C.S. Lewis, the BBC, and Mere Christianity

Dr. Michael Gleghorn explains how a series of radio talks during WWII became one of Christianity's most cherished classics.

One can rarely predict all the consequences which will follow a particular decision. On September 1, 1939, Germany invaded Poland. Two days later, France and Britain declared war on Germany. World War II was officially underway. Back in England, C. S. Lewis was "appalled" to find his country once again at war with Germany. Nevertheless, he believed it was "a righteous war" and was determined to do his part "to assist the war effort."{1}



At this point in his life, Lewis was already a fairly successful Oxford don. "His academic works and lively lectures attracted a large student following."{2} Although he published a number of academic studies, Lewis also enjoyed writing popular literary, theological and apologetic works. In 1938 he published the first volume of his science-fiction trilogy, *Out of the Silent Planet*. And in 1939, as the war began, he was working on *The Problem of Pain*, a thought-provoking discussion of the problem of evil and suffering.{3}

It was this latter work which attracted the attention of James Welch, the Director of Religious Broadcasting for the British Broadcasting Corporation, or BBC. Welch and his assistant, Eric Fenn, were both committed Christians who firmly believed that Christianity had something vital to say to the men and women of England as they faced the horrors and challenges of war. According to Welch:

> In a time of uncertainty and questioning it is the

> responsibility of the Church – and of religious broadcasting as one of its most powerful voices – to declare the truth about God and His relation to men. It has to expound the Christian faith in terms that can be easily understood by ordinary men and women, and to examine the ways in which that faith can be applied to present-day society during these difficult times.{4}

After reading *The Problem of Pain* by C. S. Lewis, Welch believed that he had found someone who just might meet his exemplary standards of religious broadcasting. He wrote to Lewis at Oxford University in February 1941, and asked if he might consider putting together a series of broadcast talks for the BBC.{5} Lewis responded a couple days later, accepting the invitation and indicating a desire to speak about what he termed "the law of nature," or what we might call "objective right and wrong."{6} Although Lewis could hardly have known it at the time, this first series of talks would eventually become Book I in his bestselling work of basic theology, *Mere Christianity*.

Right and Wrong

Mere Christianity originated as a series of talks entitled *Right and Wrong: A Clue to the Meaning of the Universe.* Lewis pitched his idea to James Welch, the Director of Religious Broadcasting at the BBC, in the following terms:

> It seems to me that the New Testament, by preaching repentance and forgiveness, always *assumes* an audience who already believe in the law of nature and know they have disobeyed it. In modern England we cannot at present assume this, and therefore most apologetic begins a stage too far on. The first step is to create, or recover, the sense of guilt. Hence if I gave a series of talks, I shd [*sic*] mention Christianity only at the end, and would prefer not to unmask my battery till then.{7}

In certain respects, this was a rather difficult time to be involved in religious broadcasting. Most of the talks were not pre-recorded, but were given live. And because of the war, the British government was anxious to insure that no information that might be "damaging to morale or helpful to the enemy" end up in a broadcast.{8} As Eric Fenn, the BBC's Assistant Director of Religion, who worked closely with Lewis in the editing and production of his talks, later recalled, ". . . every script had to be submitted to the censor and could not be broadcast until it bore his stamp and signature. And thereafter, only that script—nothing more or less—could be broadcast on that occasion."{9}

Lewis not only had to contend with these difficulties, however, he also had to learn (as anyone who writes for radio must) that this is a very precise business. Since "a listener cannot turn back the page to grasp at the second attempt what was not understood at the first reading," the content must be readily accessible for most of one's listening audience.{10} Additionally, the talks must fit within a narrowly defined window of time. In Lewis's case, this was fifteen minutes per talk – no more, no less. As one might well imagine, Lewis initially found it rather difficult to write under such constraints.{11}

Eventually, however, the combination of Fenn's coaching and Lewis's natural giftedness as a writer and communicator paid off. The talks were completed and successfully delivered. The BBC was pleased with its new broadcasting talent and quickly enlisted Lewis for a second series of talks.{12}

What Christians Believe

This second series would be titled *What Christians Believe.* Since these talks would require Lewis to more directly communicate some of the core truths of the Christian faith, he sent "the original script to four clergymen in the Anglican,

