as



good: a cat, a job, a lover, and a book may all qualify. And each of these things might even make us *happy* . . . at least, for a while. But is there a *good* that offers us genuine and lasting happiness? If so, what is it? Now we're getting closer to what the ancients were interested in knowing about happiness.

Of course, as you can probably guess, many different answers were proposed. A few thought that happiness could be found in the pleasures of the flesh. But most believed you needed something a bit more . . . *lofty*, shall we say, in order to experience *real* happiness, things like friendship, peace of mind, virtue, and even God. One thing they virtually all agreed on was that a truly good and happy life ought to be lived with a sense of mission or purpose. Hence, the ancients did not think about happiness primarily in terms of just "having a good time." Instead, they thought there was an important *moral* component to happiness. As Christian theologian Ellen Charry notes, for the ancients, happiness "comes from using oneself consistently, intentionally, and effectively, and hence it is a moral undertaking."[\[3\]](#)

The link between morality and happiness has, I fear, become rather under-appreciated in our own day. But important as it is, many (including myself) don't believe that this can be the *final* word on happiness. So in an effort to find out what is, we'll spend the rest of this article looking first at some of the most important pagan perspectives on happiness from the ancient world before concluding with a Christian proposal by possibly the greatest theologian in the early church, a man named Augustine.[\[4\]](#)

Epicureanism

Let's begin with Epicureanism. Epicurus lived from 341–270 B.C. and is often viewed as the poster boy for a hedonistic lifestyle. A popular gourmet cooking site, epicurious.com, creatively plays off this reputation to celebrate the

pleasures of a great meal.{5} But as we'll see, Epicurus was not the total "party animal" that people often think.{6}

Although he rightly regarded physical pleasure as a good thing, and believed that it was natural for us to want it, he personally thought that friendship and mental tranquility were even better. It was these latter sources of happiness, and not merely the pleasures of the flesh, which Epicurus thought of as the greatest goods. In order to attain them, he even commended a life of virtue. After all, it's the virtuous person, living at peace with his neighbors, who generally has far less cause for fear and worry than someone who's been up to no good. Such a person is thus more likely to experience the true joys of friendship and mental tranquility than his non-virtuous counterpart.{7}

As you can probably see, there are aspects of Epicureanism that even a Christian can appreciate. But there are problems with this view as well. For example, while Epicurus did not deny either God or the gods, he did teach that they were rather unconcerned about human affairs, and he denied that there would be a final judgment. For him, death was simply the end of existence and you didn't need to worry that God would judge you for your deeds in an afterlife. But these ideas made many people uncomfortable.

For instance, the Roman philosopher Cicero (106-43 B.C.) reacted strongly against Epicureanism in his book *The Nature of the Gods*. And Lactantius, an early Christian writer (A.D. 250-325), believed that only the fear of God "guards the mutual society of men." {8} In his view, if people think they aren't accountable to God, society will likely be in trouble. Hence, many thinkers worried that Epicureanism might lead to an amoral—or even *immoral*—pursuit of pleasure as the highest good of life. And unfortunately, this "can just as easily lead to debauchery and . . . selfishness as it can to the simple, honest life style of Epicurus." {9}

So while the Epicurean view of happiness has some things in its favor, there are several reasons for rejecting it.

Stoicism

Stoicism was another important school of thought that addressed the issue of human happiness. In the ancient world, it “was the single most successful and longest-lasting movement in Greco-Roman philosophy.”[\[10\]](#) The Stoics’ manly, morally tough philosophy of life had broad appeal in the ancient world. It attracted slaves like Epictetus (ca. A.D. 55-ca. 135) as well as the Roman emperor, Marcus Aurelius (A.D. 121-180). Even many of the early church fathers admired the Stoic emphasis on moral virtue and integrity.[\[11\]](#)

So what did the Stoics think about human happiness? According to Ellen Charry, the Stoics viewed “the goal of life” as human flourishing. This was understood, however, not in terms of having a long life or being financially successful. Rather, it was viewed “as maintaining one’s dignity and grace whatever may happen.”[\[12\]](#) The Stoics understood that things don’t always work out as we want. Life throws us many curve balls and, if we’re not prepared, we’re bound to be disappointed.

