

The Glory of Grace

Sue Bohlin explores God's marvelous grace as the unending flow of His power, presence and favor in our lives.

I bet you recognize “grace” as a theology word. Many of us are quick to say, “Oh yeah, I know what that is. We’re saved by grace through faith.” Or we know of churches with the word “grace” in their name. But many of us don’t have a real handle on it. Often that’s because we haven’t seen it modeled in our families, our churches, or our communities. We’re too focused on trying to prove ourselves good enough, too busy trying to keep God from getting mad at us.

But this misunderstood blessing of grace is *hugely* important. It’s one of the big things that sets Christianity apart from all other religions! Any other world religion involves performance-based works. Biblical Christianity says, “We’re messed-up broken people before a holy God, and there’s nothing we can do to earn His approval. But He loves us and delights in us despite the fact that we don’t deserve it.” With all other religions, the emphasis is on “do.” Because of grace, in Christianity the emphasis is on “done.”[\[1\]](#)



One of the most powerful elements of grace is simply *acceptance*. The book of Romans assures us that we are accepted by both the Father (Romans 14:3) and the Son (Romans 15:7). We can do nothing to earn Their acceptance; it’s a gift. The Father says, “I accept you just the way you are, but I love you too much to leave you that way. Come to Me: My arms and My heart are open to you because of what My Son did in His incarnation, crucifixion, resurrection and ascension. I have always loved you, My precious child. I chose you before the foundation of the world, to adopt you into My family.”[\[2\]](#) I love to think of God stamping our foreheads with an invisible tattoo that says, “Accepted in the Beloved” (Ephesians 1:6,

KJV).

Pastor Mark Driscoll has an especially great definition of grace. Instead of the one we've heard for years, "God's undeserved favor," Mark calls it "ill-deserved" favor.^{3} But my all-time favorite definition comes from John Ortberg: "Grace is the offer of God's ceaseless presence and irrational love that cannot be stopped. It's the flow of God's power and presence and favor in your life from one moment to the next that enables you to do whatever it is God has for you to do."^{4} I want to focus on God's power, presence, and favor, as well as giving some real-life examples of what grace looks like.

Power

A little boy was playing in his sandbox one Saturday morning when he discovered a large rock in the middle of it. The boy dug around the rock, managing to dislodge it from the dirt. With a little bit of struggle, he pushed and nudged the rock across the sandbox. But then he found that he couldn't roll it up and over the little wall. The boy shoved, pushed, and pried, but every time he thought he had made some progress, the rock tipped and then fell back into the sandbox.

All this time the boy's father watched from his window as the drama unfolded and his son burst into tears of frustration.

As the tears fell, a large shadow fell across the boy and the sandbox. It was the boy's father. He asked, "Son, why didn't you use all the strength that you had available?"

The boy sobbed, "But I did, Daddy, I did! I used all the strength that I had!"

The father corrected kindly, "No, son, you didn't use all the strength you had. You didn't ask me." With that, the father reached down, picked up the rock and removed it from the

sandbox.

Experiencing God's grace means depending on Him to provide the power for our lives, whether it's dislodging a big ol' rock in our sandbox or simply making it through the day.

I like to think of the power of God's grace as electricity that is available twenty-four hours, seven days a week. God's grace is always available to us at every moment of our life, and because of His goodness and faithfulness, we never have to fear a power shortage of God's grace.

The key to experiencing the flow of God's power is what Jesus called *abiding*, choosing to remain in a state of trustful dependence on God. Jesus said in John 15:5, "I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me and I in him, he bears much fruit, for *apart from Me you can do nothing.*"

I love to illustrate this by turning on a shop light that's plugged into an electrical outlet. When I press the switch, the light goes off, even though the power is still flowing and available. We can shut off the expression of grace, the flow of God's power, by quenching the Spirit—by actively disobeying God, or by passively ignoring Him. But His power can shine in our lives again as soon as we open ourselves up to Him, asking for His help, intentionally depending on His power and not our own. Grace is the flow of God's power in our lives.

Presence

One morning, as I swam laps in the health club pool, I was meditating on these three aspects of grace. I said, "Lord, what do You want me to know about Your presence?" At that very second, I "just happened" to see a large sign on the wall right in front of me: "WARNING: NO LIFEGUARD ON DUTY." I literally laughed out loud, realizing that this was code for "You're on your own, buddy." God's grace means we never have to fear that there's no lifeguard on duty, that we're on our

own, because He has promised to never leave us or forsake us (Deuteronomy 31:6, Hebrews 13:5). The Lord Jesus' last promise was, "I am with you always" (Matthew 28:20).

My favorite illustration of grace as God's presence is the building of the Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco. Dwight Edwards relates that during its initial stages of construction, "Twenty-three workers fell to their deaths. Finally, halfway through the project, a large net was put in place beneath the bridge. From then on, only ten men actually fell—all caught by the net. Plus, the workers' productivity was raised by twenty-five percent. Assured that their safety was no longer in question, they pursued their work with far greater freedom and effectiveness than before. This is exactly what God has done for us. Stretched wide beneath us, extending from eternity past to eternity future, is God's perfect grace, assuring every believer that we can never fall from His favor. No matter how badly we falter or fail, we can never plunge past the grace of God." [\[5\]](#)

Think of grace as the hand of God ready to catch you when you fall. Because God is good and He is sovereign, that means nothing can happen that He cannot redeem. There is no such thing as an unrecoverable disaster. Even when we sin deliberately and stupidly, we cannot jump beyond the bounds of His grace. Now, His grace usually involves painful discipline, because God disciplines those He loves (Hebrews 12:6), but we cannot out-sin God's love and grace.

Recently, a friend of mine was anguishing, "Why did God allow me to wreck my marriage and family? I wouldn't let my children run out into the street and be hit by a car, why did He let *me* go that far?" As I turned to the Lord for an answer, He whispered, "I'm always protecting My children, but you don't see the disasters I avert." Part of God's grace is the safety of His protecting presence.

Favor

One important element of grace is favor. One dictionary defines favor as “an attitude of approval or liking.”

Five-year-old Matt got up from his nap one day and said, “Guess what, mommy, I just had a dream about Jesus!” The mommy asked, “Well, what did Jesus say to you?” “Nothing.” “Well, what was Jesus doing?” “Nothing.” “Now Matthew, you just said you had a dream about Jesus, he MUST have said or done *something!*” Matt was quiet for a moment, and then with a wiggle and grin he looked up and said shyly, “He just stood there and *liked* me.”

When somebody likes you, their eyes light up when they see you. Did you know God’s whole face lights up when He looks at *you*? The Bible talks about His face shining on us.[{6}](#) God doesn’t only love us, He *likes* us! Experiencing God’s grace means He showers not only love but *like* on us, and His face reflects His heart of favor toward us.

Every child needs to receive the “3 A’s” of favor from his daddy: attention, affection, and approval. The Father poured out the 3 A’s on the Lord Jesus at His baptism when He said, “You are My beloved Son in whom I am well pleased.”[{7}](#) Those words are like gold, and we can receive them into our own hearts as well.

I love the way one daddy blogger expresses grace toward his daughter. He writes,

I love you. I love the way your hair rolls into ringlets and falls into your eyes. I love the way you read yourself books, even though you can’t read. I love the way you dance and twirl around the kitchen. I love the way you wave at cars that pass on our walks. I love the way you scream “Dad” in the middle of the night. I love the way you say “do it again” when we do something fun. I even love the permanent

marker custom design you put on my new Mac. But as much as I love you, Jesus loves you more. I sacrifice a lot because I love you, but Jesus sacrificed everything because he loves you. So if somewhere along the way you fail a test or love a boy who does not love you back or have a mastectomy or develop Alzheimer's or gain some weight or lose a job, you will still hold infinite value because Jesus loves you. No matter what. You are loved exactly as you are. Always. [\[8\]](#)

Oh yeah. That's the beauty of grace.

What Grace Looks Like

I want to share some examples of what grace looks like, both the way God showers grace on us, and the way people share His grace with others.

God has poured grace on me in a huge way when traveling internationally. Because of a schedule change, I found myself flying back to Dallas from Germany just in time to speak at a weekend women's retreat. I arrived home from the airport with just enough time to repack my bags and pick up my speaking notes and props. I then drove two hours to the retreat facility, arriving while the women were still singing. I literally got out of the car with my notebook in hand, walked in the door and up to the stage to start speaking. With the time difference, my body felt like it was five o'clock in the morning and I'd been awake for twenty-two hours. But God not only kept me alert, He filled me with His energy, and the women couldn't tell any difference.

When we've received God's grace, we are able to turn around and give it to others.

Grace means responding with patience when someone forgets they already told you something, or that you told *them* something, and just going with the flow. Grace means lifting off the burden of needless "shoulds" that weigh people down. One

grace-filled speaker invited people to respond in song at the end of her message, saying, "If you'd like to sing, great! Join us! If you need a rest, feel free to just listen." She removed any pressure to perform. At our church, a couple of pastors managed to deliver a message on giving and stewardship without even a hint of shame, or condemnation, or pressure. That's what grace looks like.

When my friend's mother contracted Alzheimer's, she told her daughter early in the progression of the disease, "If I get to the point where I don't recognize you, don't take it personally." She was expressing grace in being more concerned about her daughter's hurt than her own loss of memory.

Another friend needed eye surgery to keep her from losing her sight. Her friend Angela, who has been blind for a number of years, told our friend, "Don't be concerned about talking about your vision to me—I am so over that!" That's what grace looks like.

One of my favorite stories happened one night to my dear friend who was starting to realize what monsters her abusive parents were. She had always patterned herself after her mother, and suddenly realized she had even chosen the same dishes as her mother's when they got married. Suddenly she couldn't abide the thought of keeping them in the house a moment longer. She grabbed a plate out of the cupboard and hurled it to the floor, smashing it to pieces. Her husband heard the noise and came to see what was going on. When she explained the connection between their dishes and her mother, her husband calmly said, "Have at it. Tomorrow morning I'll take you to get new dishes." Not only did he clean up the mess when she was done, but all those shards damaged their kitchen floor—and he never once mentioned it. That's grace.

Notes

1. See, for example, John 15:5; 19:30; Colossians 3:4;

Ephesians 2:8-9.

2. Ephesians 1:4-5

3. marshill.com/media/religionsaves/grace

4. This quote came from a sermon preached at Pastor Ortberg's church, Menlo Park Presbyterian Church in Menlo Park, California, 2003. When I emailed him asking for a specific citation, his answer was, "I have no idea, Sue."

5. Dwight Edwards, *Experiencing Christ Within Workbook: Passionately Embracing God's Provisions for Supernatural Living* (Colorado Springs: Waterbrook Press, 2002), p. 105.