Methodist, Presbyterian and Roman Catholic Churches for their critique."{13} Although Lewis was a brilliant and well-read individual, he was nonetheless a layman with no formal training in theology. Since his desire was to communicate the central truth-claims of Christianity, and not just the distinctive beliefs of a particular denomination, he wanted to be sure that his talks were acceptable to a variety of Christian leaders. Although a couple of them had some minor quibbles with certain things that Lewis had said, or not said, they were basically all in agreement. This was important to Lewis, who later tells us, "I was not writing to expound something I could call 'my religion,' but to expound 'mere' Christianity, which is what it is and was what it was long before I was born and whether I like it or not."{14}

The BBC was elated with this second series of talks, liking them even more than the first. According to Justin Phillips, who wrote a book on the subject, it was this second series of talks which most closely fulfilled James Welch's original vision as Director of Religion for the BBC "to make the gospel relevant to a people at war. It speaks of the core doctrines of Christianity and explains them in plain English to the general listener."{15}

Eric Fenn, who helped with the editing and production of the talks, wrote appreciatively to Lewis afterwards to tell him he thought they were excellent. He then asked if Lewis might consider doing yet another, even longer, series sometime in the near future.{16} Lewis would agree to the request, but he was beginning to get a little disenchanted with some of the unanticipated consequences of his success. Already a very busy man, with a variety of teaching, writing, and administrative responsibilities, Lewis now found himself, in addition to everything else he was doing, nearly overwhelmed by the avalanche of mail he was receiving from many of his listeners. This Oxford don was clearly making a powerful connection with his audience!

Why Was Lewis So Popular?

According to Justin Phillips, "Even though Lewis was a prolific correspondent himself, even by his standards it was all becoming a bit too much to cope with."{17} Indeed, were it not for the able secretarial support of his brother Warnie, Lewis may *not* have been able to keep up with it all.

Jill Freud, one of the children evacuated from London at the start of the war, lived with the Lewises for a while. She recalled just how much help Warnie offered his brother, whom they called "Jack":

> He did all his typing and dealt with all his correspondence which was considerable – so huge it was becoming a problem. There was so much of it from the books and then the broadcast talks. And he was so meticulous about it. Jack wrote to everybody and answered every letter.{18}

Indeed, Warnie later estimated that he had pounded out at least 12,000 letters on his brother's behalf!{19} So what made Lewis so popular? What enabled him to connect so well with his readers and listeners?

In the first place, Lewis was simply a very talented writer and thinker. When it came to communicating with a broad, general audience, Lewis brought a lot to the table right from the start. But according to Phillips, the BBC should also be given some credit for the success of the broadcast talks. He writes, "The attention given to Lewis's scripts by his producers in religious broadcasting made him a better writer."{20}

Ironically, even Lewis's rather volatile domestic situation may have contributed to his success. Lewis was then living with his brother, who had a drinking problem, a child evacuee from London, and the adoring, but also dominating, mother of a friend who had been killed in World War I. Phillips notes:

> All this helped to 'earth' Lewis's writings in the real world. . . . It took him out of the seclusion of the Oxford don . . . and gave him a real home life more like that of his listeners than many of his professional colleagues.{21}

Finally, Lewis combined all of this with a rather disarming humility in his presentations. He wasn't pretending to be better than others; he was only trying to help. And his listeners responded in droves.

The Impact of the Broadcasts

The BBC eventually got a total of four series of talks out of Lewis. Each of the series was so successful that the BBC continued, for quite some time, to entreat Lewis to do more. But according to Phillips, Lewis was becoming increasingly disillusioned with broadcasting. The BBC issued one invitation after another, but nearly eighteen months after his fourth series concluded Lewis had turned down every single one of them.{22} Although he would eventually be tempted back to the microphone a few more times, the days of his broadcast talks were now a thing of the past. While he was glad to be of service in this way during the war, Lewis never really seemed to care that much for radio. Indeed, in one of his less serious moods, he even blamed the radio "for driving away the leprechauns from Ireland!"{23}

In spite of this, however, the impact of the broadcasts has been immense. Since first being aired on the BBC, these talks have generated (and continue to generate) a great deal of interest and discussion. *Mere Christianity*, a compilation of the talks in book form, continues to show up on bestseller lists even today.{24} And Phillips, speaking of the cumulative impact of *all* of Lewis's writings, observes that while numbers vary, "in the year 2000 some estimates put worldwide sales of Lewis's books at over 200 million copies in more than thirty languages."{25}

As the origin of *Mere Christianity* shows, however, we cannot often predict how it may please God to use (and perhaps greatly multiply) our small, seemingly insignificant, investments in the work of His kingdom. Lewis was simply trying to do his part to be faithful to God and to help his countrymen through the horrors of World War II. But God took his humble offering and, like the story of the loaves and fish recounted in the Gospels, multiplied it far beyond anything Lewis could ever have reasonably imagined.