Their solution? In a statement reminiscent of the Buddha’s teaching, the Stoic Epictetus declared, “Demand not that events happen as you wish, but wish them to happen as they do happen, and you will get on well.”[\[13\]](#) We often don’t have any control over what goes on around us. But we can control how we react to it. By knowing the good and morally virtuous thing to do, and by consistently choosing to do this, one attains the highest happiness of which human beings are capable; namely, “the enjoyment of self that comes from the conviction that one is living a principled life of the highest integrity.”[\[14\]](#) This, in a nutshell, is the Stoic conception of human happiness.

But there are some problems with this view. Although

Christians will readily cheer the Stoic commitment to a life of moral virtue, they'll nonetheless deny that such a life is ever really possible apart from the grace of God. As the Christian theologian Augustine observed, Stoicism fails to adequately address the problem of human sinfulness. Moreover, he thought, it holds out the false hope that one can achieve happiness through self-effort. But as Augustine wisely saw, only God can make us truly happy. Hence, while there's much to admire about Stoicism, as a philosophy of human happiness it must ultimately disappoint.[{15}](#)

Neo-Platonism

Having now surveyed Epicureanism and Stoicism, and found each of them wanting, we must next turn to Neo-Platonism to see if it fares any better.

Probably the most important Neo-Platonist philosopher was a man named Plotinus, who lived in the third century A.D. Plotinus believed that in the beginning was the One, "the supreme transcendent principle" and the "ground of all being."[{16}](#) Everything which now exists ultimately originated from the One through a series of emanations. Since everything proceeds from the One *not* by a process of creation, but rather by a process of emanation, "Creator and creation . . . are not sharply distinguished in Plotinus's account."[{17}](#)

Although this is certainly different from the biblical view, in which there *is* a clear distinction between Creator and creation, it would probably not be fair to simply call Plotinus a pantheist—that is, someone who believes that "all" of reality is "Divine." According to one scholar, Plotinus tried "to steer a middle course" between pure pantheism (on the one hand) and creation by God (on the other).[{18}](#) But since everything that exists emanates or proceeds from the One, Plotinus's view is certainly *close* to pantheism. And it is thus quite different from the biblical doctrine of creation.

But how is this relevant to Plotinus's perspective on the nature of human happiness? According to Plotinus, since everything (including mankind) emanates out of the One, human beings can only truly find happiness by realizing their "oneness" with the One. In Plotinus's view, "Happiness resides in a person's realization that she is one with divinity."[\[19\]](#) According to Plotinus, then, realizing one's "oneness" with the One is the key to human happiness.

Are there any problems with this view? Although there's much to admire about Neo-Platonism, and while it was quite influential in the early church, it was never entirely accepted, and that for several reasons. From a Christian perspective, Neo-Platonism ultimately has a defective view of God, creation, human nature, the meaning of salvation, and what happens to a person after death. In other words, while the system is very religious, it's *not* Christianity. And thus, while we can agree with Plotinus that happiness can only be found in God, we must nonetheless reject his system on the grounds that he's not pointing us to the one *true* God.

Augustinianism

Having previously surveyed some of the most important perspectives on happiness from the ancient world, we'll now bring our discussion to a close by briefly considering the thought of Augustine, one of the greatest theologians of the early church. Augustine lived from A.D. 354 to 430 and was familiar with the various perspectives on happiness which we've already examined.

Like the Epicureans, he believed that our happiness is at least tangentially related to our physical well-being. Like the Stoics, he believed that a life of integrity and moral virtue was important for human happiness. And like the Neo-Platonist philosopher Plotinus, Augustine thought that true human happiness could only be found in God.