6. Numbers 6:25

7. Matthew 3:17

8. jeffdlawrence.com/2011/12/23/some-thoughts-on-how-to-talk-to-little-girls/

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Faith Trends in America: How Is Christianity Faring as We Enter the Third Decade of the 21st Century

In looking at the state of American Christianity, Steve Cable examines how handling data inaccurately can produce wildly varying conclusions.

Recent reports on the current state of Christianity in America could create emotional whiplash, making one feel elated one moment and depressed the next. People are quick to comment on survey results and their own experiences. Within the last year, we



have run the gamut from Glenn Stanton's book, *The Myth of the Dying Church: How Christianity is Actually Thriving in America and the World*,[{1}](#) to a Pew Research article, *In U.S. Decline of Christianity Continues at Rapid Pace*.[{2}](#)

These titles appear to represent two very different viewpoints. Which is it? Are we thriving or declining at a rapid pace?

Finding the answer requires one to thoughtfully articulate your question in at least two ways:

1. What do you mean by Christianity? Are you referring to all potential Christians both Protestant and Catholic or are you focused on a subset, such as Evangelicals? And,
2. Is anything beyond affiliation with a church necessary to be considered an active Christian? Examples might include a biblical understanding of how one gets to heaven and belief in the Bible.

You also need to thoroughly understand the available survey data that might throw light on your question. You need to understand what questions are asked and how they are worded. Then you analyze the responses to the set of relevant questions to gain insight on your topic of interest. Remember, no survey asks the exact questions you would ideally use. That sounds like more work than most of you want to attempt. Unfortunately, most of the pundits writing today do not attempt to do that work either. Generally, they take fragmented data and attempt to draw intelligent inferences.

In this article, I have done this work for you, drawing primarily on data from the Pew Research Group and the General Social Survey. We will look at which groups are growing as a percent of our population and which groups are not. Both Pew and the GSS have taken surveys over an extended period of time, helping us identify trends in religious affiliation and

beliefs.

As you will see, the picture is certainly not rosy, but perhaps better than you expect. Although the growth of non-Christian segments is continuing at a fairly rapid pace, Evangelical Christianity is only declining slightly as a percentage of the population. However, I will point out how some data has been misunderstood to paint either a rosier picture or a gloomier picture than the actual current state of affairs.

Evangelicals: Thriving or Declining

All surveys we have reviewed covering this century show the same general result: the percent of people claiming an affiliation with a Protestant or Catholic church has been declining.

GSS surveys^{3} found across all ages the percentage who identify as Protestant or Catholic has dropped from 84% of the population in 1988 down to 69% in 2018. Looking only at Protestants (both Evangelical and Mainline), the drop was from 58% down to 46%. Considering those who are Millennials now, that is ages 18 to 34, we find a decline from 53% down to 36% over this thirty-year period. And the data does not show any leveling off in the rate of decline.

But we may ask, “Are Evangelicals participating in this general decline or are they thriving as some authors claim?”

The bottom-line answer is that Evangelicals are declining as a percent of the overall population but at a much slower rate. Across all ages, the percentage who identify as Evangelical has dropped from 30% to 28% over this twenty-year period. For those aged 18 to 34 the drop was from 29% to 25%. In October 2019, Pew released a report showing that from 2009 to 2018, the percentage of Evangelicals of all ages dropped from 28% to 25%, a significantly faster rate of decline.

Even with a slow rate of decline, if Evangelicals make up around 25% of the population, they can have a significant impact on American culture and life and perhaps begin to grow again.

However, does Evangelical affiliation equate to an active Evangelical practice? We need to know how many who affiliate with an Evangelical church *are active Christians* as opposed to just being affiliated if we want to truly assess the strength of the American Evangelical movement.

Using the GSS surveys, we can look for people who:

1. Know God really exists
2. Pray multiple times per day
3. Attend church at least twice a month
4. Believe the Bible is the inspired word of God, and
5. Call themselves a strong Christian

I think an active, evangelical Christian would have these basic beliefs and practices.

The percentage of the population who meet these criteria has dropped from about 9% down to just over 7% of the population over the last twenty years. This result is a large enough group to have some impact but not enough to crow about the growing Evangelical presence. We can say that Evangelical Christianity is certainly not thriving but clinging to a position of some relevance.

What's Happening with the Nones

Nones are people who state their religious affiliation is either atheist, agnostic or nothing at all.[{4}](#) The dramatic growth of the Nones has been an ongoing headline story.

Surveys[{5}](#) indicate the Nones were 8% of the population in 1988. By 2018 they had grown to over 23% of the population. For ages 18 through 29, they tripled from 13% to 35% of the

population. No one denies this growth, but some question the importance of this trend.

For example, Glenn Stanton states, “(The Nones) are simply reporting their actual faith practices in more candid ways, largely due to new ways in which polling questions have been asked in the last ten years or so.”[\[6\]](#) Oddly enough, he primarily relies on data from GSS for long term trends and they have asked exactly the same question regarding Nones since 1972.[\[7\]](#)

Some suggest Nones are primarily Christians who will return to the fold as they move into marriage and child rearing. Is there any indication that this is happening?

Well, in 2007, among those aged 18 to 32, 24% of them are classified as Nones. In 2014, for this same group now seven years older, 32% of them are Nones. As this group began rearing children, *a significantly larger percentage of them were Nones than when they were younger*. Also, instead of attending church, only 4% of these Nones attend church more than once a month.

Instead of emerging adult Nones turning into church-attending Christians as they age, more of them are becoming Nones. It appears that the cultural pressures against Christianity are outweighing the tendency of prior generations returning to seek religious training for their children.

The Barna Group has found that there are genuine differences between Millennials and older generations that will not be removed as they age. As Dave Kinnaman, President of the Barna Group, states in his book, *UnChristian*,[\[8\]](#) “I would caution you not to underestimate the widening gap between young people and their predecessors. Those who think that in due time Mosaics . . . will ‘grow up’ and look like everyone else should prepare to have unfulfilled expectations.” Dave’s comment is based on their analysis of multiple surveys

covering thousands of individuals and a large number of in-depth interviews with young adults.

Are the Nons THE Major Growth Story?

Is the growth of nondenominational Christians a more important trend than the Nones? Glenn Stanton states, “Growth of nondenominational churches has been many times larger than the nones. . . it is not the rise of the nones that is the major story . . . It’s the “nons” and not the nones that are mushrooming.”[{9}](#)

This condition would be an amazing finding if true. However, it is not true for three major reasons which we will discuss today:

1. The percentage growth of the “nons” is *not many times larger*. From 2007 to 2014, “nons” grew their percentage of the population by 44%. But, Nones grew by almost the same rate at 42%. Looking at absolute growth, the “nons” grew by four million people versus the Nones’ 19 million—almost five times the number of “nons.” The growth of the “nons” is relegated to a minor factor when compared to the Nones.

2. The “nons” are a subset of the Evangelicals. And Stanton states, “*Evangelicals* have benefited more from these ecclesiastical exoduses than anyone else. They even . . . *outpaced the nones.*”[{10}](#) In fact, most of the “nons” growth came as a result of switching between evangelical denominations. Thus, any growth by the “nons” is offset by declines in other evangelical groups, resulting in an overall *decline of about 1%*. Evangelicals have not even come close to outpacing the Nones.

In fact, *for the first time, we have the total number of nones exceeding the number of Evangelicals in America.*

3. Stanton says, “It’s the evangelical churches identifying as nondenominational that have been growing faster than any

others including the nones and the atheists.”[\[11\]](#) Taking a look at percentage growth, *the atheists and agnostics have shown the most explosive growth by far*, growing their numbers from 9 million in 2007 to 17.4 million in 2014—a growth of 92%—while the “nons” grew from 8 million to 12 million over the same time period, a growth of 56%. So perhaps Stanton meant to say, “It’s the non-believers and not the Nones that are mushrooming.”

In summary, the growth of the “nons” may be of interest to those who study the relative make-up of Evangelicals in America. But to those interested in how Evangelicals are doing as a whole it is not relevant. The fact that the “nons” are increasing just reflects some churning of affiliations within the Evangelical realm. On the whole, Evangelicals are decreasing at a slow, but steady pace.

Confusing Expansion with Same-Store Growth

A commercial enterprise may report sales growth. But the savvy investor wants to know why. Opening new stores may increase sales. But if it masks lower sales per existing store, it is a red flag. They are actually losing market share.

Similarly, with parachurch ministries, their number of locations gives little indication as to the health of Christianity. However, their growth rate per location can signal increased interest in Christianity.

Unfortunately, this distinction is often overlooked. For example, one pundit points to impressive growth by two respected student ministries in adding new locations as evidence to support an optimistic projection of Evangelical growth. However, they are not reporting an increased impact on a per site basis.

Looking at their annual reports,[\[12\]](#)[\[13\]](#) we see that one of

them reports per location attendance *declining* at a rate of almost 1% per year over the last decade.^{14} The other is declining even faster, reporting a growth rate of *negative* 3% per year.^{15}

These declines could be caused by several different factors such as lower attendance at new locations, competition with other student groups, lower interest in their Christian message, etc. But we can be sure that these two ministries do not indicate an overall growth trend for Evangelicals.

Surveys and statistics can be very helpful in understanding the status of a ministry. However, we can be seriously misled by listening to those who do not know how to interpret the data contained in these sources.

Wrapping up our look at faith trends, in this article we saw:

1. American Evangelicals are declining slightly in the overall population with actively engaged Evangelicals holding about 7% of the population.
2. The Nones continue to grow and now exceed Evangelicals. Their growth clearly reflects the unimportance of religious affiliation among a large percentage of Americans.
3. The growth of Non-denominationals (although interesting) made no impact on the overall size of American Evangelicals and is less than the growth of atheists and agnostics.
4. Looking at growth per location of parachurch ministries is more important than growth in number of locations in assessing the growth of Christianity.

We live in a challenging time but Evangelical churches are strong enough to make a huge difference in America if we will follow the Holy Spirit's lead and present the eternal truth of the gospel in ways that communicate to today's "nothing in particular" culture.

