

Atheism 2.0? Talking Back to a TED Talk

In 2011, atheist Alain de Botton gave a now-famous TED talk "Atheism 2.0." As part of a seminary class on apologetics, Probe intern T.S. Weaver was assigned to write a response to it, which we are honored to publish. First, here is a video of that TED talk:

Dear Mr. de Botton,

First, I want to say I admire your courage to share these ideas publicly and I do think you are a gifted orator. I am a Christian seminary student and have both many things I agree with and disagree with from your talk. I will try to touch on them in the order you bring them up in your talk.

To start with when you say, "Of course there's no God . . . now let's move on. That's not the end of the story. That's the very very beginning," I can respect that because I agree that

a truth claim regarding the existence of God is just the beginning. This truth claim informs our entire worldview and how we live. To me, knowing there is a God (the same conclusion to which avowed atheist [Sir Antony Flew](#) came) gives me meaning, purpose, knowledge of where we came from, where we are going, and how to live. I wonder from your perspective, though, how without a God, any of these key issues in life can be addressed. Without a God, where do we come from? What does life really mean? How do we differentiate between good and evil? What happens when we die?

Going further in your talk, I must say I too love Christmas carols, looking at churches, and turning the pages of the Old Testament. We have common ground here, so again, we do not disagree on everything.

However, evaluating your view again, I do not see how you can be attracted to the "moralistic side" of religion without the existence of God. You say you are "stealing from religion;" that I agree with as well. I wonder if you have thought, if you are truly an atheist, how can there even be such things as morals? How can you define good? In relation to what? Where does this come from? If there is some moral law, have you thought about where it comes from? Do you think that implies there must be some sort of law giver? In the atheistic worldview what is the moral law and who is the law giver?

You go on to say, "There's nothing wrong with picking out the best sides of religion." That sounds nice, but I disagree. You must either adopt it all or nothing, otherwise you do not have a worldview that makes sense. There will be self-contradictions all throughout your view. A perfect example as I touched on above is your idea of "Atheism 2.0." It is impossible to adopt a moralistic side because without God there are no morals. There is no reason to have a moralistic side. This is a contradiction. Have you considered this?

As your talk goes on, you say some remarkably interesting

things I have not heard before, even from an atheist. Your claim the church in the early nineteenth century looked to culture to find morality, guidance, and sources of consolation is new to me. I would like to know how you came to this conclusion. Which denomination? Which church? What was your source of information? It is noticeably clear to me that the practice of the (Christian) church is to find all those things from Scripture and God. In fact, the Bible tells us in several places not to conform to culture. Here is one example from my favorite verse: "Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind." (Romans 12:2) So, your claim is the exact opposite of what I as a Christian know presently and have learned about church history.

Furthermore, does not this refute how you opened your talk when you said, "We have done secularism bad"? You even say the church replacing Scripture with culture is "beautiful" and "true" and "an idea that we have forgotten." This is the very description of how atheists "have done secularism," is it not? From my understanding, atheism replaces Scripture with culture. Is this true, or am I missing something? If it is true, you have already done the reflection on how it is working and concluded it is "bad." Yet you want to "steal from religion." So, if your claim about church history is true, this is how it falls out: You think secularism has been done bad and want to instead steal morality from religion. And yet, religion (according to you) has gotten morality from culture (i.e., secularism). So, the very thing you would be stealing is what you yourself already called bad and would end up stuck with in the end anyway. Nothing has changed. Do you see how this is incoherent if it were true? Have you thought about this?

I do like your thoughts about the difference between a sermon (wanting to change your life) and a lecture (wanting to give you a bit of information). I also agree we need to get back to

“that sermon tradition,” and we are in need of morality, guidance, and consolation, because like you said, “We are barely holding it together.” And I do mean “we” to cover both the atheist and the Christian alike. This is exactly what Christianity is about. We cannot “hold it together” on our own. That is why we have a Savior, and we live dependently on God, the moral law giver. Now again, you cannot have morality without the moral law giver. Furthermore, if you get guidance from atheists preaching sermons are you not facing the same problem I wrote of in the earlier paragraph? Where is the guidance coming from? Culture? Have you considered this to be the blind leading the blind?

I also agree with your point about the value of repetition. I have so much information coming at me so fast that if I do not revisit it enough, almost none of it sticks. That is another reason I am repeating some of my points.

Now you mentioned one of the things you like about religion is when someone is preaching a rousing part of a sermon, we shout “Amen,” “Thank you Lord,” “Yes Lord,” “Thank you Jesus,” etc. Your idea of atheists doing this when fellow atheists are preaching passionate points is both clever and funny. However, as Rebecca McLaughlin (a Christian) pointed out in her book, *Confronting Christianity*, your examples of secular audiences saying, “Thank you Plato, thank you Shakespeare, thank you Jane Austen!” falls flat because of the examples you chose. McLaughlin writes, “One wonders how Shakespeare, whose world was fundamentally shaped by Christianity, would have felt about being cast as an atheist icon. But when it comes to Jane Austen, the answer is clear: a woman of deep, explicit, and abiding faith in Jesus, she would be utterly appalled.”

Your point on art is amazingly fascinating. You say if you were a museum curator, you would make a room for love and a room for generosity. While this sounds beautiful, there is a problem. This will sound repetitive (helping us both learn and remember), but it is just like the morality dilemma you have

presented earlier. If no God exists, what is love? What is generosity? How do you define it? Where does it come from? Why is it valuable? Why is anything valuable?

To beat the dead horse one more time (apologies) . . . In your closing statements you again you say all these things are “very good.” Well, what is good? How do you define it? In relation to what? Where does it come from? How do you know that? As you earlier confessed, you are stealing from religion. These stolen values have no grounding if atheism is true.

I know some of the issues I raised were not necessarily the purpose of your talk, but in all, I wonder if you have considered how the facts and implications you presented correspond to reality. Do you think all the assertions you made cohere? Do you find your idea of Atheism 2.0 logically consistent and rational? If you could give a follow up talk, could you offer any way to verify your claims empirically? Could you supply answers to the questions of origin, meaning, morality, and destiny?

Sincerely,

A Christian – T.S. Weaver

Atheist Myths and Scientism

Steve Cable exposes some atheist myths and the false ideology of scientism, all designed to destroy people's faith.

A Two-Pronged Attack Against Christianity



Atheist attacks against American Christianity are gaining more traction in our society. Their success can be readily seen in the growth of the number of American young adults who do not profess to be Christians. Tracking recent trends, around 50% of American Millennials fall in this category, with most of those identifying as atheist, agnostic or nothing in particular. More identify as nothing in particular than as atheist, but the atheist attacks certainly have a role to play in their ambivalent feelings about Christianity.

What have atheists done to create a cultural milieu that is drawing more and more young Americans away from Christianity? In this article, we will focus on two prominent prongs of the attack against Christianity. Those prongs are:

1. Fabricating myths around the premise that Christianity and modern science are enemies of one another and have been so since the advent of modern science, and
2. Promoting the philosophy of scientism as the only way to view science.

First, the myths are an attempt to cause people to believe that the Christian church and a Christian worldview were and are anti-science. They want us to believe that the findings of science are counter to the make-believe teachings of Christianity and the Bible. They want us to look back at history and believe that the church was actively opposing and trying to suppress scientific knowledge. As Michael Keas tells us in his 2019 book *Unbelievable*, “These stories are nothing but myths. And yet some leading scientists . . . offer these stories as unassailable truth. These myths make their way into science textbooks . . . (and) enter into popular culture,

whereby the myths pass as accepted wisdom.”[{1}](#)

However, many historians and philosophers have correctly pointed out that the Christian worldview of an orderly universe created by an involved God produced the mindset that gave birth to the scientific revolution. In his book *How the West Won*, sociologist Rodney Stark states, “Christianity was essential to the rise of science, which is why science was a purely Western phenomenon . . . science only arose in Christian Europe because only medieval Europeans believed that science was possible and desirable. And the basis of their belief was their image of God and his creation.”[{2}](#) In this article, we consider the key figures who propagated this myth and some of the falsified stories they have foisted upon us.

Second, they want us to accept scientism as the only valid way to view the role of science in our understanding of the universe. What is scientism? In his 2018 book *Scientism and Secularism*, professor of philosophy J. P Moreland defines it this way: “Scientism is the view that the hard sciences provide the only genuine knowledge of reality. . . . What is crucial to scientism is . . . the thought that the scientific is much more valuable than the non-scientific. . . . When you have competing knowledge claims from different sources, the scientific will always trump the non-scientific.”[{3}](#)

But scientism “is not a doctrine of science; rather it is a doctrine of philosophy . . . (In fact,) scientism distorts science.”[{4}](#) This philosophical doctrine came into favor among the public not because of scientific results, but rather as the result of proponents presenting it in popular ways as if it were the undisputable truth. As Moreland points out, “It is not even a friend of science but rather its enemy.”[{5}](#)

Myths about Christianity and Science

Atheists want to create stories to demonstrate that Christians

are and have been the enemies of scientific exploration and discovery. Why this drive to recreate the past? They want to encourage people to turn away from Christianity as an enemy of science and weaken the faith of believers.

As Michael Keas makes evident in *Unbelievable*, this thinking is not based on reality. Instead, historical myths have been created to bolster their position either as a result of ignorance of the actual history or intentional deceit. After creating these myths, they use the educational system and mass media to ingrain these myths into the thinking of the masses.

Keas specifically looks at seven myths used for this purpose which we find embedded in our textbooks and proclaimed by popular television programs. To understand the nature of these myths, let's consider two of the ones discussed by Keas.

Many of you learned of the Dark Ages, a period of time between A.D. 500 and 1500 where textbooks have claimed that science and the arts were stifled by the control of the church which opposed scientific understanding. In truth, this view is not supported by historical evaluations of that time. As reported in Stark's revealing book, *How the West Won*, "Perhaps the most remarkable aspect of the Dark Ages myth is that it was imposed on what was actually "one of the great innovative eras of mankind." During this period technology was developed and put into use on a scale no civilization had previously known.[\[6\]](#) Keas found that this myth first appeared in textbooks in the 1800s but did not surface with an anti-Christian slant until the 1960s. Carl Sagan, and later Neal deGrasse Tyson, would help promulgate this myth on television through their *Cosmos* series.

Another myth exploded by Keas is that "Copernicus demoted humans from the privileged 'center of the universe' and thereby challenged religious doctrines about human importance."[\[7\]](#) In fact, Copernicus as a Christian did not consider his discovery that the earth orbited the sun a

demotion for earth or humans. What Copernicus saw as unveiling the mysteries of God's creation over time began to be pictured as a great humiliation for Christians. In the 1950s some scientific writers began using the term "the Copernican principle" to refer to the idea "that the Earth is not in a central, specially favored position"[{8}](#) in the cosmos. As one Harvard professor has noted, "This is the principle of mediocrity, and Copernicus would have been shocked to find his name associated with it."[{9}](#)

Keas also documents how this atheist strategy also pretends that many early scientists were not Christians. Johannes Kepler, known for his discovery of the three laws of planetary motion, is cited by Sagan in *Cosmos* as someone who "despaired of ever attaining salvation,"[{10}](#) implying that Kepler always felt this way. Sagan leads one to believe that in his astronomical discoveries Kepler was somehow freed from this concern. Yet from Kepler's own writing it is very clear that he was a Christian, telling people shortly before his death that he was saved "solely by the merit of our savior Jesus Christ." And speaking of his scientific endeavors he wrote, "God wanted us to recognize them [i.e. mathematical natural laws] by creating us after his own image so that we could share in his own thoughts."[{11}](#)

Much of the reported relationship between science and Christianity is a myth made up to strengthen the atheist position that science repudiates Christianity and makes it superfluous and dangerous in today's enlightened world. Nothing could be further from the truth, as a Christian worldview was foundational for the development and application of the scientific method.

Methodological Naturalism: A Farce

What about the prevalence of scientism, a belief system claiming that the hard sciences provide the only genuine

knowledge of reality?

When considered carefully, the whole concept of scientism is a farce. Why? Because as philosopher J. P. Moreland points out, "Strong scientism is a philosophical assertion that claims that philosophical assertions are neither true nor can be known; only scientific assertions can be true and known." [{12}](#) So the premise is self-refuting. They are saying that only scientific facts can be objectively true. Thus, the statement that only scientific facts can be true must be false because it is a philosophical assertion, not a scientific fact.