Nevertheless, Augustine views each of these perspectives as ultimately inadequate for all who long to experience *lasting* human happiness (and Augustine thinks that's pretty much all of us). After all, neither physical well-being nor a virtuous life can grant us lasting happiness if our existence ends at death. And while he agrees with Plotinus that happiness can only be found in God, Augustine (like all Christians) is convinced that Plotinus ultimately has a defective view of God.{20}

So where is true and lasting happiness to be found? Ellen Charry sums up Augustine's view quite nicely when she writes, "Happiness is knowing, loving, and enjoying God securely." {21} In Augustine's view, happiness is a condition in which one's desires are realized. Happy is he who has what" he wants," he writes in his little book on happiness.{22} But he also believed that what we all really want is the *everlasting* possession of the *greatest* good that can be had. That is, we want the best that there is—and we want it forever!

But since the greatest good can only be God, the source and foundation of every other good there is (or ever will be), it seems that what we ultimately want, whether we realize it or not, is God! And if we not only want the best that there is, but want it forever, it seems that we must ultimately want the very thing God freely offers us in Christ, namely, everlasting life in the presence of God. The psalmist urges us to "taste and see that the Lord is good" (Psalm 34:8). And those who do are promised joy in His presence and "eternal pleasures" at His right hand (Psalm 16:11).

This, then, is Augustine's view on human happiness. In my opinion, it's far and away the best perspective that we've examined in this article, and I hope you'll think so, too.

Notes

1. Cited from the text of the Declaration of Independence at

- www.archives.gov/exhibits/charters/declaration_transcript.html (accessed August 26, 2011).
2. Dictionary.com Unabridged. Random House, inc., s.v. "happiness," dictionary.reference.com/browse/happiness (accessed August 26, 2011).
 3. Ellen T. Charry, *God and the Art of Happiness* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 3-4.
 4. Ellen Charry surveys the views of each of these persons and perspectives in the first two chapters of her book *God and the Art of Happiness*, 3-62.
 5. For more, check out www.epicurious.com
 6. Robert C. Solomon and Kathleen M. Higgins, *A Short History of Philosophy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 70.
 7. This paragraph is indebted to the discussion of Epicurus in Solomon and Higgins, *A Short History of Philosophy*, 70-71.
 8. Lactantius, "A Treatise on the Anger of God," in *Fathers of the Third and Fourth Centuries*, ed. A. Cleveland Coxe, Ante-Nicene Fathers (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), 269; cited in Charry, *God and the Art of Happiness*, 8.
 9. Stanley R. Obitts, "Epicureanism," in Walter A. Elwell, ed., *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984), 358.
 10. Solomon and Higgins, *A Short History of Philosophy*, 71.
 11. Gary T. Burke, "Stoics, Stoicism," in Elwell, ed., *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 1056.
 12. Charry, *God and the Art of Happiness*, 9.
 13. The Enchiridion, VIII; cited in Solomon and Higgins, *A Short History of Philosophy*, 71.

14. Charry, *God and the Art of Happiness*, 10.

15. This paragraph is indebted to Ellen Charry's discussion of Augustine's critique of Stoicism in *God and the Art of Happiness*, 14-15.

16. Everett Ferguson, "Neoplatonism," in Elwell, ed., *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 756.

17. Solomon and Higgins, *A Short History of Philosophy*, 122.

18. Frederick Copleston, Greece and Rome, vol. 1 of *A History of Philosophy* (Garden City: Image Books, 1985), 467.

19. Charry, *God and the Art of Happiness*, 19.

20. This paragraph and the one that precedes it are generally indebted to Charry's discussion in *God and the Art of Happiness*, 3-62.

21. Charry, *God and the Art of Happiness*, 29.

22. De beata vita 10; cited in John Bussanich, "Happiness, Eudaimonism," in *Augustine through the Ages: An Encyclopedia*, ed. Allan D. Fitzgerald (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 413.

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The Contrasting Worldviews in 'That Hideous Strength'

Dr. Michael Gleghorn demonstrates how C.S. Lewis's 'That Hideous Strength' illustrates the cosmic war of good and evil through supernatural spiritual warfare.