Notes

1. Glenn Stanton, *The Myth of the Dying Church* (Franklin TN: Worthy Publishing), 2019.
2. Pew Research Center, *In U.S., Decline of Christianity Continues at Rapid Pace*, October 17, 2019.
3. General Social Surveys from 1988, 1998, 2018.
4. Terms used in the Pew Research Surveys; the GSS survey uses None to capture all of those responses and other surveys use variations of these approaches.
5. Ibid.
6. Stanton, p. 54.
7. General Social Surveys, 1972-2018: Cumulative Codebook, March 2019.
8. Dave Kinnaman and Dave Lyons, *Unchristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks About Christianity . . . And Why It Matters*, Baker Books, 2007, p. 22.
9. Stanton, p. 30-31.
10. Stanton, p. 28.
11. Stanton, p. 31.
12. Young Life Annual Reports 2009 and 2017;
https://www.younglife.org/ResourceLibrary/Documents/2017_Annual%20Report.pdf
<https://www.younglife.org/ResourceLibrary/Documents/AR2009final.pdf>
13. InterVarsity Annual Reports 2007 and 2017;
<https://intervarsity.org/news/bringing-new-life-every-corner-every-campus>;
<https://intervarsity.org/news/2006-2007-annual-report>;
<https://intervarsity.org/about-us/2016-2017-annual-report>
14. The years looked at were 2009 and 2017.
15. For InterVarsity, we looked at 2007 and 2017.

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. Gaebelin, 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*

Jesus, 203.

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Truth You Can Sing About – Part 3

Probe radio producer Steven Davis provides spiritual truth in five Christmas carols, backed by new music written and performed by his son Jon Clive Davis.

Coventry Carol

Songs about Jesus' birth have been close friends with Christmas for generations, but when's the last time you thought about the great truth found in these Christmas hymns and carols? In this article we're highlighting five Christmas songs, and first up is *Coventry Carol*.



**Herod the King in his raging charged he hath this day,
His men of might in his own sight all children young to slay...**

Following a star, Magi arrive in Jerusalem, and ask Herod where they can find this new born King of the Jews. Herod rouses his biblical scholars to research this, and they find in Micah (5:2):

But as for you, Bethlehem . . . too little to be among the
clans of Judah,
from you One will go forth for Me to be ruler in Israel.
His goings forth are from long ago, from the days of
eternity.

This King was a much bigger deal than Herod ever would be. Still, Herod chooses to inform the Magi, encouraging them to return and tell him where they found this King, so that he too could “Worship Him (Matthew 2:8).”

But God knowing his heart, warns the Magi to return home another way. When Herod found out he was furious, and instructed his soldiers to kill all the baby boys two years old and younger. A second prophecy is fulfilled from Jeremiah: “A voice was heard in Ramah, weeping and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children; and she refused to be comforted, because they were no more.” (31:15)

It was this event which stirred the writing of the hauntingly beautiful *Coventry Carol*. Even though this is a dark and tragic theme, we need to know and to feel the entire context surrounding the birth of Christ.

One child born, and who knows how many dozens, if not hundreds, were slaughtered.

2000 years later, few would respond to Christ as Herod did; but to even do something as “harmless” as ignore Him, places you at eternal risk. So, how do you respond to the Christ?

In the Bleak Midwinter

**Enough for Him, whom Cherubim worship night and day,
a breastful of milk and a mangerful of hay;
Enough for Him, whom Angels fall down before,
the ox and ass and camel which adore.**

The third verse speaks to something we often forget, especially when it comes to applying it. The Christmas narratives from the Gospels, prophecies and subsequent teaching speak plainly and forcefully to the deity and humility of Christ. The Apostle Paul explains it well:

Though he was God, he did not think of equality with God as

something to cling to. Instead, he gave up his divine privileges; he took the humble position of a slave and was born as a human being. When he appeared in human form, he humbled himself in obedience to God and died a criminal's death on a cross. (Philippians 2: 6-8 NLT)

Jesus Christ gives us the greatest example of a life of humility, first by laying aside His "divine privileges," then humbled Himself further by dying for our sins on the cross. Going from the non-stop worship of the cherubim to mother's milk and a bed of hay was entirely within His character. As was the stark contrast between angels falling prostrate before Him to simple barnyard beasts adoring Him.

Perhaps God's greatest goal for your life and for mine is to make us like Jesus. Paul tells us in Romans: "For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son." (Romans 8:29) So do you think humility would be part of that process for us? Of course.

The author of the song Christina Rossetti wraps up her verses with an application:

Yet what I can I give Him, give my heart.

Humility is what brings us to Christ. Will you give your heart to Him this Christmas?

God Rest Ye Merry, Gentlemen

**God rest ye merry, gentlemen, let nothing you dismay,
Remember Christ our Savior was born on Christmas Day,
To save us all from Satan's power when we were gone astray.
O tidings of comfort and joy, comfort and joy, O tidings of
comfort and joy.**

Even though this is one of the oldest Christmas Carols still being sung today, it offers a unique blending of historic and contemporary perspectives.

The first and last verses are for us (the contemporary perspective), while the middle verses are about shepherds, angels, the Christ Child, and His mother Mary. Let's look at the verses which apply to you and me.

The first line tells us how we are to rest merry and are not to dismay. How can we do that? Because Christ was born to save. The angel said: "Do not be afraid" (Luke 2:10). In other words, don't be dismayed. And, "there has been born for you a Savior" (Luke 2:11), which allows us to rest merry. We learn more from Matthew 1:21, "He will save His people from their sins." So not just saved—but saved from our sins.

The next line talks about how "we were gone astray." Isaiah 53 shows us how far we've gone astray, listing the things Christ has done for us: bore our griefs, carried our sorrows, was pierced for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; chastised for our peace, and His wounds healed us. And after all Christ has done for us, it says: "All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—everyone—to his own way." Despite this, the Lord "Laid on him the iniquity of us all."

What typically is the last verse, with the contemporary perspective, says:

Now to the Lord sing praises, all you within this place.

That's what you do when the Son of God has come into the world, to save you from your sins.

While Shepherds Watched

While shepherds watched their flocks by night, all seated on the ground,

An angel of the Lord came down, and glory shone around.

"Fear not," said he for mighty dread had seized their troubled mind

"Glad tidings of great joy I bring to you and all mankind."

Well, there's no doubt from the title it's all about the shepherd's perspective of what happened the night Christ was born.

When you compare the lyrics of the carol with Luke 2, you discover that the shepherd's perspective in this song is extremely Biblical. Examine all the main points from the Gospel narrative, and you find them in the song: the cast, the location, angelic appearance, fear, angelic announcement, new location, signs, chorus, praise.

Now a word about the cast, and their perspective. *They were shepherds!* But wait, wasn't this the birth of the Son of God? King of kings and Lord of Lords? Why would God make such a stellar announcement to the working class? Two reasons:

The first reason is found in both Luke 2 and the first verse of the song. Here's Luke's account: "And the angel said to them, 'Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people.'" This good news was for ALL the people.

The second reason the shepherds were the recipients of such good news was pride. Had the message been brought to the elite, the royal, the upper class, do you think they would have shared such a great message with those of us less fortunate? Probably not. We wouldn't have access to their social circles. Why would they seek us out to share this good news? Pride would have cut the Good News off from the rest of the world.

God did not want this message to miss anyone. Christ came humbly, and his announcement came humbly. After all, *God so loved the **world**.*

0 Holy Night

**0 holy night! The stars are brightly shining
It is the night of the dear Savior's birth!**

Long lay the world in sin and error pining
Till he appeared and the soul felt its worth.
A thrill of hope, the weary world rejoices,
For yonder breaks a new and glorious morn.

Long lay the world in sin and error pining. Although one rarely “pines” anymore, as I read this line, I feel the hopelessness and helplessness pressing in. In the seventh chapter of Paul’s letter to the Romans, he said: “And I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature. I want to do what is right, but I can’t. I want to do what is good, but I don’t . . . I am a slave to sin.” Yeah, that’s hopeless.

Speaking of slavery, the third verse declares: **Chains shall He break for the slave is our brother; and in His name all oppression shall cease.** In 1847, when the lyrics were written, slavery was rampant, especially in these United States. And a century and a half later, oppression still hasn’t ceased. Why?

Well, Paul said it in the previous passage: “I am a slave to sin.” We are *all* slaves to sin . . . until Christ breaks those chains.

The result of Christ breaking the chains of oppression is found in the choruses:

Fall on your knees;

and

Behold your King! Before Him lowly bend!

Christ humbled Himself to embrace our human weaknesses, and humbled Himself even further, unto death on the cross. And our response is to fall on our knees in humility and praise. I wonder if humility has a place in breaking the chain of oppression. Seems to work for Jesus.

This program’s scripts were written by the producer of Probe Radio, Steven Davis. The music was composed and performed by

his son and Mind Games Camp alumnus Jon Clive Davis. May your Christmas be filled with praise!

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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.

Will Everyone Be Saved? A Look at Universalism

Rick Wade covers some of the pros and cons in the universalism controversy. Bottom line? No.

In the spring of 2011, Pastor Rob Bell's book *Love Wins* hit the book stores, but the furor over the book started even before that. The charge was heresy. Bell appeared to be teaching Universalism, the belief that everyone will be saved in the end. In fact, Bell *doesn't* make a case for Universalism in the book, although his rejection of the traditional view of hell makes it seem so at first.

This will not be [a review of Love Wins](#) but rather a look at Universalism itself. It won't do to simply label Universalism as heresy and be done with it. The way people responded to Bell's book illustrates the problem.[{1}](#) It's better to understand *why* this teaching has been and should be rejected.



It is important to try to represent others' views fairly. This article, which is what aired on Probe's radio program, is too short to do Universalism justice; there is way too much involved in it. Here I'll confine myself to introducing some of the important issues involved. However, a longer article in PDF form is available [here](#) to fill out the issue some more.[{2}](#)

Universalism has been believed by some Christians since the early centuries of the church. What makes it attractive? For one thing, Universalists wonder how a loving God could send

people to hell—a place of conscious torment—forever. Furthermore, God is a God of justice, and a punishment of eternal torment seems incommensurate with our finite sins, as bad as they may be.

Universalists find scriptural support primarily in Paul's writings where he declares, for example, that "as one trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all men" (Rom 5:18).

Before digging in, I need to make an important distinction. I'll be talking about *Christian* Universalism, not *pluralistic* Universalism. Pluralistic Universalism is the belief that everyone in the world will be "saved" by some almighty being or force that the various religions understand in different ways. *Christian* Universalism, by contrast, is the belief that Christianity holds the truth about God, man, and salvation, and that, contrary to the traditional belief, *everyone* will be saved through faith in Christ, even if on the other side of the grave.

The Love and Justice in God

Universalists take the traditional view of hell as being completely out of keeping with the loving character of God.[{3}](#) Philosopher Thomas Talbott believes that, because love is basic to the nature of God, everything God does has a loving aspect. Thus, there can be no eternal judgment against a person.

Because of this, Talbott sees God's justice primarily as *remedial* or *restorative*, not as *retributive* or *punitive*. Speaking of Israel, for example, he points out that God "did not spare the natural branches" (Romans 11:21), yet eventually God will have mercy on them. Couldn't it be the same for the Gentiles, too? God's grand project since the Fall has been to save people. If He doesn't save all, hasn't He failed?[{4}](#)

Scripture claims both that God is just and that God is love (see Deut. 32:41 and John 4:8). It's also clear that God administers retributive justice. This is seen in Isaiah 3:11 where God says that what the wicked "have dealt out shall be done to him." Consider, too, God's judgment against the Hittites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites, and Jebusites (Deut. 20:16-17). There is no mention of restoration.