Another example of the faulty philosophy behind scientism comes in their insistence on adopting methodological naturalism as a criterion for science. Methodological naturalism is "the idea that, while doing science, one must seek only natural causes or explanations for scientific data." [{13}](#) This idea immediately demotes science from being the search for the truth about observable items in this universe to being the search for the most plausible natural cause no matter how implausible it may be.

Although they appear to be unsure as to whether to apply the concept uniformly to all forms of science, its proponents are sure that it definitely should be applied to the field of evolutionary science. They make the *a priori* assumption that life as we know it originated and developed by strictly impersonal, unintelligent forces. No intelligence can be allowed to enter the process in any way. This approach to trying to understand the current state of life on earth is certainly an interesting exercise leading to a multitude of theories and untestable speculations. It is a challenging mental exercise and is valuable as such. However, scientism does not stop there. They declare that their unsupported (and I would say unsupportable) theories **must be the truth** about our origins, at least until replaced by another strictly naturalistic theory.

This approach seems to be an odd (and unfruitful) way to go after the truth due to at least three reasons. First, many other areas of science which include intelligent agents in their hypotheses are respected and their results generally accepted, common examples being archaeology and forensic science. Second, the current state of evolutionary science primarily appears to be tearing holes in prior theories, e.g. Darwinian evolution, rather than closing in on a plausible explanation. And, third, scientists are continuing to find evidence supporting a hypothesis that intelligent actions were involved in the formulation of life on earth.

If the sum of the available evidence is more directly explained by the involvement of some intelligent agent, then it would be reasonable to accept that potential explanation as the leading contender for the truth until some other answer is developed that is more closely supported by the available evidence. This is the attitude embraced by the intelligent design community. They embrace it because so much of the evidence supports it, including

1. the inability of other hypothesis to account for the first appearance of life,
2. the complexity of the simplest life forms with no chain of less complex forms leading up to them,
3. the relatively sudden appearance of all types of life forms in the fossil record,
4. the fine tuning of the parameters of the universe to support life on earth, and
5. the emergence of consciousness within humans.

In contrast, those supporting theistic evolution appear to do so in order to conform to the methodological naturalism of their peers. They claim to believe that God does intervene in nature through acts such as the miracles of Jesus and His resurrection. But they claim that God did not intervene in the processes leading up to the appearance of mankind on this planet. In my opinion, they take this stance not because the

evidence demands it, but because methodological naturalism does not allow it. As Moreland opines, “Methodological naturalism is *one bad way* to put science and Christianity together.”[\[14\]](#)

Things Science Cannot Explain / God of the Gaps

As we have seen, scientism is a philosophy that says the only real knowledge to be found is through application of the hard sciences and that no intelligence can be involved in any of our hypotheses. So, they believe hard science must be capable of explaining everything (even if it currently doesn't).

In this section we will consider some very important things that science cannot now nor ever be able to explain. In his book, *Scientism and Secularism*, J. P. Moreland lists five such things for us.

First, the origin of the universe cannot be explained by science. Why? Science has been able to identify that the universe most likely had a beginning point. But as Moreland points out, “Science can provide evidence that the universe had a beginning; it cannot, even in principle, explain that beginning; that is, it cannot say what caused it. . . No real thing can pop into existence from nothing.”[\[15\]](#) He points out three specific logical reasons science cannot address this issue:

1. A scientific explanation cannot be used to explain the universe because scientific explanations presuppose the universe.
2. Science cannot explain the origin of time and without time no explanation can be considered.
3. Coming-into-existence is not a process which can be reviewed and explained because it is an instantaneous event.

Something either does or does not exist.

Second, the origin of the fundamental laws of nature. All scientific explanations presuppose these laws. We can conceive of a universe where these laws might be different resulting in a different reality, but we cannot explain how our universe came into being with the laws we see active around us.

Third, the fine-tuning of the universe to support life. As far as science is concerned the parameters of the forces within this universe can be observed but we cannot know what caused them to assume the values they do. However, in recent years it has been discovered that our universe “is a razor’s edge of precisely balanced life permitting conditions.”[{16}](#) Over one hundred parameters of this universe, such as the force of gravity, the charge of an electron, the rate of expansion of the universe, etc., must be precisely balanced or there could be no life in the universe. Science cannot answer the question of why our universe can support life.

Fourth, the origin of consciousness. In this context consciousness is the ability to be aware of oneself and entertain thoughts about things which are outside of oneself and possibly outside of one’s experience. From a naturalist point of view, “the appearance of mind is utterly unpredictable and inexplicable.”[{17}](#) However, God may choose to create conscious beings; beings that are capable of asking about and discovering the works of their creator.

Fifth, the existence of moral laws. As the late atheist philosopher Mackie admitted, the emergence of moral properties would constitute a refutation of naturalism and evidence for theism: “Moral properties constitute so odd a cluster of properties and relations that they are most unlikely to have arisen in the ordinary course of events without an all-powerful god to create them.”[{18}](#)

These five important questions can never be answered if

scientism's flawed premise were true. However, Christian theism answers each of these questions and those answers are true if God is the real creator of the universe.

Integrating Christianity and Science

Scientism claims that you cannot integrate Christianity and science. Instead, they claim all theology is nonsense and only science exists to give us the truth. As Moreland points out, "One of the effects of scientism, then, is making the ridicule of Christianity's truth claims more common and acceptable (which is one of scientism's goals)."[\[19\]](#)

If this view is clearly wrong, how should we as Christians view science and its relationship with Christianity and the Bible? First, we need to understand that the topics addressed by science are in most cases peripheral to the topics covered in the Bible. The Bible is primarily concerned with God's efforts to restore people from their state as enemies of God back into eternal fellowship with Him.

One area of significant interaction is the question of how this universe came to exist in its current state. How one views that interaction (i.e. as adversarial or as complementary) depends on whether they are clinging to the unsupported myth of unguided evolution or to the new science of intelligent design. As Moreland states, "Science has done more to confirm the Christian God's existence than to undermine it, and science has provided little or no evidence against belief of theism. Science has, however, raised challenges to various biblical texts, and Christians need to take those challenges seriously."[\[20\]](#)

Moreland suggests there are five ways to relate issues in science and Christian philosophy. Let's consider two of those methods. One is the complementarity model. In this model, two disciplines are addressing the same object or feature but from

different, essentially non-overlapping perspectives. “Neither one purports to tell the whole story, but both make true claims about reality.”[\[21\]](#) This is the model used by advocates of theistic evolution who take as gospel the latest claims of evolutionary science while saying of course God kicked off the whole process including us in His plan for the universe.

Another way to interact is called the direct interaction model. In this model, theories from theology and from science may directly interact with one another on some topic, either positively or negatively. One area might raise rational difficulties for the other. This approach has the most potential for bringing information from different fields together into a fuller picture of truth. Intelligent design is an area where this model is applied as it questions the validity of eliminating intelligence from the options considered in understanding the development of life on earth.

Since scientism swears that science is the only source of truth, even when scientists cannot agree as to what that scientific truth is, they want to discount inputs from any other source no matter how helpful. So the direct interaction model is a difficult road to take. What are the rational criteria for going against the experts? Moreland suggests there are four criteria for Christian theologians to decide to take this road.

1. Make sure there is not a reasonable interpretation of the Bible that resolves the tension.
2. There is a band of academically qualified scholars who are unified in rejecting the view held by a majority of the relevant experts. In this way, we know that there are people who are familiar with the details of the majority view, who do not believe that it is true.
3. There are good non-rational explanations for why the expert majority holds the problematic view. For historical,

sociological, or theological reasons, the majority is not ready to abandon their position rather than because their evidence is overwhelming. “For example, the shift from creationism to Darwinism was primarily, though not exclusively, a shift in philosophy of science.”[\[22\]](#)

Given the large amount of evidential support for a Christian worldview, any view that is counter to central components of a Christian worldview should be rejected precisely for that reason. Any view meeting the first three criteria that also attempts to undermine key parts of a Christian worldview will be overwhelmed by the significant rational support for a Christian worldview.

As followers of the God of real truth, Christians need to realize that the so-called truths being taught to justify science over theology are in fact myths and/or self-refuting statements. Every Christian needs to be able to address these fallacies in today’s popular science culture. Equip your young adults with this understanding and more by attending our summer event called Mind Games Camp. More information can be found at probe.org/mindgames.

Notes

1. Michael Keas, *Unbelievable: 7 Myths About the History and Future of Science and Religion*, ISI Books, 2019, 2.
2. Rodney Stark, *How the West Won: The Neglected Story of the Triumph of Modernity*, ISI Books, 2014 p. 304, 315.
3. J. P. Moreland, *Scientism and Secularism: Learning to Respond to a Dangerous Ideology*, Crossway, 2018, 26 and 29.
4. Ibid., p. 23.
5. Ibid., p. 55.
6. Stark, p. 76.
7. Keas, p. 4 and Chapter 6.
8. Herman Bondi, *Cosmology*, Cambridge University Press, 1952.
9. Owen Gingerich, *God’s Universe*, Belknap Press, 2006.
10. Sagan, 1980 *Cosmos* TV series, episode 3.

11. Kepler, letter to Herwart von Hohenburg, April 9/10, 1599.
12. Moreland, p. 52.
13. Ibid., p. 131.
14. Ibid., p. 159.
15. Ibid., p. 138.
16. Ibid., p. 146.
17. Ibid., p. 151.
18. J. L. Mackie, *The Miracle of Theism*, Oxford, 1982, p. 115.
19. Moreland, p. 31.
20. Ibid., p.174.
21. Ibid., p. 184.
22. Ibid., p. 192.

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Historical Criticism and the Bible

Historical criticism of the Bible often threatens believers' faith. Dr. Michael Gleghorn explains that it is often grounded in false assumptions.

What Is Historical Criticism?

Throughout the history of Christianity, students of the Bible have used many different methods of interpreting the text. But since the Enlightenment, one particular method (or rather, family of methods) has been quite influential, especially in the academy.^{1} I'm speaking of what is often called *historical criticism*, or the *historical-critical method* of biblical interpretation.



So what is historical criticism, you ask? Although the term gets used in different ways, I will here be using it to refer to a method of biblical interpretation which attempts to read the Bible as a *purely* human document from the distant past. In other words, the historical-critical method does not typically regard the Bible as divinely inspired. It is *merely* a human book, like any other, and should thus be read like any other book.”[{2}](#)

In the past (and to some extent even today) scholars liked to portray this method as “scientific” in character, able to obtain “assured” and “objective” interpretive results. But critics tell a different story. For example, Eta Linnemann, who before her conversion to Christianity was a well-respected scholarly advocate of historical-criticism, claims that in practice the so-called “scientific” character of this method is grounded in a prior assumption of naturalism, perhaps even atheism. As Linnemann observes, “Research is conducted . . . if there were no God.”[{3}](#)

Another critic of this method is the renowned Christian philosopher Alvin Plantinga. After rehearsing certain principles of historical investigation, which many historical critics would endorse, Plantinga notes that these principles are understood “to preclude” God’s direct involvement in the world.[{4}](#) Because of this, he notes, such principles “imply that God has not in fact specially inspired any human authors in such a way that what they write is really divine speech addressed to us; nor has he . . . performed miracles of any other sorts.”[{5}](#)

As I’m sure you can see, at least some of the results of this method come about simply because of assumptions the interpreter brings to the text. The problem, however, is that

the assumptions are biased *against* Christianity in *favor* of naturalism. We must thus think rather critically about the historical-critical method. But first, we need a bit of background on how and when this method originated.

The Origins of Historical Criticism

Although many scholars helped develop the historical-critical method, Johann Salomo Semler, an eighteenth-century theologian, is widely regarded as its “father.”^{6} Semler was primarily interested in “critical work” on the canon of biblical writings.^{7} For our purposes, the “canon” can simply be thought of as the books of the Old and New Testaments. The Church regards these books as the divinely inspired Word of God and, hence, completely authoritative for Christian faith and practice.

Semler, however, considered these books (especially those of the Old Testament) to be largely of merely historical interest. They might give us some interesting information about the religion of ancient Israel or (in the case of the New Testament) the beliefs of the early church, but they could not be regarded, at least in their entirety, as the divinely inspired Word of God.^{8} Hence, Semler was led to make a distinction between “the Scriptures and the Word of God.”^{9} Although the Church had always considered the Scriptures to be the Word of God, Semler made a distinction between them. In his opinion, “some books belong in the Bible through historical decisions of past ages, but do not make wise unto salvation.”^{10} Books of this sort, he reasoned, can still be called “Scripture” (for they are part of the biblical canon), but they are *not* the Word of God (for in his view, they are not divinely inspired).