A Study in Contrasts

In this article we're concluding a three-part series examining C.S. Lewis's "Cosmic Trilogy."[{1}](#) We've already looked at [Out of the Silent Planet](#) and [Perelandra](#), which you can find on our website at Probe.org. Now we turn to *That Hideous Strength*, the third and final novel of the trilogy, originally published in 1945. In many ways, the story is a study in contrasts between two very different communities characterized by two very different worldviews.[{2}](#)

On the one hand there is the National Institute for Coordinated Experiments (or N.I.C.E.), which might initially appear to embrace a naturalistic worldview, but which is actually governed by a kind of pragmatism that accepts whatever is useful for advancing its own nefarious purposes. On the other hand, there is the community at St. Anne's, which is generally animated by a Christian worldview.

Ransom, the hero of the first two novels, comes into this story as the "Head" or "Director" of St. Anne's, and he's a very different leader than the "Head" of the N.I.C.E. (as we'll see later). Whereas the first two novels largely took place on Mars and Venus respectively, this story takes place on Earth, specifically in England, sometime after World War 2.[{3}](#)

That Hideous Strength is a long novel. It covers a lot of ground and deals with an incredible variety of ideas and issues. Because of this, we can only hit a few of the highlights here.

With this in mind, let's begin by noticing two important statements on the book's title page. First, the book's subtitle: "A Modern Fairy-Tale for Grown-Ups." This tells us something about the genre of the story. It's intended as a kind of "fairy-tale." But this is a "fairy-tale" for *grown-ups*. And indeed, much of this novel would be inappropriate for

children.

Second, there's a quotation from the 16th century Scottish poet, Sir David Lyndsay. In fact, the title of Lewis's book is taken from this quotation, for Lyndsay mentions "that hyddeous strength" with reference to the Tower of Babel, a story originally told in Genesis 11. The Tower of Babel, you may recall, was a monument to human pride and rebellion against the Lord. In response, the Lord came down in judgment and confused the languages of those building the tower, and they were subsequently scattered over the face of the earth.

If we are to correctly interpret Lewis's novel, then, we must not lose sight of these two clues. Lewis intends this story as a kind of modern-day "fairy-tale" that, in one way or another, also alludes to something like the Tower of Babel.

Supernatural Influences

Above, I mentioned Lewis's subtitle for the novel: "A Modern Fairy-Tale for Grown-Ups." This, I said, tells us something about the genre of the story. Lewis intended the story as a kind of fairy-tale. But what *are* fairy-tales, and how might this help us interpret Lewis's novel?

On the English-Studies website, we learn that fairy-tales "are types of literature . . . featuring magical elements, mythical creatures, and moral lessons. Characterized by simple . . . characters, these stories typically involve a protagonist overcoming challenges with the help of magic or supernatural aid." [\[4\]](#) As we'll see, this description fits Lewis's novel fairly well.

Consider, for example, the concluding statement about "overcoming challenges with the help of magic or supernatural aid." In Lewis's novel, Ransom and the community at St. Anne's overcome the challenges posed by the National Institute of Coordinated Experiments (or N.I.C.E.) with help *both* magical

and supernatural. From the depths of Arthurian legend, Merlin the magician returns to lend his aid to St. Anne's. Moreover, the community is also helped by powerful angelic authorities who can best be described as something like a cross between Christian archangels and Roman gods or goddesses.[\[5\]](#) Hence, Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter, and Saturn all descend from the heavens to help the community in its time of need.

And this helps us see an important contrast between St. Anne's and the N.I.C.E., for it turns out that *both* are receiving a kind of supernatural aid, though the source of that aid is very different. The Christian community at St. Anne's is receiving supernatural aid from loyal, angelic, servants of God. The N.I.C.E., however, is receiving aid from dark spirits, who are in rebellion against God. The leaders of the N.I.C.E. refer to these spirits as "macrobes," and recognize that they are "more intelligent than Man."[\[6\]](#) While the good spirits communicate to the company of St. Anne's through Ransom, the "Head" of that community, the evil spirits communicate to the leaders of the N.I.C.E. through the decapitated "Head" of a former criminal, which is being artificially preserved in a laboratory. We thus begin to see how the contrasting worldviews of these two communities have led them into very different spiritual alliances.