For Universalists, love is supreme; justice serves love. Why not the other way around? Why shouldn't love serve justice? N. T. Wright asks why *either* love or justice ought to be seen as the highest expression of God's nature. Perhaps, he says, both are expressions of God's *holiness*.^[5]

The cross work of Christ is instructive here. Our hope for salvation rests on the fact that on the cross "He who knew no sin became sin on our behalf" (2 Cor. 5:21; see also Rom. 3:25; Gal. 3:13; Heb. 10:10,12,14; Isa. 53:5). What kind of judgment fell on Christ? It was *punitive*, not *restorative*, and it was properly ours.

Still, even with all this, how can we possibly regard *everlasting* punishment as just? It's important to understand that judgment isn't merely a reflection of a sin:punishment ratio. Believing in God in the biblical sense involves both our acceptance of God in all His glory and our submission to Him whatever He may command or promise. Thus, to *not* believe in God in this full sense is to reject God. So when people will be punished in hell, it won't be simply a matter of paybacks for individual sins. It will be because they rejected God.

Paul and Universalism

In addition to the appeal to the love of God, Universalists often look to the letters of Paul for support. Writes Thomas

Talbott, "Unlike most conservatives, I see no way to escape the conclusion that St. Paul was an obvious Universalist." {6}

Where does he find this in Paul's letters? Romans 5 and 11 are key passages. In Romans 5, Paul compares the first Adam with the second Adam, Christ. In verse 18 he writes, "Therefore, as one trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all men. For as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous." In Romans 11:32 he writes, "For God has consigned all to disobedience that he may have mercy on all." "All" is taken quite literally to mean everyone tainted by sin. {7} What can we say in response?

Paul's main point in Romans, with respect to the issue at hand, is that salvation is not just for Jews but for all people, and it comes through faith in Jesus. In chapters 1 through 4, Paul argues that everyone knows God exists but sins anyway and is deserving of punishment. Furthermore, the Jews had no safety net because they possessed the law; they broke the law themselves. Salvation has come through faith in Christ alone. In fact, faith has always been the basis of salvation. Paul sums up in chapter 5: through Adam everyone is tainted by sin; through Christ alone is found salvation for everyone. That he doesn't mean every single person *will* necessarily be saved is clear in Romans 11:22. The Jews who will be grafted back in are those who "do not continue in their unbelief."

Second Thessalonians 1:7-10 is an important passage for understanding Paul's teaching on eternal punishment. There Paul says that those who do not obey the gospel "will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might." Gregory MacDonald, a Universalist, acknowledges that this is an especially problematic passage for Universalists. {8}

Jesus and Universalism

It's often been noted that Jesus makes the strongest statements on hell in Scripture. Universalists believe they have been misunderstood.

Given that Paul clearly taught Universalism, Thomas Talbott believes, passages such as Matthew 25, where Jesus spoke of separating the sheep from the goats, must be interpreted in that light. Talbott characterizes Jesus' prophetic teachings as "hyperbole, metaphor, and riddle . . . parable and colorful stories."[{9}](#) He says that "Had it been Jesus' intention to address the question of universal salvation . . . in a clear and systematic way, I'm sure he was capable of doing so."[{10}](#) Jesus is simply teaching what would have been our fate were it not for the atonement.[{11}](#)

Did Jesus make any clear statements about the finality of judgment? I'll mention just three passages.

In Matthew chapter 7 we read the severe warning from Jesus that in the end not everyone who claims Jesus as Lord will enter the kingdom of heaven. "I declare to them," Jesus said, "'I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness'" (vv. 21-23). There is no mention of a second chance later.

In the parable of the ten virgins (Matthew 25:1-13), when those who weren't prepared knocked on the door and asked to be let in, the bridegroom refused, saying he didn't know them. One must be prepared or be locked out. There's no hint of a later unlocking of the door.

In Matthew 25:46, Jesus speaks of "everlasting punishment." "Everlasting" is the English translation of the Greek word *aiōnion*. Universalists argue that this word refers to an age of punishment because the root word, *aiōn*, means just that—an age with a beginning and an end. But *aiōnion* isn't just a form

of aiōn; it is a form of the word *aiōnios* which means “eternal.”

According to the standard Greek lexicon of our day, aiōnios can mean, among other things, with a beginning but without an end.[{12}](#) One example is when Jesus said He was going to prepare a place for us (Jn. 14:2,3). Paul says that this new home is “eternal in the heavens” (Romans 5:1).[{13}](#)

When Jesus speaks of punishment in Matt. 25:46 as everlasting, He means just that. Everlasting life or everlasting punishment; it’s one or the other.

Postmortem Salvation

Because obviously not everyone dies in Christ, postmortem salvation is an essential component of Universalism. There must be people saved after death.

There is no direct scriptural teaching about postmortem salvation. The closest is the much disputed passage in 1 Peter 3 where Peter speaks of Jesus making proclamation to the spirits in prison (vv. 19-20). It is not at all clear that the event spoken of in 1 Peter refers to the evangelization of all the lost after death. Theologian and New Testament scholar Wayne Grudem names five possible interpretations of this passage in an article, and says that even more are possible.[{14}](#)

Gregory MacDonald believes that Rev. 21:25, which says that the gates to the New Jerusalem will never be closed, indicates that unbelievers can exercise faith after death and come in. Verse 24 speaks of the kings of the earth entering the city along with the glory and honor of the nations. MacDonald identifies these with the kings defeated earlier with the beast (19:19). They had been enemies; now they are not.

In response, we note that “kings of the earth” is a common

designation in Scripture for earthly rulers.[{15}](#) It is entirely reasonable to see John, in Revelation, as talking about one group of kings who side with the beast and another group who are part of the kingdom and who enter to bring homage to *the* King.

The wall around the city marks a boundary between those who may enter and those outside.[{16}](#) “Outside” doesn’t necessarily mean simply outside spatially but can also mean those not included in the circle or group.[{17}](#) Those who are able to enter the city are those whose names have been written in the Lamb’s book of life (21:27). No promise is given that a person’s name can be entered after death.

There is no clear promise in Scripture that there will be an opportunity for people to be saved after death. Are we willing to risk the eternal damnation of people by presenting the supposition that there will be?[{18}](#) Universalism is conjecture built upon a basic notion of what the love of God must mean. The case built from Scripture, however, is too fragile to sustain it.

This article barely scrapes the surface of this subject. I urge you to look at the longer article, “Universalism: A Biblical and Theological Critique,” also on Probe’s web site.

Notes

1. My comments regarding the hasty reaction to *Love Wins* are given in a short article on Probe’s web site titled “[\(Ir\)Responsible Critique: The Rob Bell Affair.](#)”
2. The longer version, titled “[Universalism: A Biblical and Theological Critique,](#)” is available on Probe’s web site.
3. Gregory MacDonald, a Universalist, states that “The love of God is very important for the Universalist. Indeed, it would not be an exaggeration to say that it is a strong belief in God’s love that often drives people towards Universalism.”

Gregory MacDonald, *The Evangelical Universalist* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2006), 100. Note that "Gregory MacDonald" is a pen name used by Robin A. Parry. To reduce the possibility for confusion over book titles and author names, I will refer to him as MacDonald when referencing his book *The Evangelical Universalist*.

4. See for example John A.T. Robinson, *In the End God* (New York: Harper & Row: 1968), 116.

5. N. T. Wright, "Universalism and the World-Wide Community," *Churchman* 89 (1975): 197-212.

6. Thomas Talbott, "A Pauline Interpretation of Divine Judgment," in Parry and Partridge, *Universal Salvation?*, 48.

7. Thomas Talbott, "Christ Victorious," in Parry and Partridge, eds., *Universal Salvation?*, 18-19.

8. MacDonald, *The Evangelical Universalist*. 151-54.

9. Talbott, "A Pauline Interpretation of Divine Judgment," in Robin A. Parry and Christopher H. Partridge., eds., *Universal Salvation? The Current Debate* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 43.

10. Talbott, "A Pauline Interpretation," 50-51, n. 18.

11. *Ibid.*, 45.

12. Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich, eds., 2nd ed. (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1979), s.v. "????????".

13. Other Scriptures that refer to our future as eternal include Luke 1:33, John 4:14, John 6:51, 58; 8:51; 10:28; 11:26; and Rev. 22:5. Another reason we know eternal life extends into the future in a temporal sense is because it is the life of the Son and he has no end (1 Jn. 5:11; cf. Jn.

1:4). We will have life everlasting because Jesus, to whom we are now connected, has life everlasting.

14. Wayne A. Grudem, "Christ Preaching Through Noah: 1 Peter 3:19-20 in the Light of Dominant Themes in Jewish Literature," *Trinity Journal* 7.2 (Fall, 1986): 3-31.

15. See Matt. 17:25; Acts 4:26; Rev. 6:15; 17:2, 18; 18:3, 9.

16. Brown, ed., *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, s.v. "Wall, Hedge, Palisade," by N. Hillyer, 3:948. Hillyer takes the wall to be symbolic, but the same meaning would apply to a literal interpretation.

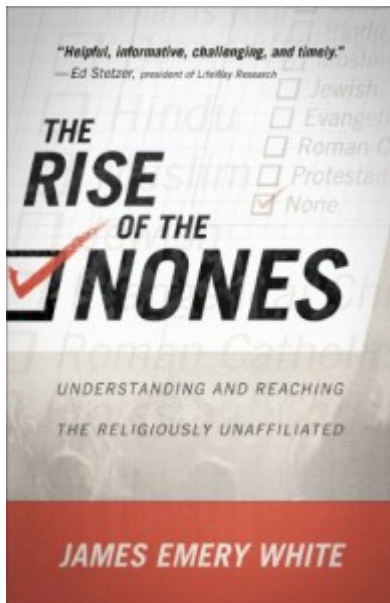
17. For other Scriptures on this use of "outside" see Mk. 4:11; 1 Cor. 5:12f; Col. 4:5; 1 Thess. 4:12.

18. See Jay Wesley Richards, "A Pascalian Argument Against Universalism," in William A. Dembski and Jay Wesley Richards, *Unapologetic Apologetics: Meeting the Challenges of Theological Studies* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 217-218.

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The Rise of the Nones – Reaching the Lost in Today's America

Steve Cable addresses James White's book The Rise of the Nones in view of Probe's research about the church.