Although historical criticism continued to be developed after Semler, it’s easy to see why many consider him to be this method’s “father.” In his own study of the Bible, Semler

generally disregarded any claims that either it or the Church might make regarding its divine inspiration and authority and attempted instead to read the Bible like any other book. In the opinion of theologian Gerhard Maier, it's "the general acceptance" of Semler's view which "has plunged theology into an endless chain of perplexities and inner contradictions."[{11}](#) Before we examine such difficulties, however, we must first consider why so many scholars see value in the historical-critical method.

Some Proposed Benefits of Historical Criticism

To begin, virtually everyone agrees that when you're attempting to understand a book of the Bible, it can be helpful to know something about the origin of the book. Who was the author? When did he live? What sorts of things were happening at the time the book was written? Was the author influenced by any of these things, or attempting to respond to them in some way? Who was he writing for? How might they have understood him? Answering such questions can often clarify what the author may have been trying to communicate in his book. Historical critics are right to see this as an important part of understanding the books of the Bible. And most everyone agrees on this point.[{12}](#)

More controversial would be the principles of historical investigation originally proposed by Ernst Troeltsch in an essay written in 1898.[{13}](#) These principles are still generally embraced (though with some modifications) by historical critics today.[{14}](#) Briefly stated, Troeltsch proposed three principles that can simply be called the principles of criticism, analogy, and correlation.[{15}](#) Although there's no universal agreement about how these principles should be used in actually doing historical research, historical-critical scholars have generally regarded

these principles as helpful guides in critically evaluating what is written in the Bible in their effort to determine what *really* happened. This is considered a great benefit of historical criticism. For, rather than simply accepting the claims of a biblical author uncritically, Troeltsch's principles provide some help in critically evaluating such reports in order to assess their believability.[{16}](#)

Now in one sense this is commendable, for it is good to search for truth about what the Bible is trying to teach us. But there's a problem with how these principles are typically understood by historical-critical scholars. As the Christian philosopher Alvin Plantinga reminds us, such scholars generally take these principles to exclude any "*direct divine action* in the world."[{17}](#) That is, such principles forbid us to believe that God has ever directly intervened in the world which He has made. And for Christians, this presents a real difficulty with historical criticism.

Some Problems with Historical Criticism

According to Christian scholars Norman Geisler and William Nix, a fundamental problem with historical criticism is that "it is based on an unjustified antisupernatural bias which it superimposes on the biblical documents."[{18}](#) This can easily be seen by examining some of the things which have been written by proponents and advocates of this method.

For example, Rudolf Bultmann, who was interested in "demythologizing" the New Testament, famously wrote, "It is impossible to use electric light . . . and to avail ourselves of modern medical . . . discoveries, and at the same time to believe in the New Testament world of spirits and miracles."[{19}](#) Similarly, another theologian has written that whatever the biblical authors may have believed about such things, "we believe that the biblical people lived in the same" world we do, that is "one in which no divine wonders

transpired and no divine voices were heard.”[{20}](#)

Now if we ask such scholars why it is that we’re to think that miracles are either unbelievable or impossible, we’ll usually notice rather quickly that the responses are generally short on arguments and long on assumptions. That is, such scholars typically just *assume* that God is not directly involved in the world and that miracles never occur. But if a personal Creator of the universe exists (and there are [good reasons](#) to think that one does), then why should we simply *assume* that He would never directly intervene in the world which He has made? Such intervention would hardly seem *impossible*. And if it produced an effect which would not have come about had nature been left to itself, then this could quite properly be regarded as a miracle.

So it seems to me that if a personal God exists, then miracles are possible. And if miracles are possible, then it is nothing more than “an unjustified antisupernatural bias” (as Geisler and Nix assert) to simply *assume* that the Bible’s reports of miracles are all false and unbelievable. And since historical criticism of the Bible often begins with just such an assumption, it appears to offer us an inadequate method for correctly reading the Bible.

An Alternative to Historical Criticism

Having looked at some problems with historical criticism, we can now consider a preferable alternative, namely, theological interpretation.[{21}](#)

So what is theological interpretation? As I’m using the terminology here, it’s a method of reading the Bible like a Christian, with the aim “of knowing God and of being formed unto godliness.”[{22}](#) Theological interpretation takes a sober and serious account of what Christianity is, believes, and teaches. It then attempts to read and interpret the Bible as

“a word from God about God.”[{23}](#)

It’s a radically different way of reading the Bible from that practiced by historical critics. Of course, as theologian Russell Reno reminds us, “There is obviously a historical dimension” to the truth found in the Bible. “Nevertheless,” he continues, “to be a Christian is to believe that the truth found in the Bible is the very same truth we enter into by way of baptism, the same truth we confess in our creeds, the same truth we receive in the bread and wine of the Eucharist.”[{24}](#)

But historical criticism attempts to read the Bible in the same way one would read any other book from the ancient world. It assumes that the Bible is merely a human book. The only way to really understand a book of the Bible, then, is to try to understand how it originated and what the original author was trying to say.

Theological interpretation, on the other hand, does not view the Bible as a merely human book. Of course, it realizes that each of the biblical books has a human author. But it also insists, along with the consensual teaching of the Christian community, that each of these books also has a Divine author.[{25}](#) It thus views the Bible as a divinely-inspired document.

Is this a legitimate way to read the Bible? Alvin Plantinga has written extensively on the theory of knowledge.[{26}](#) According to him, the biblical scholar who is also a Christian “has a perfect right to assume Christian belief in pursuing her inquiries.” Doing so, he says, is just as legitimate as assuming the principles of historical criticism.[{27}](#) Indeed, for the Christian it is arguably better—for it allows us to read the Bible in continuity with the tradition and faith we profess and believe.

Notes

1. Gregory Dawes, for example, notes that both form criticism

and redaction criticism would fall under the umbrella of historical criticism. See Gregory Dawes, "'A Certain Similarity to the Devil': Historical Criticism and Christian Faith," in *Interdisciplinary Perspectives on the Authority of Scripture: Historical, Biblical, and Theoretical Perspectives*, ed. Carlos R. Bovell (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2011), 354.

2. Benjamin Jowett, "On the Interpretation of Scripture," in Josephine M. Guy, *The Victorian Age: An Anthology of Sources and Documents*. n.p.: Routledge, 1998. eBook Collection (EBSCOhost), EBSCOhost (accessed February 9, 2013), 295.

3. See Eta Linnemann, *Historical Criticism of the Bible: Methodology or Ideology?* trans., Robert Yarbrough (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2001), 84.

4. Alvin Plantinga, "Two (or More) Kinds of Scripture Scholarship," in "*Behind*" the Text: *History and Biblical Interpretation*, edited by Craig Bartholomew, C. Stephan Evans, Mary Healy and Murray Rae (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 33.

5. Ibid.

6. James C. Livingston, *Modern Christian Thought: The Enlightenment and the Nineteenth Century*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006), 29.

7. Ibid.

8. Peter Stuhlmacher, *Historical Criticism and Theological Interpretation of Scripture: Toward a Hermeneutics of Consent* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977), 38-40.

9. Edgar Krentz, *The Historical-Critical Method* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2002), 19.

10. Ibid.

11. The first sentence of Maier's book declares, "The general acceptance of Semler's basic concept that the Bible must be treated like any other book has plunged theology into an endless chain of perplexities and inner contradictions." See Gerhard Maier, *The End of the Historical-Critical Method*, trans., Edwin W. Leverenz and Rudolph F. Norden (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2001), 11.

12. Plantinga, echoing the language of Robert Gordon, grants

that we might refer to the attempt to answer such questions as a “warranted” form of historical biblical criticism. See Alvin Plantinga, “Reason and Scripture Scholarship: A Response to Robert Gordon and Craig Bartholomew,” in *“Behind” the Text*, 94.

13. For those interested in this essay, see Ernst Troeltsch, “Historical and Dogmatic Method in Theology (1898),” trans. E. Fischhoff, rev. W. Bense in *Religion in History-Ernst Troeltsch: Essays*, trans. J. L. Adams and W. F. Bense (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1991).

14. Edgar Krentz states, “Contemporary historians use Troeltsch’s three principles, but with significant modifications” (*The Historical-Critical Method*, 56). However, it does not seem necessary to qualify the modifications of Troeltsch’s principles by practicing historical-critical scholars with the adjective “significant,” for (in my opinion, at any rate) they are generally more severe in critically evaluating the sources with which they are dealing than the average historian is with his.

15. For two very helpful discussions of Troeltsch’s principles, see Alvin Plantinga’s discussion of “Troeltschian HBC” in “Two (or More) Kinds of Scripture Scholarship,” in *“Behind” the Text*, 31-35, as well as Gregory Dawes discussion in “‘A Certain Similarity to the Devil’: Historical Criticism and Christian Faith,” in *Interdisciplinary Perspectives on the Authority of Scripture*, 358-70. Although Plantinga and Dawes reach different conclusions about if and how Troeltsch’s principles can be legitimately employed, both discussions are well worth reading.

16. Stuhlmacher, *Historical Criticism and Theological Interpretation of Scripture*, 45.

17. Alvin Plantinga, “Two (or More) Kinds of Scripture Scholarship,” in *“Behind” the Text*, 33.

18. Norman L. Geisler and William E. Nix, *A General Introduction to the Bible: Revised and Expanded* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1986), 440.

19. Rudolf Bultmann, “New Testament and Mythology,” in *Kerygma*

and Myth, edited by Hans Werner Bartsch (New York: Harper and Row, 1961), 5.

20. Langdon Gilkey, "Cosmology, Ontology, and the Travail of Biblical Language," reprinted in Owen C. Thomas, ed., *God's Activity in the World: the Contemporary Problem* (Chico, CA: Scholar's Press, 1983), 31; cited in Alvin Plantinga, "Two (or More) Kinds of Scripture Scholarship," in *"Behind" the Text*, 34.

21. Kevin Vanhoozer defines "theological interpretation" as "the process of keeping the canonical practices alive and well in the believing community." A bit later he describes a "canonical practice" as "divinely authorized use of language and literature, which, when learned, presents and forms Christ." As examples of "canonical practice," he discusses, first, the typological, or Christological, interpretation of the Old Testament in light of the person and work of Jesus Christ and, second, prayer. He concludes his discussion by noting, "Christians learn to speak about, to think about, and to live for God by indwelling the diverse canonical practices that comprise the Scriptures. By participating in such practices—interpreting figurally, praying to the Father, and the like—Christians grow in faith toward understanding." This, it seems to me, is a helpful way of fleshing out, in greater detail, all that is involved in the concept and practice of the "theological interpretation" of Scripture. See Kevin Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical-Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 219-226. The citations in this note are from pp. 219 and 226.

22. Kevin J. Vanhoozer, "Introduction," in *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible*, edited by Kevin J. Vanhoozer, Craig G. Bartholomew, Daniel J. Treier, and N. T. Wright (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 25.

23. *Ibid.*, 23.

24. R. R. Reno, "A Richer Bible," *First Things* (August/September, 2010), 44.

25. I adopt this language from Thomas Oden who, in his book on

Classic Christianity, states as his intention the setting forth of the “classic consensual ecumenical teaching” of the church throughout history. See Thomas Oden, *Classic Christianity* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992), xiii.

26. See, for example, Alvin Plantinga, *Warrant and Proper Function* (Oxford, 1993), *Warrant: The Current Debate* (Oxford, 1993), and *Warranted Christian Belief* (Oxford, 2000).

27. Alvin Plantinga, “Reason and Scripture Scholarship: A Response to Robert Gordon and Craig Bartholomew,” in *“Behind” the Text*, 99.

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Lessons from C.S. Lewis

Two issues which vex Christians today are moral subjectivism and the origin of the world. Through a couple of his recorded lectures, C.S. Lewis provides helpful insights and answers to the challenges we face.

The Poison of Subjectivism

C.S. Lewis was both a serious scholar who could tangle with the great minds of his day and a popular author who had the wonderful ability to write for children. Lewis, who died in 1963, is still an intellectual force who is well worth reading.

I want to dig into Lewis’s thinking on a few subjects which are still applicable today. Studying writers like Lewis helps us love God with our minds.



Are Values Created by Us?