Science and Magic

One of the strangest aspects of C. S. Lewis's novel, *That Hideous Strength*, concerns the return of Merlin to help the community of St. Anne's in their battle against the National Institute of Coordinated Experiments (or N.I.C.E.). Stranger still is the fact that the leaders of the N.I.C.E. initially hope to recruit Merlin to their *own* side in this struggle. But isn't the N.I.C.E. a scientific institute? Why would its leaders want to enlist the aid of an enigmatic magician from the days of King Arthur? It would seem that the governing principles of the N.I.C.E. are really rather different from

what one might expect from a scientific institute.

Consider, for example, the character of William Hingest. Lewis describes him as “a physical chemist” and one of only two men at his college “who had a reputation outside England.”[{7}](#) Hingest is a true scientist. But when he visits the N.I.C.E. to find out more about it, he quickly decides to leave. As he tells Mark Studdock, another character in the novel, “I came here because I thought it had something to do with science. Now that I find it’s something more like a political conspiracy, I shall go home.”[{8}](#)

Hingest realizes that the N.I.C.E. is quite different from a scientific institute. He rightly senses that there is something dark and corrupt at the institute’s core. As readers, we learn that the leaders of the N.I.C.E. are actually taking orders from demonic spirits. They want to recruit Merlin because they hope to make use of his powers to advance their own agenda. What they fail to realize, however, is that in the world of Lewis’s novel, Merlin is a Christian, and he joins forces with the company at St. Anne’s.

In his book, *The Abolition of Man*, Lewis described the birth of magic and applied science as “twins.” Both desired “to subdue reality to the wishes of men,” but only science was successful.[{9}](#) In Lewis’s novel, however, the leaders of the Institute have stumbled upon a source of power that might arguably trump that of science, namely, the demonic “macrobes.” They want Merlin because he will increase their power still further. The leaders of the N.I.C.E. are not really interested in truth, beauty, or goodness, but only in the power “to subdue reality” to their own wishes. Like the ancient builders of Babel, they are in prideful rebellion against the Lord. And this is why, in Lewis’s “fairy-tale” novel, their work also must be destroyed.[{10}](#)

The Problem of Violence

C. S. Lewis's novel, *That Hideous Strength*, has often been criticized for its alarming depictions of violence. Near the end of the novel, when the leaders of the National Institute of Coordinated Experiments (or N.I.C.E.) are destroyed by Merlin and the heavenly powers, Lewis describes their deaths in rather grisly detail. Some are trampled and torn apart by wild animals, others are shot or decapitated, and one character chooses to be incinerated by his own hands.{11} Why does Lewis include such horrific scenes?

David Downing has a good discussion of this issue in his book, *Planets in Peril: A Critical Study of C.S. Lewis's Ransom Trilogy*. He first observes that "Lewis was writing" this novel "during the bleakest years of World War II and that he draws explicit parallels between the leaders of N.I.C.E. and the Nazis." {12} He notes that, like the Nazis, the N.I.C.E. also rely upon a "secret police" force. Like the Nazis, they too "control the press . . . use criminals for barbaric medical experiments" and "dream of creating a master race." Hence, just as it was necessary for the Allies to fight and defeat the Nazis, so also it is necessary for Ransom, Merlin, and the heavenly powers to fight and defeat the N.I.C.E.

But was it necessary for Lewis to describe the deaths of his villains in such "gruesome detail"? {13} Why not simply have the angelic-god Jupiter destroy the leaders of the N.I.C.E. with a well-aimed thunderbolt? Why does Lewis insist on narrating their deaths in such graphic terms? Downing argues that Lewis was using Dante's *Inferno* as a "subtext" for this novel. {14} He shows how the journey of Mark Studdock (a major character in the novel) into the heart of the N.I.C.E. parallels Dante's journey through the nine circles of hell. {15} As Downing observes, the leaders of the N.I.C.E. joined forces with dark spirits. They thus experience a dark end to their earthly pilgrimage. {16}

The violence in *That Hideous Strength* makes more sense when we remember the comparisons Lewis makes between the N.I.C.E. and the Nazis, as well as the many literary connections between his own story and Dante's *Inferno*. Moreover, we must not forget that such violence fits in rather well with Lewis's description of the story as a kind of "fairy-tale." Fairy tales, after all, often have a dark side, and Lewis's tale is no exception.