Probe Ministries is committed to updating you on the status of Christianity in America. In this article, we consider James White's book, *The Rise of the Nones, Understanding and Reaching the Religiously Unaffiliated*.^[1] His book addresses a critical topic since the fastest-growing religious group of our time is those who check "none" or "none of the above" on religious survey questions.

Let's begin by reviewing some observations about Christianity in America.



From the 1930's^[2] into the early 1990's the percentage of *nones* in America^[3] was less than 8%. But by 2012, the number had grown to 20% of all adults and appears to be increasing. Even more alarming, among those between the ages of 18 and 30 the percentage grew by a factor of three, from 11% in 1990 to nearly 32% in 2012.

Another study reported Protestantism is no longer the majority in the U.S., dropping from 66% in the 1960's down to 48% in 2012.

The *nones* tend to consider themselves to be liberal or moderate politically, in favor of abortion and same-sex marriage being legal, and seldom if ever attend religious services. For the most part, they are not atheists and are not necessarily hostile toward religious institutions. However, among those who believe in "nothing in particular," 88% are not even looking for a specific faith or religion.

One report concludes, "The challenge to Christianity . . .

does not come from other religions, but from a rejection of all forms of organized religions. They're not thinking about religion and rejecting it; they are not thinking about it at all." [\[4\]](#) In fact, the 2011 Baylor survey found that 44% of Americans said they spend no time seeking "eternal wisdom," and a Lifeway survey found that nearly half of Americans said they never wonder whether they will go to heaven.

As White notes, these changes in attitude come in the wake of a second major attack on traditional Christian beliefs. The first set of attacks consisted of:

1. Copernicus attacking the existence of God
2. Darwin attacking God's involvement in creation, and
3. Freud attacking our very concept of a creator God.

The second storm of attacks focuses on perceptions of how Christians think in three important areas.

1. An over entanglement with politics linked to anti-gay, sexual conservatism, and abrasiveness
2. Hateful aggression that has the church talking in ways that have stolen God's reputation, and
3. An obsession with greed seen in televangelist transgressions and mega-pastor materialism, causing distrust of the church.

These perceptions, whether true or not, create an environment where there is no benefit in the public mind to self-identifying with a Christian religious denomination.

Living in a Post-Christian America

A 2013 Barna study [\[5\]](#) shows America rapidly moving into a post-Christian status. Their survey-based study came to this

conclusion: over 48% of young adults are post-Christian, and “The influence of post-Christian trends is likely to increase and is a significant factor among today’s youngest Americans.”[{6}](#)

White suggests this trend is the result of “three deep and fast-moving cultural currents: secularization, privatization, and pluralization.”[{7}](#)

Secularization

Secularization teaches the secular world is reality and our thoughts about the spiritual world are fantasy. White states: “We seem quite content to accept the idea of faith being privately engaging but culturally irrelevant.”[{8}](#) In a society which is not affirming of public religious faith, it is much more difficult to hold a vibrant, personal faith.

Privatization

Privatization creates a chasm between the public and private spheres of life, trivializing Christian faith to the realm of opinion. Nancy Pearcey saw this, saying, “The most pervasive thought pattern of our times is the two-realm view of truth.”[{9}](#) In it, the first and public realm is secular truth that states, “Humans are machines.” The second and private realm of spirituality states, “Moral and humane ideals have no basis in truth, as defined by scientific naturalism. But we affirm them anyway.”[{10}](#)

Pluralization

Pluralization tells us all religions are equal in their lack of ultimate truth and their ability to deliver eternity. Rather speaking the truth of Christ, our post-modern ethic tells us we can each have our own truth. As reported in our book, *Cultural Captives*[{11}](#), about 70% of evangelical, emerging adults are pluralists. Pluralism results in making your own suit out of patches of different fabrics and patterns

and expecting everyone else to act as if it were seamless.

White sums up today's situation this way: "They forgot that their God was . . . radically other than man . . . They committed religion functionally to making the world better in human terms and intellectually to modes of knowing God fitted only for understanding this world."[\[12\]](#)

This combination of secularization, privatization and pluralization has led to a mishmash of "bad religion" overtaking much of mainstream Christianity. The underlying basis of the belief systems of *nones* is that there is a lot of truth to go around. In this post-modern world, it is considered futile to search for absolute truth. Instead, we create our own truth from the facts at hand and as necessary despite the facts. Of course, this creates the false (yet seemingly desirable) attribute that neither we, nor anyone else, have to recognize we are sinners anymore. With no wrong, we feel no need for the ultimate source of truth, namely God.

If You Build It, They Won't Come

We've been considering the beliefs and thinking of the *nones*. Can we reach them with the gospel, causing them to genuinely consider the case for Christ?

We are not going to reach them by doing more of the same. Statistics indicate that we are not doing a good job of reaching the *nones*.

As James White notes, "The very people who say they want unchurched people to . . . find Jesus resist the most basic . . . issues related to building a relationship with someone apart from Christ, . . . and inviting them to an open, winsome, and compelling front door so they can come and see."[\[13\]](#)

Paul had to change his approach when addressing Greeks in

Athens. In the same way, we need to understand how to speak to the culture we want to penetrate.

In the 1960's, a non-believer was likely to have a working knowledge of Christianity. They needed to personally respond to the offer of salvation, not just intellectually agree to its validity. This situation made revivals and door-to-door visitation excellent tools to reach lost people.

Today, we face a different dynamic among the *nones*. "The goal is not simply knowing how to articulate the means of coming to Christ; it is learning how to facilitate and enable the person to progress from [little knowledge of Christ], to where he or she is able to even consider accepting Christ."[{14}](#)

The rise of the *nones* calls for a new strategy for effectiveness. Today, cause should be the leading edge of our connection with many of the *nones*, in terms of both arresting their attention and enlisting their participation.

Up through the 1980s, many unchurched would respond for salvation and then be incorporated into the church and there become drawn to Christian causes. From 1990 through the 2000s, unchurched people most often needed to experience fellowship in the body before they were ready to respond to the gospel. Today, we have *nones* who are first attracted to the causes addressed by Christians. Becoming involved in those causes, they are attracted to the community of believers and gradually they become ready to respond to the gospel.

We need to be aware of how these can be used to offer the good news in a way that can penetrate through the cultural fog. White puts it this way, "Even if it takes a while to get to talking about Christ, (our church members) get there. And they do it with integrity and . . . credibility. . . Later I've seen those *nones* enfolded into our community and before long . . . the waters of baptism."[{15}](#)

Relating to *nones* may be outside your comfort zone, but God

has called us to step out to share His love.

Combining Grace and Truth in a Christian Mind

Every day we are on mission to the unchurched around us. James White suggests ways we can communicate in a way that the *nones* can understand.

We need to take to heart the three primary tasks of any missionary to an unfamiliar culture. First, learn how to communicate with the people we are trying to reach. Second, become sensitized to the new culture to operate effectively within it. Third, “translate the gospel into its own cultural context so that it can be heard, understood, and appropriated.”[{16}](#)

The growth of the *nones* comes largely from Mainline Protestants and Catholics, right in the squishy middle where there is little emphasis on the truth of God’s word. How can we confront them with truth in a loving way?

The gospel of John tells us, “Grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.”[{17}](#) Jesus brought the free gift of grace grounded in eternal truth. As we translate the gospel in today’s cultural context for the *nones*, this combination needs to shine through our message. What does it look like to balance grace and truth?

- If we are communicating no grace and no truth, we are following the example of Hinduism.
- If we are high on grace – but lacking in truth, we give license to virtually any lifestyle and perspective, affirming today’s new definition of tolerance.
- On the other hand, “truth without grace: this is the worst of legalism . . . – what many *nones*

believe to be the hallmark of the Christian faith.” The real representative of dogma without grace is Islam.” In a survey among 750 Muslims who had converted to Christianity, they said that as Muslims, they could never be certain of their forgiveness and salvation as Christians can.

- Grace is the distinctive message of Christianity but never remove it from the truth of the high cost Christ paid. Jesus challenged the religious thought of the day with the truth of God’s standard. Recognizing we cannot achieve that standard, we are run to the grace of God by faith.

To communicate the truth, we need to respond to the new questions *nones* are asking of any faith. As White points out, “I do not encounter very many people who ask questions that classical apologetics trained us to answer . . . Instead, the new questions have to do with significance and meaning.” Questions such as, “So, what?” and “Is this God of yours really that good?”

We need to be prepared to “give a defense for the hope that is within us” in ways that the *nones* around us can resonate with, such as described in our article *The Apologetics of Peter* on our website.

Opening the Front Door to *Nones*

The *nones* desperately need the truth of Jesus, yet it is a challenge to effectively reach them. “Reaching out to a group of people who have given up on the church, . . . we must renew our own commitment to the very thing they have rejected – the church.”^{18} The fact that some in today’s culture have problems with today’s church does not mean that God intends to abandon it.

The church needs to grasp its mandate “to engage in the process of ‘counter-secularization’ . . . There are often disparaging quips made about organized religion, but there was

nothing disorganized about the biblical model.”[{19}](#) We all have a role to play in making our church a force for the gospel in our community.

It must be clear to those outside that we approach our task with civility and unity. Our individual actions are not sufficient to bring down the domain of darkness. Jesus told us that if those who encounter the church can sense the unity holding us together they will be drawn to its message.

How will the *nones* come into contact with the unity of Christ? It will most likely be through interaction with a church acting as the church. As White points out, “If the church has a “front door,” and it clearly does, why shouldn’t it be . . . strategically developed for optimal impact for . . . all *nones* who may venture inside?”[{20}](#) Surveys indicate that 82 percent of unchurched people would come to church this weekend if they were invited by a friend.

One way we have a chance to interact with *nones* is when they expose their children to a church experience. Children’s ministry is not something to occupy our children while we have church, but is instead a key part of our outreach to the lost *nones* in our community. “What you do with their children could be a deal breaker.”