Let's begin with a very pertinent issue today, that of *subjectivism*. Subjectivism is the belief that individual persons—or subjects—are the source of knowledge and moral values. What is true or morally good finds its final authority in people, not in an external source like God. Today there is more of an emphasis on groups of people rather than individuals. However, truth and morality arise from our own ideas or feelings.

Over the last few hundred years there have been many attempts to work out ethical systems that are grounded in our subjective states apart from God but somehow provide universal moral values. That project has been a failure. The individual is now left to his or her own devices to figure out how to live, except, of course, for laws of the state.

In a lecture titled "The Poison of Subjectivism," Lewis scrutinizes subjectivist thinking with a special focus on what he calls "practical reason." Practical reason is our capacity for deciding what to do, how to act. It has to do with judgments of value. It is different from theoretical reason which deals with, well, theories. Practical reason answers the question, What should I do?

It sounds odd today to talk about moral values as matters of reason since people tend more to go with what they *feel* is the right thing to do. But this is just the problem, Lewis says. "Until modern times," he wrote, "no thinker of the first rank ever doubted that our judgements of value were rational judgements or that what they discovered was objective." {1} In other words, matters of value have not always been separated from the realm of reason.

Lewis continues:

Out of this apparently innocent idea [that values are subjective] comes the disease that will certainly end our species (and, in my view, damn our souls) if it is not

crushed; the fatal superstition that men can create values, that a community can choose its 'ideology' as men choose their clothes. {2}

Just as we don't measure the physical length of something by itself, but rather use a measuring instrument such as a yardstick, we also need a moral "instrument" for deciding what is good or bad. Otherwise, what we do isn't good or bad, it's just . . . what we do.

Cultural Relativism

A prominent form of moral relativism today is *cultural relativism*. This is the belief that each culture chooses its own values regardless of the values other cultures choose. There is no universal moral norm. This idea is supposed to come from the observation that different cultures have different sets of values. A leap is made from there to the claim that that is how things *should* be.

We're often tempted to counter such a notion with the simple answer that the Bible says otherwise. Lewis provides a good lesson in doing apologetics by subjecting the belief itself to scrutiny. Cultural relativism is based on the assumption that cultures are very different with respect to values. Lewis claims that all the supposed differences are exaggerated. The idea that "cultures differ so widely that there is no common tradition at all" is a lie, he says; "a good, solid, resounding lie." He elaborates:

If a man will go into a library and spend a few days with the *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics* he will soon discover that massive unanimity of the practical reason in man. From the Babylonian *Hymn to Samos*, from the Laws of Manu, the *Book of the Dead*, the Analects, the Stoics, the Platonists, from Australian aborigines and Redskins, he will collect the same triumphantly monotonous denunciations of

oppression, murder, treachery and falsehood, the same injunctions of kindness to the aged, the young, and the weak, of almsgiving and impartiality and honesty. He may be a little surprised . . . to find that precepts of mercy are more frequent than precepts of justice; but he will no longer doubt that there is such a thing as the Law of Nature. There are, of course, differences. . . . But the pretence that we are presented with a mere chaos . . . is simply false.[{3}](#)

Someone might ask whether the Fall of Adam and Eve made us incapable of knowing this law. But Lewis insists that the Fall didn't damage our *knowledge* of the law as much as it did our ability to *obey* it. There is impairment, to be sure. But as he says, "there is a difference between imperfect sight and blindness."[{4}](#)

We still have a knowledge of good and evil. The good that we seek is not found within the subject, within us. It is rooted in God. It is neither above God as a law *He* has to follow, nor is it a set of rules God arbitrarily made up. It comes from His nature. And, since we are made in His image, it suits our nature to live according to it.

Is Theology Poetry?

In 1944, Lewis was invited to speak at a meeting of the University Socratic Club at Oxford. The topic was, "Is Theology Poetry?"[{5}](#)

Lewis defines poetry here as, "writing which arouses and in part satisfies the imagination." He thus restates the question this way: "Does Christian Theology owe its attraction to its power of arousing and satisfying our imagination?"[{6}](#)

Why would this question even be raised? This was the era of such scholars as Rudolph Bultmann who believed the message of the Bible was encrusted in supernatural ideas unacceptable to

modern people. Bultmann wanted to save Christian truth by “demythologizing” it.

Some Problems

It has been assumed by some critics that until modern times people didn't know the difference between reality and fantasy. But this is a condescending attitude. People know the difference for the most part, even premodern people—and even Christians! In fact, Lewis believes there are elements in Christian theology which work *against* it as poetry. He says, for example, that the doctrine of the Trinity doesn't have the “monolithic grandeur” of Unitarian conceptions of God, or the richness of polytheism. God's omnipotence, for another example, doesn't fit the poetic image of the hero who is tragically defeated in the end.[{7}](#)

Critics point out that the Bible contains some of the same elements found in other religions—creation accounts, floods, risings from the dead—and conclude that it is just another example of ancient mythology. Lewis says there are notable differences. For example, in the pagan stories, people die and rise again either every year or at some unknown time and place, whereas the resurrection of Christ happened once and in a recognizable location.

However, we shouldn't shy away from the fact that our theology will sometimes resemble mythological accounts. Why? Because we cannot state it in completely non-metaphorical, nonsymbolic forms. “God came down to earth” is metaphorical language, as is “God entered history.” “All language about things other than physical objects is necessarily metaphorical,” Lewis says.[{8}](#)

Did early Christians believe the metaphorical language of Scripture literally? Lewis says “the alternative we are offering them [between literal and metaphorical] was probably never present to their minds at all.”[{9}](#) While early

Christians would have thought of their faith using anthropomorphic imagery, that doesn't mean their faith was bound up with details about celestial throne rooms and the like. Lewis says that once the symbolic nature of some of Scripture became explicit, they recognized it for what it was without feeling their faith was compromised.

The Myth of Evolution

Lewis had a wonderful way of turning criticisms back on the critics. So they believe Christian doctrine is mythological because of its language? They should look to their *own* beliefs! These critics, Lewis says, believe "one of the finest myths which human imagination has yet produced," the myth of blind evolution. This is how he describes this myth.[{10}](#)

The story begins with infinite void and matter. By a tiny chance the conditions are such to produce the first spark of life. Everything is against it, but somehow it survives. "With infinite suffering, against all but insuperable obstacles," Lewis says, "it spreads, it breeds, it complicates itself, from the amoeba up to the plant, up to the reptile, up to the mammal. We glance briefly at the age of monsters. Dragons prowl the earth, devour one another, and die. . . . As the weak, tiny spark of life began amidst the huge hostilities of the inanimate, so now again, amidst the beasts that are far larger and stronger than he, there comes forth a little naked, shivering, cowering creature, shuffling, not yet erect, promising nothing, the product of another millionth millionth chance. Yet somehow he thrives." He becomes the Cave Man who worships the horrible gods he made in his own image. Then comes true Man who learns to master nature. "Science comes and dissipates the superstitions of his infancy." Man becomes the controller of his fate.

Zoom into the future, when a race of demigods rules the planet, "for eugenics have made certain that only demigods

will be born, and psychoanalysis that none of them shall lose or smirch his divinity, and communism that all which divinity requires shall be ready to their hands. Man has ascended to his throne. Henceforward he has nothing to do but to practice virtue, to grow in wisdom, to be happy.”

The last scene in the story reverses everything. We have the Twilight of the Gods. The sun cools, the universe runs down, life is banished. “All ends in nothingness, and ‘universal darkness covers all.’”

“The pattern of the myth thus becomes one of the noblest we can conceive,” Lewis says. “It is the pattern of many Elizabethan tragedies, where the protagonist’s career can be represented by a slowly ascending and then rapidly falling curve, with its highest point in Act IV.”

“Such a world drama appeals to every part of us,” Lewis says. However, even though he personally found it a moving story, Lewis said he believed less than half of what it told him about the past and less than nothing of what it told him about the future.[\[11\]](#)

This kind of response to the critic of Christianity doesn’t prove that the critic is wrong. Just to show that he has his own mythology doesn’t prove he is wrong about Christianity. That’s called a *tu quoque* argument, which means “you too.” It serves, however, to make the critic hesitate before making simplistic charges against Christians. What is important about a belief system isn’t first of all whether it contains poetical elements. It’s whether it is true.

Naturalism and Reason

Having pointed out that the critic has his own mythology, Lewis examines another aspect of the issue, that of the reliability of reason, the primary tool of science.

Critics were purportedly looking at Christian doctrine from a scientific perspective. They believed that the findings of science made religious belief unacceptable. Lewis was no outsider to the atheistic mentality often found among scientists; he had been an atheist himself. Yet even as such, he didn't have a triumphal vision of science as being the welcomed incoming tide that overtook the old mythological view of the world held by Christians. Lewis had accepted as truth the "grand myth" of evolution which I recounted previously, but he came to see a serious problem with it quite apart from any religious convictions. "Deepening distrust and final abandonment of it," Lewis wrote, "long preceded my conversion to Christianity. Long before I believed Theology to be true I had already decided that the popular scientific picture at any rate was false."[{12}](#) There was "one absolutely central inconsistency" that ruined it. This was the inconsistency of basing belief in evolution on human reason when the belief itself made reason suspect![{13}](#)

What Lewis calls "the popular scientific view" or "the Scientific Outlook" is based on naturalism, the view that nature is all there is; there is no supernatural being or realm. Everything must be explained in terms of the natural order; the "Total System," Lewis calls it.[{14}](#) If there's any one thing that *cannot* be given a satisfactory naturalistic explanation, then naturalism falls.

Lewis contends that reason *itself* is something that can't be explained in naturalistic terms. This is an especially pertinent matter, because reason is one of the primary tools of science, and science is the great authority for evolutionists.

Science, Lewis says, depends upon logical inferences from observed facts. Unless logical inference is valid, scientific study has no basis. But if reason is "simply the unforeseen and unintended by-product of mindless matter at one stage of its endless and aimless becoming," how can we trust it? How do

we know our thoughts reflect reality? How can we trust the random movement of atoms in our brain to reliably convey to us knowledge of the world outside us? “They ask me at the same moment to accept a conclusion,” Lewis says, “and to discredit the only testimony on which that conclusion can be based.”[\[15\]](#)

In short, then, if reason is our authority for believing in naturalistic evolution, but the theory of evolution makes us question reason, the whole theory is without solid foundation.

The science of the evolutionist cannot explain reason. Christianity, however, can. In fact, it explains much more than that. Lewis ends the lecture with one of his famous quotations, one that is hanging on my office door: “I believe in Christianity,” he says, “as I believe that the Sun has risen: not only because I see it, but because by it I see everything else.”[\[16\]](#)

Notes

1. C. S. Lewis, “The Poison of Subjectivism,” in *Christian Reflections* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967), 73.
2. Lewis, 73.
3. Lewis, 77.
4. Lewis, 79.
5. C. S. Lewis, in *The Weight of Glory and Other Essays* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1980), 116.
6. *Ibid.*, 117.
7. *Ibid.*, 118.
8. *Ibid.*, 133-34.
9. *Ibid.*, 131.
10. *Ibid.*, 123-25.
11. *Ibid.*, 125-26.
12. *Ibid.*, 134-35.
13. This argument is found at the end of “Is Theology Poetry?” A lengthier discussion is found in C. S. Lewis, *Miracles: A Preliminary Study* (New York: Macmillan, 1947), chap. 3.
14. Lewis, *Miracles*, 17.

15. Lewis, *Weight of Glory*, 135-36.

16. *Ibid.*, 140.

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What Does It Mean To Live With an Eternal Perspective?

Sue Bohlin, who has been working on developing an eternal perspective for decades, provides some examples of how to do that.

Years ago, after spending his whole life on the mission field, a career missionary made his final trip home on a passenger ship. One of the other people on his sailing was a celebrity, and as the ship made its way into the harbor, all those on board beheld a huge throng of well wishers at the pier with signs and instruments to celebrate the famous person's return.

The missionary stood at the railing, watching wistfully, knowing that not a soul was there for him. He said, "Lord, I've served You my whole life. Look at all the recognition and revelry for that famous person, and there's nobody here for me. It hurts, Lord."

He heard the still, small voice say, "You're not home yet, son."

I love this story that helps me keep in mind the big picture that includes the eternal, unseen realm, and the long picture that extends into the forever that awaits on the other side of death.

But how do we *get* an eternal perspective?