Babel and the Word of God

C. S. Lewis intended the final novel of his "Cosmic Trilogy," *That Hideous Strength*, to be read as a kind of fairy tale with allusions to the biblical Tower of Babel. We've mentioned several ways in which Lewis's novel resembles a fairy tale, but we've said little about its allusions to the Tower of Babel. Although Lewis draws several connections between the National Institute for Coordinated Experiments (or N.I.C.E.) and the Tower of Babel, we here have time to mention only a couple.

The story of the Tower of Babel occurs in Genesis 11. In that story, all humanity speaks the same language, and they determine to build "a city and a tower with its top in the heavens" (Genesis 11:4). They do this in order to "make a name" for themselves. But the Lord, who has told humanity to "fill the earth" (Genesis 9:1), comes down and confuses their language, thus dispersing them throughout the world (Genesis 11:8-9).

Like the builders of Babel, the leaders of the N.I.C.E. also want to "make a name" for themselves. The N.I.C.E. aims to achieve something like the deification of humanity, though this will only be accomplished by the destruction of virtually everything that makes human life worthwhile (and only a few, and eventually perhaps just one person, will be the beneficiary of their evil schemes).[\[17\]](#) For this reason, God

permits some of His loyal servants, the Heavenly Powers, to descend to earth and bring linguistic confusion to the leaders of the N.I.C.E., thus forcing them to abandon their project.[{18}](#)

Merlin the magician, who has joined forces with Ransom and the community at St. Anne's, is the human instrument through which the Heavenly Powers work to release the "curse of Babel" upon the N.I.C.E. The leaders of this institute have joined forces with dark spirits to achieve their ends. Hence, once the "curse of Babel" is in full force among them, Merlin calls out over the din of confusion: "They that have despised the word of God, from them shall the word of man also be taken away."[{19}](#) The inability of the leaders of the N.I.C.E. to understand one another plays a significant role in ending their tyranny, thus saving humanity from their evil intentions.

In *That Hideous Strength*, Lewis has contrasted two very different communities, with two very different worldviews. Presented as a kind of fairy-tale, with allusions to the biblical Tower of Babel, he has developed an intriguing story about the ongoing battle between good and evil.

Notes

1. Wayne Shumaker uses this terminology in the title of his essay, "The Cosmic Trilogy of C. S. Lewis," in *The Longing for a Form: Essays on the Fiction of C. S. Lewis*, ed. Peter J. Schakel (Kent State University Press, 1977), 51-63.
2. See Richard L. Purtill, "*That Hideous Strength*: A Double Story," in *The Longing for a Form*, 91-102, for an excellent treatment of this issue.
3. C. S. Lewis, *That Hideous Strength: A Modern Fairy-Tale for Grown-Ups* (New York, NY: Macmillan, 1965), 7.
4. See English Studies, "Fairy Tale: A Literary Genre," English Studies, english-studies.net/fairy-tale-a-literary-genre/#google_vignette (accessed October 29, 2024).
5. I discuss this issue in my first program on the trilogy:

“Smuggling Theology into Out of the Silent Planet,” which you can find here: [Smuggling Theology into Out of the Silent Planet](#)

6. Lewis, *That Hideous Strength*, 257.

7. Ibid., 56.

8. Ibid., 70.

9. C. S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man* (New York: Macmillan, 1955), 87-89.

10. Lewis, *That Hideous Strength*, 293-94.

11. Ibid., 343-358. See the chapter, “Banquet at Belbury.”

12. All the quoted material in this paragraph can be found in David Downing, *Planets in Peril: A Critical Study of C.S. Lewis’s Ransom Trilogy* (University of Massachusetts Press, 1995), 152.

13. Ibid.

14. Ibid., 94.

15. Ibid., 94-99.

16. Ibid., 99.

17. See Lewis, *That Hideous Strength*, 176-80.

18. Ibid., 320-58.

19. Ibid., 351. In the story, Merlin says this in Latin, but there is a translation in the footnote on this page.