In today’s culture, we cannot overemphasize the deep need for visual communication. Almost everyone is attuned to visually receiving information and meaning. By incorporating visual arts in our church mainstream, “it has a way of sneaking past the defenses of the heart. And *nones* need a lot snuck past them.”[{21}](#)

We need to keep evangelism at the forefront. “This is no time to wave the flag of social ministry and justice issues so single-mindedly in the name of cultural acceptance and the hip factor that it becomes our collective substitute for the clear articulation of the gospel.”[{22}](#)

White clearly states our goal, “Our only hope and the heart of the Great Commission, is to stem the tide by turning the nones into wons.”[\[23\]](#)

Notes

1. James Emery White, *The Rise of the Nones: Understanding and Reaching the Religiously Unaffiliated*, Baker Books, 2014.
2. Katherine Bindley, “Religion Among Americans Hits Low Point, As More People Say They Have No Religious Affiliation: Report,” *Huffington Post*, March 1, 2012.
3. General Social Survey conducted over multiple years by the National Opinion Research Center and accessed through the Association of Religion Data Archives, www.TheARDA.com.
4. ARIS, “American Nones: The Profile of the No Religion Population”, Trinity College, commons.trincoll.edu/aris/files/2011/08/NONES_08.pdf.
5. Barna Group, *How Post-Christian is America?*, 2013, barna.org/barna-update/culture/608-hpca.
6. Ibid.
7. White p. 46.
8. White p. 47.
9. Ibid, p. 121.
10. Ibid p. 109.
11. Stephen Cable, *Cultural Captives: The Beliefs and Behavior of American Young Adults*, 2012, p. 60.
12. James Turner, *Without God, Without Creed: The Origins of Unbelief in America*, Johns Hopkins Press, 1985.
13. White, p. 83.
14. White, p. 93.
15. White, p. 108.
16. White, p. 114.
17. John 1:15.
18. White, p. 155.
19. White, p. 169.
20. White, p. 152.
21. White, p. 163.

22 White, p. 180.

23. White, p. 181.

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Smuggling Theology Into “Out of the Silent Planet”

Dr. Michael Gleghorn provides an overview of how C.S. Lewis wove theology into his ‘Out of the Silent Planet,’ the first book of his space trilogy,

Out of the Silent Planet, C.S. Lewis’ first foray into the science-fiction genre, was originally published in 1938.^{1} Lewis, who appreciated the science-fiction stories of authors like H. G. Wells, was nonetheless troubled by elements in these stories that were morally and intellectually objectionable. According to Alister McGrath, Lewis realized “that the forms of science fiction . . . used to promote various forms of atheism and materialism could . . . be used to *critique* these viewpoints and advocate an alternative.”^{2} This is what Lewis *did* in *Out of the Silent Planet*—and what he *continued* to do in two follow-up books: *Perelandra* and *That Hideous Strength*. Together, these books are commonly known as “the Space Trilogy.”

Out of the Silent Planet tells the story of Dr. Elwin Ransom, who is drugged, kidnapped, and taken aboard a spaceship traveling to Mars. Weston and Devine, the two men who kidnap Ransom, have been to Mars before and believe that the planet’s inhabitants want them to bring back another human being (wrongly assuming that the person *may* be wanted as a



sacrificial offering). Weston is a physicist, interested in finding potential planets for humanity to colonize once our own planet becomes uninhabitable. Devine is an investor, hoping to make some money from the enterprise.

On their way to Mars (known as Malacandra to its own inhabitants), Ransom learns that his life may be in danger once they reach the planet. Hence, shortly after their arrival, Ransom escapes his kidnappers and ends up meeting a creature called a Hross, one of the planet's native inhabitants. He soon discovers that, much like himself, these are intelligent and moral beings. Indeed, in some ways they, along with the other intelligent species on the planet, are superior to human beings, for they have not been infected with the same moral illness that plagues our own species. Eventually, Ransom even meets the designated ruler of the planet, a spiritual intelligence referred to as an Oyarsa. He then learns why earth is known as "the silent planet."[\[3\]](#)

After publishing the book, Lewis confided to one interested correspondent that most of the early reviews had completely missed of Christian theology that he had woven into his narrative. He humorously noted that, apparently, "any amount of theology can now be smuggled into" such a book without anyone's even noticing.[\[4\]](#) So how much theology did Lewis "smuggle into" *Out of the Silent Planet*? That's what we'll discuss in the remainder of this article.

The Heavens Declare the Glory

As Weston, Devine, and Ransom travel through space on their way to Mars, Ransom is surprised by just how *good* he is feeling: courageous, joyful, alert, and full of life. He reflects upon the fact that he had been educated to regard space as "the black, cold vacuity" separating the worlds. He comes to realize, however, that this was all wrong. The term "space," he muses, was utterly inadequate "for this . . .

ocean of radiance in which they swam.” He thus *rejects* the term, observing that “Older thinkers had been wiser when they named it simply the heavens—the heavens which declared the glory.”{5}

Ransom is here reflecting upon the words of King David in Psalm 19:1, “The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands.” As one commentator remarks, “David was moved by observing that the heavens, under the dominating influence of the sun, declare the splendor of God’s handiwork.”{6} The reference to the sun here is apt, for it is largely through the influence of the solar rays that Ransom feels “his body and mind daily rubbed and scoured and filled with new vitality.”{7}

Of course, we must remember that Lewis is here writing science *fiction*—and not science fact. While “the substitution of heaven for space” was Lewis’s “favorite idea in the book,” he also acknowledged “that the rays in interplanetary space, so far from being beneficial,” would actually be harmful to us.{8} But Lewis was attempting to reintroduce a conception of wonder and beauty into the world. He wanted to move his readers’ understanding of “space” from something merely cold, dark, and dead, to a conception of the “heavens” as something radiant and alive with the goodness and bounty of their Creator. And this, in the fictional (and even mythological) world of the story, he has arguably achieved.

Indeed, it’s one of the reasons that many dislike referring to these books as “the *space* trilogy.” Such language misses the fact that Lewis was attempting to shift our attention from the darkness and deadness of “space” to the glory and splendor of the “heavens.” It’s just one of the ways in which Lewis was attempting to reclaim for God a genre of literature that was so often dominated by atheistic and materialistic forms of thinking.{9}

War in Heaven

Before we go any further, we must address the meaning of Lewis's title, "*Out of the Silent Planet*." The novel concerns a voyage from Earth to Mars, and details the adventures of the main character, Dr. Elwin Ransom, after his arrival. In the novel, Earth is known as "the *silent* planet." But why?

The answer has partly to do with "smuggled theology" and partly with the mythological world of the story created by Lewis. In this mythological world, we are introduced to the idea that each planet in our solar system is ruled by a very great, though still created, spiritual being. These beings were created by God and are something like a cross between a Christian archangel and a Roman god or goddess. Hence, the spirit that governs Mars is something like a cross between the archangel Michael and the Roman god Mars (devoid, of course, of all the negative characteristics traditionally ascribed to Mars in Greco-Roman mythology). In fact, this being is a loyal servant of God and was created (at least in part) for the purpose of ruling the planet assigned to it. In the novel, such a ruling spiritual power is referred to an *Oyarsa*.

Eventually, Ransom meets this ruling power and learns why Earth is known as "the silent planet." He is told that the *Oyarsa* of *our* world was once very great, even greater than that of Mars.^[1] Unfortunately, however, he became "bent" (or evil). This happened in the distant past, before there was any life on Earth. Because this "Bent One" desired to destroy "other worlds besides his own," there was "great war" in the heavens. Eventually, he was "bound . . . in the air of his own world." "There," Ransom learns, "doubtless he lies to this hour."^[11] The other planets have no communication with Earth. It is "silent."

Do you see what Lewis is doing? In the fictional world of the novel, he is telling us a story very similar to that of the fall of the devil. In the Bible, the Apostle Paul refers to

Satan as the “prince of the power of the air” (Ephesians 2:1-2) and the “god of this world” (2 Corinthians 4:4). Lewis is doing something similar in his description of the “Bent One” who rules the Earth as a rebel against God. But Lewis goes much further than this.

War on Earth

Above, we left Ransom, the hero of C. S. Lewis’s novel, *Out of the Silent Planet*, deep in conversation with the divinely appointed spiritual ruler of Mars. After telling Ransom that Earth, alone among the planets in our solar system, is “silent,” being ruled by a “bent” (or evil) power, the Martian ruler then says something quite intriguing.

He tells Ransom that they do not think that “Maleldil” (more on this in a moment) would completely surrender Earth to the “Bent One.” Indeed, he says, “there are stories among us” that Maleldil has done some “strange” and wonderful things, even personally appearing on Earth and “wrestling with the Bent One” for the right to rule. “But of this,” he says, “we know less than you; it is a thing we desire to look into.”[{12}](#)

So who is Maleldil, and what exactly has he done? In the world of the novel, Maleldil is the name for God in the Old Solar language, which Ransom has gradually learned during his time on Mars.[{13}](#) Hence, the Martian ruler is essentially telling Ransom that they do not believe that God would completely surrender Earth to the devil. Indeed, they have even heard stories that God (or Maleldil) has visited “the silent planet” and done battle with the evil one. He admits that there is much they do not know about all this but says that he (and other loyal servants of God) long to look into these things.

Those familiar with the Bible will doubtless see what Lewis is doing here, for he concludes this passage with what is basically a biblical quotation. The Apostle Peter wrote of

“the prophets who prophesied about the grace” that was to be ours in Christ. So great was the content of this revelation, notes Peter, that even “angels long to look” into such things (1 Peter 1:10-12). Thus, as Christiana Hale rightly notes, the “strange counsel” that Maleldil has taken, and the wonderful things he has done, “the things that all the angels desire to look into, is the Gospel of Jesus Christ: the Incarnation, birth, death, and resurrection of the Son of God.”[{14}](#)

Once again, therefore, we see Lewis “smuggling theology” into his interplanetary space adventure. In this case, though not stating it explicitly, he clearly alludes to the whole gospel message about Jesus. Next, we’ll consider one final example of “smuggled theology” in C. S. Lewis’s *Out of the Silent Planet*.

Divine Providence and the Martial Spirit

Although God, who is known as Maleldil in the novel, is mentioned repeatedly, He is always mentioned in the third person. We hear about things that Maleldil *has done, is doing,* or may one day *do*, but we do not hear directly from God (or Maleldil) himself. Nevertheless, it is clear that He is ultimately in charge, and He is providentially at work in and through His creatures.[{15}](#)

For example, the spiritual power that Maleldil created to govern Mars, tells Ransom (the hero of the novel) that it was only by Maleldil that he had been able to save his own planet from the destructive rage of the “Bent One” (or devil). Indeed, it was only by Maleldil that the heavenly host were able to stop the “Bent One’s” ambitious cruelty and confine him to the Earth.[{16}](#) Moreover, we learn that Maleldil has done marvelous things and even personally visited Earth to do battle with the devil.[{17}](#)

Lewis thus portrays God (or Maleldil) not only as a king, but also as a warrior. He is characterized (in an appropriate way)

by what might be called the “warrior” or “martial spirit.” Moreover, the spiritual power that Maleldil created to govern Mars is also (like the god of Roman mythology) imbued with the martial spirit. He, too, is a warrior, loyally engaged in fighting in the service of God. In light of this, once we learn that Ransom has been called to Mars by its planetary ruler, we can rightly surmise that it was, in fact, *God’s will* for Ransom to make this journey. We might even guess that one of the purposes of this journey was to develop the “martial spirit” in Ransom himself.