Seeing the Unseen

As I've grown older, 2 Corinthians 4:16-18 has become my new life verse:

So we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day. For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal.

We have to work at seeing the unseen and eternal. We do that with the eyes of our hearts. We do that by training ourselves to view everything through the lens of God's word.

I've been working at developing an eternal perspective for years. For me, it's about connecting the dots between earthly things and heavenly things.

I look at earthly things and wonder, "How does this connect to the spirit realm? How does this connect to what is unseen and eternal?" (For examples, look at [Glorious Morning Glories](#), [Back Infections and Heart Infections](#), [Cruise Ships, Roller Coasters and Attitudes](#), and [Blowing Past Greatness](#).)

Jesus' parables are the world's best examples of using the physical to provide understanding of the eternal. He was always connecting the dots between the things He was surrounded by—different types of soil, lost coins and sheep and sons, a wedding banquet—and explaining how these things related to the Kingdom of Heaven.

Another aspect of seeing the unseen is staying aware of the fact that we live in a permanent battle zone of spiritual warfare. We have an enemy who hates us because He hates God, and is continually attacking us with lies and deceptions. When we forget that we live in a culture barraging us with anti-God

anti-truth, it's like going out in our underwear, needlessly exposing ourselves. Living with an eternal perspective means staying vigilant, donning our spiritual armor (Ephesians 6:10-18) and using it to fight back against the lies of the enemy.

One of the most important prayers we can ask is, "Lord, help me see Your hand at work"—and then intentionally looking for it. For years I have kept a "God Sightings" Journal where I record evidence of God intervening in my life and the lives of others I have seen. I love to ask my friends and mentees, "Do you have any God Sightings to share?" to help them identify the hand of God in their lives.

One final aspect of seeing the unseen is to remind ourselves that everything we can see, is going away. Everything we can see and measure is temporary and passing. So we need to think about what's around us that is permanent and eternal, and invest in those things.

God.

People.

God's word.

God's work in people's lives.

And the things we do to honor God and bless others. [Randy Alcorn writes](#), "With eternity in view, nearly any honest activity-whether building a shed, driving a bus, pruning trees, changing diapers or caring for a patient-can be an investment in God's kingdom."

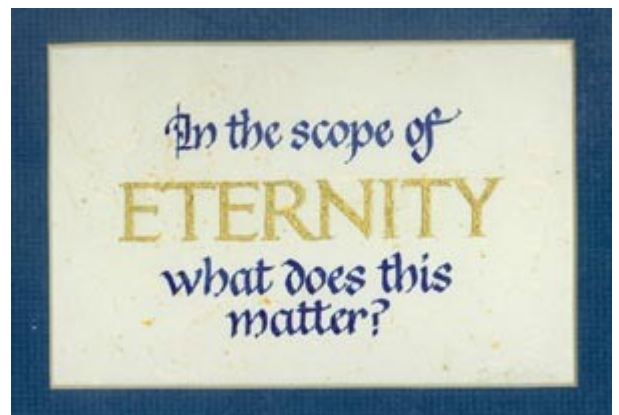
One of my friends is a TSA agent. She diligently reminds herself daily that every traveler who comes through the security line is infinitely valuable because they are made in the image of God, and Jesus died for them. She showers kindness on them because they are so important. One of her co-

workers, for whom work is just a job where he punches a time clock, told her, “In two years you’ll stop being nice to everyone.” We don’t think so. She works at maintaining an eternal perspective, seeing the unseen, to the glory of God.

Remembering the Long View

Another aspect of living with an eternal perspective is focusing on the reality that our time on earth is short, especially compared to the never-ending life on the other side of death.

Another one of my favorite questions is to ask, “A hundred years from now, when you are face to face with Jesus in heaven, what do you want to be glad you chose today? Indulging your flesh and doing whatever you think will make you happy, or making choices that honor God and bless other people?”



Several years ago I wrote a [blog post](#) about one of the power tools for our “life tool belt” that remains an essential part of my eternal perspective: passing everything through the grid of the great question, “In the scope of eternity, what does this matter?”

In the decades since I started asking that question, it’s still the best filter for deciding what’s worth getting upset about, and what to let go, and what to just roll over into the Lord’s hands.

Moses was very helpful for helping us develop an eternal

perspective. He writes in Psalm 90:10, "Our days may come to seventy years, or eighty, if our strength endures." So we need to be sober about how much time we actually have. Then he writes a great prayer in verse 12 that helps us remember the long view: "Teach us to number our days, that we may gain a heart of wisdom."

So I did.

As of today, I have lived 24,500 days.

If I live to be 70, I have only 1,050 days left.

If I live to be 80, I have only 4,700 days left.

Oh my word, I have so much earthly work to do in a very short time, before my life continues on the other side! And I so want to grow older well.

One way to do that is to pre-decide now that we will use our earthly days fully, engaged in ministry, as long as God gives us breath.

Years ago, my view of living with an eternal perspective was shaped by a lady who decided to start college in her 70s. When they asked her why she would do such a thing when her life was basically over, she said, "Oh no! It's not over! I'm preparing for the next part of my life in heaven! The more equipped I can get on earth, the more ready I'll be for what the Lord has for me on the other side!"

Another lady was homebound because she was so disabled. She got the word out that every afternoon, her home was open for anyone who needed prayer. Some days it was like there was a revolving door, so many coming and going! She had a vibrant ministry in the waning days of her life because she was determined to use her remaining earthly days fully, to the glory of God.

In the time you have now, live well. To the glory of God. Keep

reminding yourself that everything we do now has an eternal impact. Our choices, our behaviors, our words, ripple into eternity. Which is why we need to seek to do everything for the glory of God.



I lettered this calligraphy and put it in a frame in my kitchen next to the coffee maker so I see it and recite it to myself every morning.

Two great questions to consider: "Lord, in order to live well, in order to live to Your glory, with an eternal perspective, what do You want me to do less of in the time I have left? And what do You want me to do more of?"

As a mom of littles, Nicole Johnson was feeling sorry for herself when she met with a friend who had just returned from Europe. [She writes](#),

"My friend turned to me with a beautifully wrapped package, and said, 'I brought you this.' It was a book on the great cathedrals of Europe. I wasn't exactly sure why she'd given it to me until I read her inscription: 'With admiration for the greatness of what you are building when no one sees.'

"In the days ahead I would read—no, devour—the book. And I would discover what would become for me, four life-changing truths, after which I could pattern my work:

- “1) No one can say who built the great cathedrals—we have no record of their names.
- 2) These builders gave their whole lives for a work they would never see finished.
- 3) They made great sacrifices and expected no credit.
- 4) The passion of their building was fueled by their faith that the eyes of God saw everything.

“There’s a story in the book about a rich man who came to visit the cathedral while it was being built, and he saw a workman carving a tiny bird on the inside of a beam. He was puzzled and asked the man, ‘Why are you spending so much time carving that bird into a beam that will be covered by the roof? No one will ever see it.’

“And the workman replied, ‘Because God sees it.’”

Living with an eternal perspective as we make choices and invest our time to glorify God is like building a cathedral that we won’t be able to see finished.

But every “next faithful step” of the tasks in your life, is building something. The things you do that no one sees but God—the unseen and eternal—they matter!

This blog post originally appeared at blogs.bible.org/what-does-it-mean-to-live-with-an-eternal-perspective/ on March 17, 2021.

Current Events and the

Currency of Truth: “Test Everything”

Byron Barlowe opens a series on biblical discernment for dark days, likening wise discernment of current events and abiding issues to examining bills and coins to verify their authenticity. Being able to tell the difference between good vs. bad, right vs. wrong, fruitful vs. unfruitful, and subtle lies that captivate believers is a long-term discipline that is a Christian's duty and privilege to walk out as God provides Scripture, counsel, reflection, and field experience.

“In Christ are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” Colossians 2:3

As Christians, should we really concern ourselves with discerning real vs. fake, better vs. best, profitable vs. unprofitable, lies and half-truths vs. truth and wisdom? To help answer that question, and as an introduction to a coming series on discernment, let's look at a historical example from over 70 years ago.

Adolph Burger, a Jewish printer sentenced to a Nazi concentration camp in 1942, was shocked to find himself released and forced to use his printing skill for Germany's war effort. In a perversion of the tabernacle artisans whom God gifted during Israel's exodus from Egypt, [\[1\]](#) Burger was forced to facilitate a brilliant secret plan to ruin Britain.

His and fellow Jewish craftsmen's work would be dropped by German bombers over English cities and towns. But these were no explosive devices. They potentially held much more devastating power than any number of bombs. They were even made of paper!

Fifty-five years later, investigative TV show *60 Minutes II* hired a deep-sea recovery team to search the 350-foot depths

of Lake Toplitz in Austria. Why? In the final days of WWII, when the Russians and Allied troops were pinching Hitler's regime from opposite sides for an inevitable victory, some Nazi holdouts hoped the diabolical plan could yet be implemented. So, they sunk the work of the Jewish artisans in remote Lake Toplitz.

The plan, dubbed *Operation Bernard*, would seize upon human greed and sheer numbers to ruin the British economy. It would go like this:

- Drop exquisitely forged English pound notes from Luftwaffe planes causing widespread distribution, then refuse to honor the phony money by banks and businesses, and resultant economic panic among citizens, thus
- Radically undermining the value of the British pound, hence
- Destroying the economy, hopefully driving England to its knees and ensuring victory.
- Key to the plan: human nature. Money falling from the sky is just too tempting! It would definitely lead to hoarding and general circulation, they thought.

Most forgers do as little as they can to mimic genuine currency—only enough to get a pass on a cursory look. “But by using the world’s finest craftsmen and supplying . . . the most modern tools and machinery, the Germans solved this problem Once the bills were in circulation, it would be difficult for even experts to know genuine from counterfeit; amateurs would have no hope.”[\[2\]](#)

Judging counterfeit claims and deceit, like the bogus bills the Nazis created, is a complex project, requiring great skill and training. Much of godly discernment emerges from self-discipline, a facet of the fruit of the Spirit. According to Tim Challies, author of *The Discipline of Spiritual Discernment*, every disciple of Jesus is morally obligated to discern between truth and lies and to pass on the former while

resisting the latter.

Whatever the person's level of maturity in Christ, wisdom and its application of discernment to specific issues is available for every Christian. "His divine power has given us everything required for life and godliness through the *knowledge* of him who called us . . ." (1 Peter 1:3-4, emphasis mine). "Yet when I am among mature believers, I do speak with words of wisdom, but not the kind of wisdom that belongs to this world or to the rulers of this world, who are soon forgotten" (1 Corinthians 2:6 NLT). All born-again believers possess potential discernment. Mature ones seek and develop it.

The biblical command to "test everything" (1 Thessalonians 5:21) means carefully weighing inputs from culture, family, and even personal thoughts. It monitors—somewhat like antivirus software on a computer—our beliefs and decision-making in light of Scriptural truth, Spirit-illuminated meditation and thoughtfulness, godly counsel, and experience in situational discernment.

Gaining wisdom, the entire point of the book of Proverbs, is lifegiving and sweet! "Know also that wisdom is like honey for you: If you find it, there is a future hope for you, and your hope will not be cut off" (Proverbs 24:14).

Often this lifelong process seems burdensome, but spiritual warfare is indeed warfighting, which is often excruciating. The Body of Christ has always been in a *war of ideas*, battling for truth. However daunting, constant discipline and practice takes over and knowledge grows into wisdom which, by God's grace, produces discernment. Discernment becomes a progression not unlike basic education from kindergarten to secondary graduation. The seasoned soldier of Truth can see potential danger approaching and react with muscle memory, but not prematurely or with overkill. Better weapons in trained hands win. [\[3\]](#)

Lies, subtle and blatant, emerge daily on every front like perhaps never in our history. Brazenly hostile and self-contradicting misinformation and propaganda avalanches too quickly to keep up with.

Renowned Christian philosopher Dr. J.P. Moreland insists that “the fundamental fight today is not primarily about truth claims” themselves but rather how we can know truth at all. The prevailing assumptions question the very “nature of knowledge itself.”[\[4\]](#) People say, “How can you know that?” or simply dismiss Christian faith statements and reasoned, Scriptural argumentation as groundless, mostly due to their faith in scientific naturalism as the only source of actual truth.[\[5\]](#) Postmodernism creates a widespread belief that truth can only be tribal, eschewing appeals to absolute or universal truth claims—chiefly, the metanarrative of the Biblical record.[\[6\]](#)

This moment in American history is witnessing pervasive efforts to deceive and shut down alternative views. Pressure groups, several with Marxist underpinnings, actively initiate strategies designed to dismantle and remake American culture, its history and education system, the nuclear family, negotiated policy creation, America’s founding principles, the role of the press, and to suppress individuals and groups who do not hew to certain views. Some big businesses, “woke” and supportive of such moves, provide financial, advertising, and distribution aid as de facto gatekeepers and worse.