As Christiana Hale observes, “Lewis does not randomly pick Mars as the location, as if any alien planet would do. No, he chooses Mars for a reason, and an enormous part of that reason is to mold Ransom into a Martial character.”[\[18\]](#) In other words, God (or Maleldil) wants to develop certain martial virtues in Ransom, things like courage, strength, determination, perseverance, and grit. Indeed, this is providentially necessary, for He is preparing Ransom for something far greater in the future. Hence, through the providence of God and the influence of Mars, we witness Ransom’s growth in the martial spirit, thus preparing him for his next great adventure on a different alien world, that of Perelandra.

Notes

1. C. S. Lewis, *Out of the Silent Planet* (New York, NY: Macmillan, 1965).
2. Alister McGrath, *C. S. Lewis: A Life: Eccentric Genius, Reluctant Prophet* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2013), 234-35.
3. Lewis, *Out of the Silent Planet*, 120-21.
4. C. S. Lewis to Sister Penelope CSMV, August 9, 1939, in *The Collected Letters of C. S. Lewis*, ed. Walter Hooper, vol. 2, Books, Broadcasts and War 1931-1949 (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 2004), 262.
5. All quotations in this paragraph are taken from Lewis, *Out*

of the Silent Planet, 32.

6. Allen P. Ross, "Psalms," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: Old Testament Edition*. ed. John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck (Victor Books, 1985), 807.

7. Lewis, *Out of the Silent Planet*, 31-32.

8. C. S. Lewis to Mrs. Stuart Moore (Evelyn Underhill), October 29, 1938, in *The Collected Letters of C. S. Lewis*, ed. Walter Hooper, vol. 2, Books, Broadcasts and War 1931-1949 (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 2004), 233-34.

9. See Alister McGrath, *C. S. Lewis: A Life: Eccentric Genius, Reluctant Prophet* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2013), 234-35.

10. See Lewis, *Out of the Silent Planet*, 120-21.

11. All quotations in the paragraph are taken from Lewis, *Out of the Silent Planet*, 121.

12. Lewis, *Out of the Silent Planet*, 121.

13. Christiana Hale, *Deeper Heaven: A Reader's Guide to C. S. Lewis's Ransom Trilogy* (Moscow, ID: Roman Roads Press, 2020), 155.

14. Hale, *Deeper Heaven*, 88.

15. Lewis, *Out of the Silent Planet*, 67-8.

16. *Ibid.*, 121.

17. *Ibid.*

18. Hale, *Deeper Heaven*, 70.

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The Professor: Why Are You a Christian? – When Challenged,

Can You Defend Your Faith in Christ

Are our adults ready to give a defense of the gospel? When challenged, can they give a reasonable explanation of their faith? Dr. Bohlin presents a sobering view of this question based upon years of experience questioning high school and college-age students on the basis for their belief in Christ. By exposing their lack of cogent answers to questions they may be asked, he challenges them to spend time exploring the questions and developing biblical worldview-based answers.

The Professor

Over the last ten years, I have used a very effective technique to help teens realize their unpreparedness for the step toward college. It seems our young people are heading into public and even Christian colleges thinking they are ready for the challenge to their faith that higher learning can be.

☒ Probe Ministries has sponsored a [college prep conference](#) since 1991 that was designed to help young people gain some insights and even some knowledge on how to address the intellectual challenges that college will provide.

If you remember the thousands of college radicals who protested and picketed in the '60s and '70s, they found their push for change was not very effective. Instead, many of them stayed in college, obtained Masters Degrees and PhDs. After all, it was easier than getting a real job! As a result, they are now your children's professors!

The college campus was an anti-Christian breeding ground several decades ago and now it is even worse. Christianity is not so much openly mocked as it is marginalized and deemed a

false and mischievous mythology.

If you haven't already heard some of these statistics, you need to hold onto your hat.

In 2007, LifeWay surveyed 23- to 30-year-olds and found that seventy percent had taken at least a one year break from church during their college years.[{1}](#) Now, almost two-thirds of these return to some level of church attendance, but mainly to please family or friends who encouraged them to return. That means that most of our church youth are making many of their life decisions, including marriage and career, apart from a church context. Even many who return carry numerous scars from bad choices during those years.[{2}](#)

With this statistical background, it's plain our young people need some preparation before going on to college or the military. But as most parents of teens know, just telling them they need this is less than likely to be convincing.

Enter the Professor. The technique I mentioned at the beginning is to impersonate an atheistic college professor doing research on the religious beliefs of young people. Sometimes the students know I am playing a role with them, but occasionally I play the professor and the students are none the wiser.

A Simple Question

When I step to the front of the room, I introduce myself as Professor Hymie Schwartz (a name borrowed from my late colleague Jerry Solomon who played this role far better than I do). I tell the group that, since I am conducting research on the religious beliefs of young people, their youth pastor, counselor, principal, teacher—whatever, has allowed me to visit with them.

I begin the conversation something like this: "Since this is a

church or Christian school I presume you are all Christians. Is anyone not a Christian?" Of course no one raises their hand. But I am always aware that some may indeed not be believers and may not appreciate my questioning so I am always paying attention.

At this point I simply call on someone, usually someone who isn't really paying attention or is engrossed in conversation with a neighbor. "You! Are you a Christian?" No one has ever answered no. Upon receiving an affirmative answer, with hands casually stuck in my pockets, I demand, "Why?"

Students are paying attention now. This is for real. Now consider my question for yourself. If Peter warns us to always be ready to give an answer to anyone who asks to give a defense for the hope that we have, this is a pretty basic question. In our highly secular culture, if someone finds out you're a Christian, they may indeed ask you why. Peter says you ought to have an answer.

But this simple question why is usually something our young people, and even their parents, have never really considered. Their Christian faith is certainly something they would claim is central to their lives, but the dumbfounded looks on their faces tells me repeatedly that this question is a new one.

It's usually about this time that any parents sitting in the back are suddenly quite relieved I'm not talking to them!

By asking such questions, I can get them pretty riled up and confused. The point is not to have fun but to help them see that they need to be prepared and think a little about why Christianity is important to them and why they think it's true.

"I Asked Jesus into My Heart!"

Having their Christianity questioned usually comes as a

surprise and even shock. Rather than directly answering the question, they try to tell me *how* they became a Christian. It usually takes the form of confidently saying they asked Jesus into their heart.

The professor quickly fires back, "You asked Jesus into your heart?! That sounds pretty gross, really. What's he doing in there with all that blood? Yuck!" That always gets a surprised reaction and a little befuddlement. The student typically tries to recover by saying something like, "No, I mean it's like I trusted Jesus as my Savior."

Again the professor will fire back quickly with a question like, "Why did you do that?" or "Savior? What did you need saving from?" I think you can see where this is going. It really is not difficult to pick something from what he or she said and challenge it. I either pretend I don't understand what they said, forcing them to better explain themselves (which is rare), or I deliberately ask them why they think that way, or how they know that.

In answer to "How do you know that?" I am often told that "It says so in the Bible!" They usually can't tell me where the Bible says that. I also ask if the Bible is true, and they say it is. But when I ask, "How do you know it's true?" the blank stare reemerges.

Sometimes a student will say, "Because it's the word of God!" Now I can really dig a little deeper. In response to further questioning, they usually can't tell me where the Bible says it's the Word of God nor can they tell me why the Bible is different from The Book of Mormon or the Qur'an. If there is a youth pastor or chaplain present there is usually an embarrassed look on their face or a head buried in their hands.

By this time the class is very tense and full of nervous laughter. When I reach a dead end with a student—for instance

when they say, "I don't know" with a very resigned and defeated voice—I look for one of the laughing students and ask, "What about you?" Of course that gets everybody's attention again and off we go.

While I admit I have a little fun playing this role, it never ceases to break my heart at how ill-prepared our young people are to follow Peter's advice to always be prepared with an answer. I have yet to find a student in ten years who is willing and able to go toe-to-toe with the professor.

"You're a Narrow-Minded, Self-Righteous Bigot!"

Here are three other directions our conversations have frequently taken.

When I have challenged students to tell me why they think or believe Christianity is true, some will turn to their own subjective experience. Technically, there is nothing wrong with this, specifically when speaking to a Christian audience. But someone who doesn't even believe in God will frequently find ways to truly make fun of this element.

A student may describe that Jesus speaks to them in their prayer time, to which I quickly ask what His voice sounds like or how they know it was Jesus and not indigestion. The blank stares usually resume at this point. We have become so comfortable in our Christian bubble sometimes that we frequently don't see how unintelligible our language is to those outside the community of faith. It's tough to share the gospel that way.

Sometimes a student will interject that they believe in Jesus because that's what their family has taught them or it's what they learned in church. I usually pounce on that pretty quickly and repeat that this student believes Christianity is

true because their parents told them so. The student usually agrees. After commending them for honoring their parents I tell them that's really pretty stupid. Pausing a second for the shock to register, I go on about the boy raised in India whose parents are Hindu and he respects his parents and believes Hinduism is true, so the boy in India and this student are both headed to heaven because they trusted their parents!

One time a student stammered around and eventually agreed with my statement as his youth pastor put his head in his hands.

Finally in talking about salvation I ask what happens to those who don't believe in Jesus. Most will hesitatingly say they go to hell. The professor predictably rants, "Just because I don't believe the same fairy tale as you, I'm going to hell?" When they predictably shake their head yes, I get down eye to eye and spit out, "You're a narrow minded, self-righteous bigot!"

Always Be Ready to Give an Answer, with Gentleness and Respect

Students enjoy the interactive nature of this routine even though they are routinely embarrassed by their inability to handle the challenge. When Peter admonished all of us to always be ready to give an answer to everyone who asks us for a reason for the hope that we have, yet with gentleness and respect (1 Pet. 3:15), they fail miserably. Perhaps as a parent, you may be glad that I don't do this with adult groups.

Often students will try to turn the conversation in their favor by asking the professor a question. I quickly dismiss that idea by simply answering that *I'm* asking the questions. But when we're done, if time allows I attempt to leave them with hope by quickly summarizing how I, Dr. Ray Bohlin, Vice-

President of Probe Ministries, would answer the same question.

Here's the outline of my response. In a calm voice I quickly assert that I know there is a God. As a scientist I look principally at how marvelously our universe, galaxy, solar system, and planet are designed for complex life here on earth. The number of highly improbable coincidences rules out chance and strongly implies design. This is reinforced by the evidence from biology of the incredible complexity of life, particularly the coded information in DNA. This remarkable molecule with its accompanying system of transcription and translation screams for intelligence.

The fact that all people have some sense of right and wrong, even though we may disagree sometimes, tells us we are comparing our morality to some invisible standard outside ourselves that must come from a supreme Law Giver. I am convinced there is a supernatural God.