Thanks to federal law granting them special protections, social media platforms and search engines (Big Tech) are uniquely free, compared to broadcast radio and TV, to blacklist and block anyone with whom they disagree. It’s a matter of public record that Google, Facebook, Twitter, and others exercise these tactics of massive influence more each week. Industry leaders who skew Leftward politically have bound together to influence the outcome of the 2020 Presidential election.[\[7\]](#) Calls from members of Congress

unconstitutionally imply, even threaten, to “research” individuals who were associated at all with the former president or the movement he represented. Understanding the roots of radical notions like these helps recognize and rebut them.

This seems to be our generation’s time of testing. But, as Jesus taught, believers don’t target even our human enemies.[{8}](#) Rather, “we destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ” (2 Corinthians 10:5). We fight for their sake and ours against destructive lies. During dark days, such a keen battle-ready mindset and *heartset* seems all the more urgent.

What’s Our Part in Deciphering Truth in All This Chaos?

Did you know that you can refuse a suspicious piece of currency? But if you accept it, you’re legally responsible. If it’s funny money, you’re left holding the bag.

The Bank of Canada’s solution to a rampant counterfeiting problem was a campaign drumming into the public the watchwords: “touch, tilt, look at, look through.” That publicity campaign taught citizens how to test official currency compared to forgeries. Likewise, Christ followers must hold up any claim or trend to the light to see if it’s genuine truth or a fake. On religious claims and trends, examine carefully any doctrine or teaching or you could be led astray.[{9}](#)

Therefore, if legal tender requires examination and the recipient is legally responsible for analyzing all received cash payment, then certainly Paul’s admonition to “examine everything”[{10}](#) applies even more to citizens of God’s kingdom. We will answer for our spiritual savvy, our *saltmanship*, and our lighting of the world, as well as how

wisely we led our families, fellows and flocks.

Everyday life examples of the need for vigilant discernment are replete. Recently I was digitally fed news from an online newspaper I found valuable. After a quick search I discovered that this newspaper is owned by a mystical religious cult founded in China. I found out through reporting sources I didn't fully trust, though, so I provisionally entered that new fact into my matrix of personal filters. Only recently was that claim confirmed when I saw the name of the religious group spelled out on the publication's web site.

The point of the story: few things are jet black and snow white, so layers of discernment are required. When things get gray, more work is needed with the help of others. Wise discernment discovers distinctions within the knowledge we gain, it assesses known patterns, and advises the heart and mind on levels of trust to agree to or the need to reject.

In the case mentioned, I determined that the enemy of my enemy (the Chinese Communist Party) is my friend, in a way. However, I have an eye out on journalistic balance and am especially on guard reading their newspaper's spirituality section (if I ever read it). All of this took a grand total of less than fifteen minutes, then an abiding mindfulness as I hunted for other things. Awareness and practice are key. Biblical and cultural perception paves the way. Make your own wise assessments.

You, as a growing or seasoned Christian, can use wise discernment to serve as an "elder in the gate" for others. Or, as a seeker you can begin to plumb the depths of God's twin revelations in Creation and the Bible. The book of Proverbs emphasizes a desperate and greatly rewarding pursuit of wisdom and its seasoning with age. We are here to help equip you and answer your questions.[{11}](#)

The best antidote to spiritual and worldly confusion is simply

Holy Spirit-led discernment. (And that's not just for those gifted with special discernment.)

In future posts I will address several angles on discernment in the world and Church. Following is a list of upcoming topics as I envision them today.

Upcoming in This Discernment Series

The How of Discernment—I'll dive deeper into biblically defining discernment and address how worldview as a concept helps reveal and classify untrue and dangerous assumptions among philosophies that affect one's view of the universe and the Creator, human value and business, and more. Also, to be discussed: How can we distinguish true from untrue (or the insidious half-true), good, better and best, and right from wrong or disputable matters of conscience? What is the relationship of knowledge, wisdom, and discernment as the Bible frames it?

Spiritual & Mental Triage—How can I handle sustained, varying and rapid information, claims and counterclaims, and policies that force me to either endure, protest, or free myself from them? (I may write some about conscientious objection vs. following authorities.) How can one fend off attack, especially the arrows aimed at religious freedom, biblical values and God's revealed will? What if repression or persecution happens anyway?

Distinguishing Between God's Ways and God's Enemy's Ways—It bears emphasizing that, though the cosmos (world) and human sin nature (flesh) are capable of ruin on a global scale, there's a cosmic battle pre-dating man and Creation—and, yes, politics. The traits and track records, if you will, of both God Almighty and the original Rebel help to immediately test a message's likely origin and flag the source.

Discerning and Dealing with False Dichotomies—With so many events and "empty philosophies of men,"[{12}](#) the unified

biblical narrative of how life works and biblical guidance gets distorted by oversimplified false choices—a favorite trick of the Liar and his worldly, often unwitting, disciples. It's either “material things are all that matters” or “spiritual and mystical things are the only really real things,” etc. Competing goods are confusing for good-willed people, too. How do I better notice these and find either a middle way or a third way? What false *splits* have I bought into that keep both unbelievers and believers from discerning biblically: facts vs. feelings, truth vs. emotions, oppressors vs. the oppressed only, and so on?

Giving Essentials Their Proper Due—How do I and those I spiritually lead avoid unconsciously discounting a high view of Scripture, theology, and God? We not only need to elevate our game but lift our eyes to the heavens.

Realize and Embrace the Need for Testing—Even the scariest of crises, such as an epidemic or a cultural revolution, may constitute a test God uses for us. Such events provide a perfect laboratory for gaining discernment from general knowledge and a growing understanding gained by “rightly handling the word of truth.”[\[13\]](#) The disciplines you hone through a sincerely perseverant search for a divine source of wisdom gains immediate insight for daily situations, news, and cultural developments that touch your life.

Discernment and the Human Heart, Mind and Will—What did Solomon receive after asking for discernment to govern God's people, and how does that apply to me? Did that guarantee wise living? What's the difference between the heart and head in biblical and scientific terms? What does Scripture say about the heart and how elevated is its role?

Are You and Your Sources Asking the Hard Questions?—Yesterday's conspiracy theory increasingly becomes today's headline and tomorrow's policy. Did you detect a curious new spirit of control, perhaps a taste by governments

for unreasonable and unrelenting regulations in the initial stages of the Covid-19 response? [I did in March 2020.](#) Skilled observers like Dennis Prager asked early on about the balance of our national response. Discerning people were justified in their caution and predictions about the tradeoffs between several goods: fighting a novel virus for everyone weighed against economic, medical, and psychological damage, not to mention governments' tendency to retain emergency measures beyond need. Asking the hard questions can enable us to see and respond to the shifts and movements around us from whichever side. Asking early enough can avoid hazards.

Avoiding Logical Pitfalls and Inappropriate Judgment—Thinking can be flawed or downright incorrect, so how can I avoid that? What are some common logical fallacies and how can I spot them? Are sound arguments always true?

Judging: Is it a Forbidden Act or a Necessary Tool?—One of the most famous but misused quotes of Jesus is, “Judge not, lest you be judged” (Matthew 7:1). Was He teaching never to make assessments of anyone or anything, or did His and other New Testament teachings offer a nuanced approach?

Discernment must stem foundationally from an outside Observer or its interpretations will be captive to its own small circle of knowledge, assumptions, and influencers. Think of it! God intervened in human form and keeps speaking into it by his illuminating Spirit. “But the one who is spiritual discerns all things” (1 Corinthians 2:15).

As ministers of reconciliation and ambassadors, we speak his truth as if from a foreign country.[\[14\]](#) How do we gain a hearing? Partly from making sense of things from an objective, authoritative, out-of-this-world point of view, relying on knowledge and wisdom that the unredeemed can only dream exist.

Notes

1. Exodus 36:1.

2. Tim Challies, *The Discipline of Spiritual Discernment*, (Wheaton, IL, Crossway Books 2007), 14. I owe this well-researched story and many concepts to Challies.

3. 2 Corinthians 10:4; 1 Timothy 4:8; Ephesians 6:17; Hebrews 4:12

4. Dr. J.P. Moreland, on a Zoom conference call sponsored by Baylor University apologetics club Oso Logos (tied to Ratio Christi), streamed live on March 2, 2021. I attended that online meeting.

5. See probe.org/atheist-myths-and-scientism/. Note: this belief sneaks into the minds and convictions of Christians, too, who don't see its influence.

6. See probe.org/worldviews-part-2/ and probe.org/truth-what-it-is-and-why-we-can-know-it/.

7. See a mainstream media article detailing a “conspiracy” to “save the [2021 Presidential] election” through a “shadow campaign” led by a “cabal” of Big Tech leaders at time.com/5936036/secret-2020-election-campaign/. See also an expose (speech transcript) detailing very recent and alarming systematic message controlling methods by giant social media platforms: imprimis.hillsdale.edu/control-need-rein-big-tech/.

8. “Love your enemies . . .”, Leviticus 19:18; Matthew 12:31.

9. Acts 17:11. More to come on general as well as spiritual discernment to via [Probe.org](https://probe.org), Probe radio and our [Head & Heart podcast](#).

10. 1 Thessalonians 5:21.

11. Visit our answers to visitor queries at [Probe.org/answers/](https://probe.org/answers/) and [Ask Probe](#).

12. Galatians 2:8.

13. 2 Timothy 2:15.

14. Hebrews 11:16.

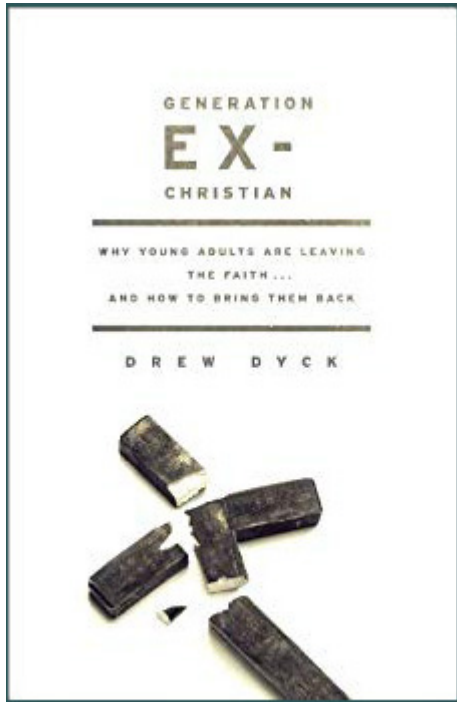
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Ex-Christians: Ways to Bring Back the Leavers

Steve Cable provides an overview of why young people leave the church based on Drew Dyck's book Generation Ex-Christian: Why Young Adults Are Leaving the Faith . . . And How to Bring Them Back.



Over the last several years, Probe has been reporting on a changing young adult society that is marginalizing the church at an increasing rate. When we analyzed relevant survey data and our own survey taken of 18- to 40-year-old, born again Christians, the data revealed that even among Evangelicals, cultural captivity was the norm for the vast majority of Christians. One result of culturally captive Christians is that their children often become “leavers,” leaving the faith entirely once they are out on their own.



Are there others who are seeing the same degree of disconnect with the truths of Scripture in the life styles and life choices of young, adult Americans? I want to look at one such prominent voice speaking out about these same concerns. Drew Dyck is the author of *Generation Ex-Christian: Why Young Adults Are Leaving the Faith . . . And How to Bring Them Back*^[1] and managing editor of *Leadership Journal*.

Six Types of Leavers

Dyck's book is not primarily driven by general survey data. Instead, it tells a more personal story. He connected with people who had left their Christian upbringing. He talked with them about their life choices *and* he attempted to share Christ in a way that would be meaningful in the context of their personal journeys. As a result of this experience, he felt that those leaving their Christian influenced youth to enter into adulthood without a total faith in Christ could be placed into one of six different categories. He entitled these categories:

- Postmodern leavers – those adopting a postmodern view where no meta-narrative is to be trusted
- Modern leavers – those who believe only what they can prove and Neo-Darwinism seems more provable
- Neo-pagan leavers – those who gravitate to an earth-based religion where they are essentially their own gods
- Rebel leavers – those for whom a sinful lifestyle appears more appealing or who don't want to "give in" to God

- Recoilers – leavers who withdraw because of an emotional hurt associated with people claiming to represent Christianity, and
- Drifters – perhaps the largest group of leavers who gradually drift away because their faith was never that deep to begin with.

Each category of leaver creates a different challenge for one who desires to lead them into a true knowledge of Jesus. Just as Paul used different approaches to share the gospel in the synagogue, the marketplace and the philosopher's meeting place in Athens, so we need to tailor our approach to communicate effectively with our audience. In what follows, we will consider each of these categories and some of the ways one can best share with them.

Postmodern and Modern Leavers

Postmodern thinking is becoming the cultural norm for young adults. The postmodern view holds that there is no objective truth applying to all, but rather each person or group of people defines their own truth. As J. P. Moreland puts it, "In a postmodernist view, there is no such thing as objective truth, reality, value, reason and so forth."^{2} Yet, many young adults still adopt modernity, the dominant view throughout the twentieth century. Those with a modern view believe linear thinking and rational thought can lead us to objective truths valid for all. In his book *Generation Ex-Christian*, Drew Dyck finds both of these viewpoints create stumbling blocks for belief.

The gospel of Jesus Christ is true for all people in every age. This view runs counter to the "true for you but not for me" mentality of the postmodern generation. Many young adults influenced by postmodern thought have a difficult time accepting the all-encompassing, meta-narrative of the gospel. These leavers believe that Christianity is too narrow and

judgmental to be a part of their own truth sphere.

Dyck points out that those with a postmodern perspective are not really interested in hearing your apologetic arguments. Even if you weave a compelling logical argument, they will nod, smile, and ignore you. They need to see the impact of the truth of Jesus lived out in your life before them. Invite them to participate with you in serving others, creating an opportunity to share your story. They are, initially, more interested in your personal story. How has Jesus Christ made a difference in your life?

Conversely, those with a modern perspective are not as interested in your personal story. With moderns, ask questions to understand how they decide if something is true. Model a concern for the truth before laying “the Way, the Truth, and the Life” on their plate. Focus on the truth of the gospel, not letting ourselves get sidetracked into other arenas. How satisfying is their alternative view, and what are the consequences if they are wrong in their perception of truth?

Many modernists report that most Christians hastened their departure from the church through trite, unhelpful answers to the questions they were asking. Be willing to do the research to answer their questions thoughtfully and with confidence. Remember, there are good cogent explanations to their questions and their objections.

As Dyck discovered, effectively sharing with a leaver today requires us to know whether their general thought process is more shaped by modernism or postmodernism. Their answer determines whether we start with our personal experience or with the total truth of the gospel.

Neo-Pagans and Rebels

Two more groups of leavers Dyck labels Neo-pagans and Rebels.

Dyck discovered a surprisingly large number of Neo-pagan leavers. Neo-pagans have gravitated to the beliefs that they are ultimately gods living in a society where the earth is to be nourished and women are as important, if not more so, than men. One common example of this religious view is Wicca.[{3}](#) Another example is Oprah's mishmash of Eastern mysticism.[{4}](#)

As with other leavers, begin by asking them questions to understand what they believe and what attracted them to it. With Neo-pagans, Dyck suggests starting by sharing with them our appreciation for nature and our sense of responsibility to care for it as God commanded. We also can share the honor that Christ and the church gave to women. They need to understand that women are "fellow heirs," not maidservants in Christ's kingdom. Upon earning a listening ear, we can share how we have experienced God's presence in our midst. Share our spiritual experiences with them. Above all, recognize that you are engaging in a spiritual battle that must include fervent pray on their behalf.

As he examined his relationships with different types of leavers, Dyck realized that some of them leave not to follow after a different belief system but, instead, to rebel against their view of a creator who is attempting to limit their self expression. Some rebels are motivated by a desire to do their own thing and participate fully in the short-lived pleasures of this world. Others are motivated by a desire to spit in the face of God, declaring their independence.

To effectively reach out to spiritual rebels, we need to let them know we care about them as persons. The world is already showing them that in their rebellion they are not really free. Everybody serves something. Get them to talk about what they are serving, whether it is money, success, clothes, power, etc. Then share with them how you experience true freedom as a captive of the source of all true freedom, Jesus Christ. As Paul tells us in Galatians, "For you were called to freedom, only do not turn your freedom into an opportunity for the

flesh, but through love serve one another” (Gal. 5:13).

Drifters and Recoilers

Drifters and Recoilers are two more kinds of leavers.

Dyck identifies the Drifters as the largest group of leavers, exhibiting “that entrenched human defect—the tendency to drift from God.”^{5} They did not set out to walk away from the faith of their parents. Over time it became less important to them, until it played no real role in their lives. As Dyck put it, “the biggest danger to Christianity is Christians.”^{6}

Recent surveys showed 18- to 29-year-olds who indicated they had no religion growing from 11 percent in 1990 to 22 percent in 2008.^{7} Of these young adults, two-thirds of them were leavers from an earlier point in their life where they considered themselves Christians. Their most common reason for leaving was not some intellectual epiphany, but rather they “just gradually drifted away from the religion.”^{8}

Drifters are not driven by specific intellectual objections. They may have no real objections or arguments against Christian beliefs. Instead, they are apathetic toward it. It just is not important in their life.

To reach Drifters, one must redefine their perception that a Christian life is not worth pursuing. They need to see us loving Jesus because of who He is and not because of what He can do for us. It is not about getting God to do something for us. It is about the opportunity for eternal fellowship with the One who created us all.

The Drifters need to be connected with older adults who are living with an eternal perspective. Who are “redeeming the time because the days are evil” (Eph. 5:16). We need to raise the bar on the Christian life. It is more than the sterile, play-acting game they may have seen from their parents. You

cannot call them back to a watered down Christianity that was unable to hold their allegiance in the first place. Instead, we need to live out before them the radical lifestyle of a true follower of Jesus Christ.

The final group of leavers are the ones Dyck calls the Recoilers. These people are a special case. Their lives have been marred by significant pain. They relate the source of this pain to their Christian experience. For the Recoilers, it is typically only in the context of a relationship that healing can take place. On the one hand, we need to empathize with them, while, on the other, they need to see the joy our faith brings to our lives. Gradually, we may be able to help them delineate between God who loves them and the people who hurt them.

Reaching This Generation

In *Generation Ex-Christian*, Drew Dyck identified six different types of faith leavers: Postmoderns, Moderns, Neo-pagans, Spiritual Rebels, Drifters, and Recoilers. Recognizing that we are called to be “all things to all men so that we may by all means save some” (1 Cor. 9:22), we can tailor our approach to more effectively reach each type of leaver.

Let’s consider five aspects that need to be consistent regardless of which type of leaver you are dealing with.

Listen to them to understand which type they may be. If we jump into sharing without knowing, we run the risk they will tune us out permanently.

Articulate why we believe what we believe. We need to have a good basic understanding of why we believe the gospel is true. If we have a good grasp of the basics, we can tailor our approach to the type of leaver we are addressing.

Enter into relationship with the long view in mind. Don’t

expect to reverse their dismissal of Christianity overnight. Over time we want clear away some of the obstacles standing between them and a vibrant faith. Be prepared for this effort to take time.

Focus on forging loving relationships. All the intelligent words in the world won't matter if they view us as hired guns adding another notch to our tally. Paul reminded Timothy, "The aim of our instruction is love proceeding from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith" (1 Tim. 1:5). Demonstrating Christian love makes them more willing to sincerely listen to us.

Consistently pray for the leavers in our lives. As Dyck put it, "We can give our loved ones who have strayed no greater gift than time spent in the presence of God on their behalf. Plead, ramble, cry, rage—but don't stop." Pray that "God will open up to us a door for the word, so that we may speak forth the mystery of Christ . . . that we may make it clear in the way we ought to speak" (Col. 4:2). If we are not bringing God into the relationship through prayer, we are not speaking with His effectiveness.

I don't believe the God who "desires all men to be saved" (1 Tim. 2:4) would at the same time desire a large portion of our young adults to leave behind faith in Jesus Christ. We are not to throw up our hands in surrender, but rather to dedicate ourselves to sharing Christ in ways that communicate the truth to different sets of ears. Let's commit together to reach out and bring these leavers into an eternal relationship with Christ.

Notes

1. Drew Dyck, *Generation Ex-Christian: Why Young Adults Are Leaving the Faith . . . And How to Bring Them Back* (Moody Publishers, 2010), Kindle edition.
2. Ibid., Chapter 2.

3. See Michael Gleghorn, "Wicca: A Biblical Critique," Probe Ministries, 2002, probe.org/wicca-a-biblical-critique/.
4. See Steve Cable, "Oprah's Spirituality: Exploring A New Earth," Probe Ministries, 2008, probe.org/oprahs-spirituality-exploring-a-new-earth/.
5. Dyck, *Generation Ex-Christian*, chapter 16.
6. Ibid.
7. Kosmin & Keysar, *American Nones: The Profile of the No Religion Population, A Report Based on the American Religious Identification Survey 2008*, commons.trincoll.edu/aris/files/2011/08/NONES_08.pdf, "Highlights."
8. Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, *Faith in Flux: Changes in Religious Affiliation in the U.S.*, 2009, www.pewforum.org/Faith-in-Flux-Changes-in-Religious-Affiliation-in-the-US.aspx

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The All-Powerful God

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

Introducing Omnipotence

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



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

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

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

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

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

Omnipotence and Creation

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

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

Now what’s astonishing about this is that it’s perfectly consistent with today’s standard Big Bang model of the origin

of the universe! This is because, as physicist P. C. W. Davies observes, “On this view the big bang represents the creation event; the creation not only of all the matter and energy in the universe, but also of spacetime itself.”^{3} Hence, the origin posited by this model is “an absolute origin” out of nothing.^{4}

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

Omnipotence and Morality

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

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

This is particularly important for New Testament believers, for God has made many wonderful promises to those who have trusted Christ for salvation. Is there any reason to fear that God may not keep some of these promises? No, there is not, for as the author of Hebrews reminds us, “it is impossible for God

to lie” by making a promise and then failing to keep it. And because of this, our hope in Christ is “firm and secure” (Heb. 6:18-19).

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

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

Omnipotence and Freedom

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

Let's consider an example. A square is a geometrical object

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

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

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

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

The Importance of Omnipotence

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

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

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

deliver us from his hand.

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

Notes

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2. Thomas F. Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God: One Being, Three Persons* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1996), 207; cited in Paul Copan and William Lane Craig, *Creation out of Nothing: A Biblical, Philosophical, and Scientific Exploration* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004), 14.
3. P. C. W. Davies, "Spacetime Singularities in Cosmology," in *The Study of Time III*, ed. J. T. Fraser (New York: Springer Verlag, 1978), 78-79; cited in Copan and Craig, *Creation out of Nothing*, 222.
4. Copan and Craig, *Creation out of Nothing*, 223.
5. *Ibid.*, 26.
6. Edward Wierenga, "Omnipotence Defined," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 43, no. 3 (1983): 367.
7. See J. P. Moreland and William Lane Craig, *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 539.
8. Antony Flew, ed., *A Dictionary of Philosophy*, Rev. 2nd ed. (New York: Gramercy Books, 1999), s.v. "impossibility."
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Glorious Morning Glories

This is what love looks like.

My husband planted morning glories for me on our back fence because they are my favorite.



I love that a whole new batch of brand new blooms pops out each morning, day after day of fresh beauty that reminds me of Lamentations 3:23, that God's mercies are "new every morning—great is Your faithfulness!"

This year, we had to wait long into the fall for the flowers. The green foliage was crazy lush and full for months, but there were no gorgeous "blue happies," as I think of them, until late October.

Finally they started exploding daily with beauty and color. Not long afterwards, an unseasonable cold snap hit us, and the green foliage started to wither and dry up.

But the "blue happies" kept popping out!



I had to smile at what was happening on our fence, because it was a powerful illustration of what it's like for me to grow older. The green leaves were getting old and spent and dry and yucky, at the same time that every morning, there were still fresh and new morning glory blooms sprouting out. What a picture of what has become my new life verse, 2 Corinthians 4:16-18—

Therefore we do not lose heart, but ***though our outer man is decaying, yet our inner man is being renewed day by day.*** For momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison, while we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen; for the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal.