If this God exists, then has He spoken to man? I quickly tell about the uniqueness of Scripture, written by forty authors from eight countries over fifteen hundred years in three languages and all with a consistent and unique message of a God of love who ransomed us from our sins. Where we have archaeological evidence it consistently confirms the accuracy of biblical events. I am convinced the Bible is the true and unique Word of God.

The Bible throughout is about Jesus, who repeatedly claimed to be the unique divine Son of God and offered his death and resurrection on behalf of mankind as proof. That Jesus bodily rose from the dead is the only rational conclusion of the evidence of the empty tomb. On top of that, my personal experience of the last thirty-seven years has shown me again and again the unique love and power of God.

So what about you? Why are *you* a Christian?

Notes

1. "LifeWay Research Uncovers Reasons 18 to 22 Year Olds Drop Out of Church," 2007, www.lifeway.com/article/165949/, accessed May 15, 2010.

2. Youth Transition Network has researched this problem over the last ten years and has excellent resources, videos, research, and books and DVDs for purchase. Take a look at www.ytn.org.

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Why Study Church History?

James Detrich provides five reasons to study church history and allow our knowledge to build our confidence in our faith.

When I was in college, we had to do what was called "evangelism night." It was a night in which a group of us would pile into someone's old, broken-down car (we were all poor back then) and skirt downtown to the city's walking bridge, a large half-mile overpass extending over the Chattanooga River. We were always sure that plenty of people would be there that needed our message. One night I began talking to a man about Christ and he quickly cut me off, "I am a Christian," he exclaimed. "Great," I replied. As we continue talking, though, I soon discovered that he was a "different" Christian than me. He said he believed in an expansive New Testament that contained many more books than the twenty-seven I was accustomed to, and he had six or seven Gospels, where I only had four. When I told him that I didn't think he was right, that the New Testament only contained twenty-seven books and four Gospels, he asked me an important question, "How do you know that there are only four Gospels? Maybe there are more books to the Bible than you think!" I stood there, knowing that he was wrong. But I didn't know *why* he was wrong.

I had no idea of how to combat him—I didn't know church history well enough in order to provide, as 1 Peter 3:15 says, an account of the assurance that lies within me.



This is one of the great reasons why we as Christians need to study church history. In this article I am going to make a passionate plea for the study of church history and give five reasons why I believe it is essential for every follower of Christ. Alister McGrath said that “Studying church history . . . is like being at a Bible study with a great company of people who thought about those questions that were bothering you and others.”^[1] These bothering questions, much like the one I could not answer on the walking bridge, oftentimes can be answered through learning the stories and lessons of history. It was Martin Luther, the great reformer, who cried out: “History is the mother of truth.” This is the first reason why Christians need to study history, so that we can become better skilled to answer the nagging questions that either critics ask or that we ourselves are wrestling with. It would have been a tremendous help that day on the bridge to know that in the second and third centuries, the time right after Jesus and the apostles, that church pastors and theologians were exclaiming and defending the truth that we only possess four Gospels: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. If I had only known of this rich tradition, if I had only known my church history, I would have been able to give a reasonable account of that hope that lies within me.

Church History Provides Comfort

The first reason why Christians should study church history is that it helps Christians provide a more reasonable account of

what we believe. The second reason is that Christians, just like any other people, go through many times of loneliness and despair. The book of Psalms reveals multiple times where various psalmists reveal that they feel as though God has left them, that their enemies are closing in, and that no one, including God, really cares. Suffice it to say that this often leads to a crisis of faith. Many of us suffer that same crisis from time to time, and the one thing that usually helps to be encouraged is to get around God's people. When we are with others who believe as we do, it helps to stabilize, and to build, our faith. There is a sense in those moments of being with other Christians that our faith is bigger and more expansive—that it is communal, not merely individual.

Studying church history is about being with the community of faith. Reading the stories, learning the truths, examining the insights of these faithful men and women down through the centuries gives to us the sense that our faith is not shallow, but as the song used to say, it is "deep and wide." Church historian John Hannah claims that studying Christian heritage "dispels the sense of loneliness and isolation in an era that stresses the peripheral and sensational." [\[2\]](#) It breaks us away from this modern culture that emphasizes the glitz and the glamour of the here and now, and helps us to establish confidence in the faith by examining the beliefs central to our faith that have been developed over a long period of time. Christian theology does not invent beliefs; it finds beliefs already among Christians and critically examines them. The excavation site for Christian theology is not merely in the pages of Scripture, though that is the starting point, but it expands from there into the many centuries as we find the Holy Spirit leading His church. For us today, it gives us the ability to live each day absolutely sure that what we are believing in actually is true; to know and understand that for over 2000 years men and women have been worshipping, praising, and glorifying the same God that we do today.

It's similar to those grand, majestic churches, the cathedrals that overwhelm you with the sense of transcendence. The expansive ceilings, high walls, and stained glass leaves the impression that our faith, our Christian heritage, is not small but large. Entering into a contemplation of our faith's history is like going into one of those churches. It takes away the loneliness, the isolation, and reminds us of the greatness of our faith.

Church History Solidifies Our Faith

The third reason for studying church history takes us to the task of theology. Have you ever wondered if something you heard being preached in church was essential? Maybe you've asked, Is this really so important to my faith? Understanding and articulating what is most important to Christianity is one of the crucial tasks that theology performs. This task is developed from a historical viewpoint. It asks the question, What has always been crucially important to Christians in each stage of church history? Over the centuries, Christian theologians have developed three main categories for Christian beliefs: dogma, doctrine, and opinion.^{3} A belief considered as dogma is deemed to be essential to the gospel; rejecting it would entail apostasy and heresy. Doctrines are developed within a particular church or denomination that help to guide that group in belief. What a church believes is found in its doctrine. Lastly, beliefs relegated to opinion are always interesting, but they are not important in the overall faith of the church. But dogma is important and history tells the story of how the church receives these important truths. It tells the story of how the church came to understand that God is three and one, the received truth of the Trinity; or how they came to understand that Jesus was both human and divine, the received truth of the Person of Christ. In examining these things, you begin to understand what is most essential and what is less important.

This is the same question that was being asked in the early fourth century. Some folks calling themselves Christians were going around proclaiming that Jesus Christ was different from God the Father, that even though He was deserving of worship, there was a time when He was created by the Father. Other Christians rose up and declared that to be heretical. They claimed that the words and actions of Christ as recorded in the Scripture clearly affirms Him to be equal with the Father. The Council of Nicaea in A.D. 325 sided with the latter group, claiming that Jesus was indeed equal with His Father. The exact wording of the council's conclusion is that Jesus is "of the same substance" with His Father. That dogmatic decision is reflected in the church's doctrinal beliefs and it demonstrates its crucial importance for Christianity.

History is indeed the treasure chest of truth. Open it up. Discover the riches within it. Find out what is there and what is not—what is important and what is not!

Church History Helps Us Interpret the Bible

Why should we study church history? The answers already given are that it provides perspective in answering tough questions, gives a sense that our faith has gravitas, delineates that which is important; the fourth reason is that the study of church history helps us to interpret the Bible. You might be inclined to say, "We don't need church history, all we need is the Bible." But we must remember that people interpret the Bible in many and various ways. For instance, do you know that the largest meeting in North America that discusses the Bible is called the Society of Biblical Literature. It meets every year and boasts of having thousands of members. Among those within the society, only an astonishing 30% of them are evangelicals, or people who would have a more conservative interpretation of Scripture. People all over are reading the

Bible, but they are reading it in different ways.

So, how do we know how to interpret the Bible? We believe that a certain interpretation or tradition of the text goes all the way back to Jesus and His apostles. Thus, Scripture must be interpreted in light of this tradition—the way that the early community of believers read the various texts of Scripture as they recognized its authority in matters of faith and practice. They recognized that these texts supported, explained, and gave evidence to the belief system that they held dear. For us, going back and reading the early church fathers is profitable for our understanding of the broader cultural and theological framework so that we can better understand what Scripture is saying. For instance, as we discovered above, the Trinity is a crucial dogma of the church. Therefore, any interpretation of the Bible that contradicts that basic belief would be inadequate. History helps to paint the lines that we must stay within and it helps to construct the boundaries for a faithful reading of the text. Examining what was important to the apostles, and the generation that followed, and then the next generation, gives a basic tradition, a framework, of values and beliefs, that must guide our faith today. The study of church history helps us to develop that basic framework.

It was a second-century pastor that complained that the heretics of his day read the same Bible as he did, yet they twist it into something else. He equated it someone taking a beautiful picture of a king constructed with precious jewels and rearranging those jewels so that the picture now resembles a dog.^{4} We would contest ruining such a beautiful piece of art! This is exactly what happens when the beauty of the Bible is misinterpreted. To keep that from happening, we must study church history and find out what the precious jewels actually are that construct the beauty of the Bible.

Church History Demonstrates the Working of God

We have listed four reasons to study church history: it helps answering questions, it presents a faith that is deep and wide, it delineates what is important, and it helps us to interpret the Bible. The fifth reason why we should study church history is that it demonstrates the working of God. More specifically, it gives evidence that the Holy Spirit is working through and among His people, the church of God. It is the same Spirit that was working in that early Christian community that is still at work today in the community of faith. In other words, history provides a further resource for understanding the movement of God in the entire community of faith. We affirm that there is continuity between the early Christian community and the community today, because we serve one God and are the one people of that God. Hence, every sector of church history is valuable, because it is the same Spirit moving through every stage of history. Church history is His story and it tells of God's faithfulness to the community of believers as they have carried forth His truth and have given animation to His character. Just as Christ is the image of the invisible God, the church, through the Son and by the Spirit, is also the image of the invisible God. Church history is the story of how the community reflects that invisible God.

This is the concept that brings all the others into a connected whole. The reason why studying church history can provide answers to crucial questions of faith is due to the fact that the Spirit has been moving in the hearts of men and women down throughout history, aiding them in their questions of faith and the fruit of that work has been preserved for us today. The reason why studying church history can show us what is important to the faith is because the Spirit has been at work guiding the church into truth. The reason why studying church history can help us interpret the Bible is because the

Spirit has illuminated the path for understanding the Bible for centuries. This is what is fascinating about church history: it is a study of His Story. He is there, just as Jesus said He would be. Remember it was Jesus who said that He was going away, but that He would send a Comforter. And this One would guide us in all truth. Church history is the story of that illuminated path where the God of the church guides His people into all truth. History is where He is.

Notes

1. Alister McGrath, "The State of the Church Before the Reformation" in *Modern Reformation* [January/February 1994]: 11.
2. John D. Hannah, "Notes on the Church to the Modern Era" (Dallas: Dallas Theological Seminary), 2.
3. Stanley Grenz and Roger Olson, *Who Needs Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 73.
4. This is a metaphor presented by Irenaeus in *Against Heresies*, 1.8.1.