My body is growing older and weaker, especially ravaged by the lingering effects of polio. Not long ago, I spent almost two years [unable to walk](#) at all because of severe arthritis in both hips. (The Lord has restored so very much to me on the other side of two [hip replacements](#)!) I'm able to walk and stand without pain these days, for which I give thanks every single day, but the march of time continues and, like everyone else, I'm going downhill physically.

But—the glorious but!—on the inside I get to be fresh and new every day! Just like the “blue happies”! As I walk in faithfulness with the Lord, seeking to abide in Him and allow the beauty and character of Christlikeness to flow into and through me, He keeps bringing renewed energy and joy to my soul. Every day! I love it!

The hope for us as believers, especially older believers, is that we get to be renewed daily with the radiance and vibrancy and joy of Jesus within that keeps getting better and better the older we get!

In fact, the Bible even speaks about our transformation as a special kind of glory: 2 Corinthians 3:17-18 says,

Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord’s glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.

I LOVE being transformed, a little bit every day, into the image of Jesus, with ever-increasing glory! I get to be a spiritual morning glory!

This blog post originally appeared at
blogs.bible.org/glorious-morning-glories/ on December 15,
2020.

Addressing Anxiety in

Tumultuous Times

Byron Barlowe connects the dots between the universal problem of anxiety, what brain science is teaching us about our minds, and how Scripture and spiritual disciplines can help. In a world consumed by violent riots and trauma surrounding the Covid virus, this is a timely topic that God and science speak to well.

Millions of people worldwide are battling anxiety in a tumultuous time. The Coronavirus pandemic response has created a new abnormal: heightened fear of sickness and death, economic damage, and social isolation. Loneliness is the number one health crisis in America according to many epidemiologists, psychiatrists, and social scientists.[{1}](#) While we're all still reeling from this, racial strife has erupted into looting, killings, and anarchy in American streets.

Mental health is an increasing concern too. One study found that during the spring 2020 mass quarantine, prescriptions for anti-anxiety meds spiked.[{2}](#) A San Francisco area hospital has seen more deaths by suicide than by Covid-19, prompting a call for an end to mass shutdowns.[{3}](#) *It's been a perfect storm of stress.*



Are there real solutions *right now*? Yes, brain science is confirming the truths and promises proclaimed in Scripture in exciting ways! We have wonderfully adaptive minds—especially when they are focused on God. These built-in mind-morphing capabilities show the genius of our design as Image-bearers of God. Audiologist, cognitive researcher and outspoken Christian Dr. Caroline Leaf writes, “As an individual, you are capable of making mental and emotional change in your life. Through your thinking, you can actively recreate thoughts and, therefore, knowledge in your mind.”[{4}](#)

And this has profound implications for true hope. Leaf continues: “Thoughts are real, *physical* things that occupy mental real estate. Moment by moment, every day, you are changing the structure of your brain through your thinking [it’s happening right now as you read]. *When we hope, it is an activity of the mind that changes the structure of our brain in a positive and normal direction.*”^{5} The biblical book of Hebrews defines faith as “the *substance* of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen” (Hebrews 11:1). The thankful, attentive, willfully hopeful mind creates positive emotions, thoughts, and acts of the will. In other words, we *significantly control whether we have a healthy soul.*

Dallas Willard writes, “The transformation of the self away from a life of fear and insufficiency takes place as we fix our mind upon God as he truly is.” As Scripture teaches, “Be transformed by the renewing of your mind.” In this article we’ll explore this transformation.

Morphing Your Mind—It’s Mostly Up to You!

Everyday stress is hard enough—but what about work-related anxiety? Money? Riots, memories of abuse, bullying, and abandonment? We have little control over family, culture or epidemics. But we can make amazing internal changes through our responses. Science and Scripture *agree* on this.

The transforming mind-renewal encouraged by Scripture is possible for us all, especially for people who have invited God to lead their lives. We can intentionally train our minds to reshape our brains—we are *not* perpetual victims of our past or circumstances. Nor are humans mere products of matter in motion. Dr. Caroline Leaf, author of *Switch on Your Brain*, claims that “Choice is real, and free will exists. You are able to stand outside yourself, observe your own thinking, consult with God, and [work with him to] change the negative, toxic thought or grow a healthy, positive thought. When you do this, your brain responds with a positive neurochemical rush

and structural changes that improve your intellect, health, and peace.”{6}

Even traumatic memories can be starved, defanged, broken down, and replaced. Brought into conscious awareness, they can become plastic enough to be recreated. Leaf explains that “Neurons that don’t get enough signal (that is, rehearsing of the negative event) will start firing apart, wiring apart, pulling out, and destroying the emotion attached to the trauma.” Also, desirable brain chemicals that bond and remold chemical connections, increase focus and attention, and increase feelings of peace and happiness begin to weaken traumatic memories even more. So bad memories, hatred, hurt, and other negative thoughts and emotions that form toxic beliefs: “If they stop firing together, they will no longer wire together. This leads to . . . rebuilding new ones.”{7}

Ideas have consequences and our beliefs guide our behavior. In the words of King Solomon, “As a man thinks in his heart, so he is.”{8} That is, we construct frameworks of beliefs and *then* speak and act from them.

Science seems to confirm this biblical view of self-control. Measuring magnetic fields, electrical impulses, chemical effects, photons, vibrations, and quantum energy paints a picture of intricately [networking] neurotransmitters, proteins, and energy—that is, signals—that change the brain’s landscape.{9} This “neuroplasticity [seems to be] God’s design for renewing the mind.”{10}

And there’s nothing magic about it: overcoming anxiety can be helped a lot through habits of the mind, heart, and soul.

Mindfulness & Meditation—Self-Control and Seeking God in Silent Solitude

It’s no wonder that the concept of “mindfulness” has become a “thing” these days. Meditation and concentration are new-old

survival skills. How do they work?

Dr. J.P. Moreland, noted philosopher and author of *Finding Quiet: My Story of Overcoming Anxiety and The Practices That Brought Peace*, candidly shares his struggles with anxiety and the need he had for medications. He also discovered the power of seeking God in self-directed solitude. He emphasizes sustained habits of the praising, thankful, and self-controlled soul.

Mindful meditation is not like taking a drug, is not a quick fix, or denying the senses to rid oneself of desire.^{11} “By charting new pathways in the brain, mindfulness can change the banter inside our heads from chaotic to calm.”^{12} New habits are formed over time. When it comes to our minds, “practice doesn’t make perfect; it makes permanent.”^{13}

Remaining at rest via the practice of spiritual disciplines takes advantage of our mind’s ability to “move into a highly intelligent, self-reflective, directed state.” And the more often we go there, the more “we get in touch with the deep, spiritual part of who we are.” This exercise switches brain modes in a way that can create wisdom and potential connection with God.^{14} As Jesus taught his disciples, “Keep awake (give strict attention, be cautious and active) and watch and pray, that you may not come into temptation.”^{15} We can mentor our own minds, settle our souls, habituate our hearts, and free our spirits to respond to God. Brain science is catching up on this reality.

So, what’s going on physically when we stop to meditate in focused solitude and silence? A post at *Mindful.org* claims, “The impact that mindfulness exerts on our brain is borne from routine: a slow, steady, and consistent reckoning of our realities, and the ability to take a step back, become more aware, more accepting, less judgmental, and less reactive. . . . Mindfulness over time can make the brain, and thus [ourselves], more efficient regulators, with a penchant for

pausing to respond to our world instead of mindlessly reacting.”{16} How different would social media conversations be—especially on politics and race—if more people practiced patient contemplation!

Various regions of our brains change while meditating. The “fight or flight” area actually shrinks in size.{17} It’s a real chill pill!

God keeps “him in perfect peace whose mind is stayed on You, because he trusts in You.”{18}

Thankfulness and Happiness—Healthy Habits of the Mind & Heart

In trying times, we all want to return to happiness. It’s a God-given right to pursue it, according to America’s founders. The biblical worldview recognizes the inherent brokenness of both creation and human beings, so it is no surprise that confusion, discord, and tragedy—along with evil spiritual powers—“steal, kill, and destroy”{19} our joy. What can be done?

Christian philosopher J.P. Moreland writes, “You have it in your power to begin a regimen of choices, assuming you would choose the right things, and form a habit of this that can *substantially improve your happiness and decrease or get rid of anxiety*. There really is hope.”{20} Our non-conscious mind turns thoughts over and over. Through spiritual disciplines, we bring these into our conscious awareness, which manipulates actual proteins, creating overhauled memories. Intentionally bringing God to mind—His attributes, the wonder of creation and His blessings, promises, answered prayers—such a focus leads to a cycle of good thinking, feeling, and *knowing* that turns into believing real truth. Faith is a gift so we’re not alone in doing this. But it is up to us to put to use the gifts described here to “work out [our] salvation with [reverence and proper humility].”{21}

Remember, we have a strong influence in reshaping our own brains—especially with God’s help. Secular scientists are discovering the wonderful power of thankfulness. Scientific studies prove seven benefits according to *PsychologyToday.com*. Gratitude improves relationships, physical and mental health, sleep, self-esteem, and mental resilience. It even reduces aggression, the urge for revenge. Scripture aligns with physical reality again when it tells us: “Don’t worry about anything; instead, pray about everything. Tell God what you need and thank him for all he has done. Then you will experience God’s peace, which exceeds anything we can understand. His peace will guard your hearts and minds as you live in Christ Jesus.”[{22}](#)

Moreland jokes, “If we’re not careful, we may even come to think we were designed to flourish best when we are thankful and grateful! Yet as exciting as these psychological studies are, we didn’t need them to know the importance and value of expressing gratitude and thanksgiving to God. The Bible insists on this . . . [it’s] filled to overflowing with exhortations to be grateful to God and express thanksgiving to him.”[{23}](#) As King David famously prayed in Psalm 23, “Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life”—he trusted a good God to lead, protect, and bless him. That’s joy far beyond happiness!

Takeaways & Practical Applications

Brain networks form an inner life of the mind. We can switch between various networks constantly. Like a mom monitoring kids running around inside several contained rooms, this enables us to control the controllable—our reactions to events and circumstances. Brain scans confirm how we capture and police rogue thoughts in ways prescribed in Scripture: “We . . . take every thought captive to obey Christ.”[{24}](#)

UCLA researchers address how our habitual non-conscious thoughts can drive anxiety—negative self-talk like:

- “I’ll be in real trouble if...”
- “What if so and so happens next week?”
- “I’ll probably fail that exam!”

“It’s what we say to ourselves in response to any particular situation that mainly determines our mood and feelings.”[{25}](#)

“Forming a new habit requires doing things you may not want to do in the early stages of formation,” as any coach or teacher will tell you.

For retraining our brains, experts have devised methods like **The Four Step Solution**:

It goes as follows:[{26}](#)

Step 1: Relabeling: call out thoughts as having no necessary connection with reality: tell yourself “That is a destructive lie.” Call on Proverbs 4:23, “Guard your heart above all else, for it is the source of life.”[{27}](#)

Step 2: Reframing: take the power out of the bad thoughts. Reset your perception of the deceptive message by being mindful that it exists, its content, and how you are now feeling by correctly categorizing the distorted message. Bad self-talk includes:

- all or nothing thinking (for example: “it was a *total* failure”)
- overgeneralizing
- singling out one thing to focus on
- catastrophizing (or making too big a deal out of things) and
- discounting the positive

Reframing them creates stable memories formed by repeated updating.

Step 3: Refocusing: Set your mind on anything else—distract yourself from the negative thoughts. Stop obsessing! Get into “the flow” of something. Focus elsewhere. And don’t ruminate about the message—analyzing it will deepen the grooves in your brain.

Step 4: Revaluating: After a while, reflect on how you did Steps 1-3. Recommit to repeat these steps throughout the day.

Over 21 days, a “newly formed neural network” will decay in less than a month: thoughts are like muscles that atrophy and die or get stronger with use.^{28} Starve the bad, feed the good.

As Paul instructed the Philippian church, dwell on what is good and pure, true and worthy of praise.^{29}

Notes

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5. Ibid.

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22. Philippians 4: 6-7, New Living Translation.
23. *Finding Quiet*, 113.
24. 2 Corinthians 10:5.
25. Psychologists Edmund Bourne and Lorna Garano, cited by Moreland.
26. Entire section, *Finding Quiet*, p. ?
27. Proverbs 4:23, CSB.
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