This should be an encouragement to us. As we faithfully exercise our gifts and abilities in the service of Jesus Christ, small and inconsiderable though they may seem to be, we may one day wake to find that incredibly, and against all odds, God has graciously multiplied our efforts to accomplish truly extraordinary things!

Notes

1. Justin Phillips, *C. S. Lewis in a Time of War: The World War II Broadcasts that Riveted a Nation and Became the Classic* Mere Christianity (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2002), 4.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. James Welch, *BBC Handbook 1942*, 59; cited in Phillips, *C. S. Lewis in a Time of War*, 78.
5. Phillips, *C. S. Lewis in a Time of War*, 80-81.
6. Ibid., 82.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid., 33.
9. Interview with Eric Fenn by Frank Gillard for the BBC Oral History Archive, 4 July 1986; cited in Phillips, *C. S. Lewis in a Time of War*, 33.
10. Ibid., 88.
11. Ibid., 87-88.
12. Ibid., 134-35.
13. Ibid., 142.

14. C. S. Lewis, "Preface," in *Mere Christianity* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1960), vii.
15. Phillips, *C. S. Lewis in a Time of War*, 153.
16. Ibid.
17. Ibid., 155.
18. Interview with Jill Freud, 19 November 1999; cited in Phillips, *C. S. Lewis in a Time of War*, 157.
19. Walter Hooper, *C. S. Lewis: A Companion & Guide* (London: Harper Collins, 1966), 33; cited in Phillips, *C. S. Lewis in a Time of War*, 158.
20. Phillips, *C. S. Lewis in a Time of War*, 165.
21. Ibid., 183.
22. Ibid., 268.
23. C. S. Lewis, *Letters to an American Lady* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967); cited in Phillips, *C. S. Lewis in a Time of War*, 276.
24. See, for example, www.bookvideoawards.com/bookstandard/images/BestSellersAwards_Program.pdf and peopleofthebook.us/2007/02/.
25. Phillips, *C. S. Lewis in a Time of War*, 279.

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"How Strong Does My Belief Need to be for Me to be Saved?"

This may seem like a strange question, but how strong does my belief need to be in order for me to be saved? I have been living I guess what you would call a carnal life (not praying or even thinking about God) for around 20 years and am

beginning to wonder if I have lost my salvation or if I cannot be reconciled. Please help me, something is missing. I am worried that some of the feelings I sometimes have mean that I don't want to serve The Lord.

If you have faith as small as a mustard seed you can be saved (Matt. 17:20). The issue really is not so much the "size" or "amount" of your faith, but the object of your faith. Are you trusting Christ for salvation? If so, then you are saved, for your faith is placed in the only One who is really able to save you.

Now I must say that it's really not surprising that you don't feel like you have much of a relationship with the Lord, for the fact is that (by your own admission) you don't. If, for the past twenty years or so, you haven't been seeking the Lord in prayer, spending time in His word, enjoying fellowship with other believers, seeking to serve the Lord in your own sphere of influence, etc., then it's really not surprising that you would feel distant from Him. The truth is, at this point in your life, you *are* distant from Him! It would as if you had a friend that you had not spoken to or thought about in twenty years. What sort of friendship would that be? Not a very close one, right?

The good news, however, is that you can always repent, turn away from sin and turn back to God, and let Him know that you would like to begin to have a "real" relationship with Him. If you have truly trusted Christ for salvation, then your relationship with God is still intact. However, you've been out of fellowship with Him for the last twenty years. You scarcely even know the One you're trusting with your eternal destiny! Nevertheless, if you confess your sins, the Lord is faithful and just to forgive your sins and cleanse you from all unrighteousness (1 John 1:9). So I would encourage you to go to the Lord in prayer, confess your sins, accept His forgiveness and cleansing, and get back in the game! You might want to read the story of the prodigal son in Luke 15:11-32. I

think you would find this story helpful at this point in your life.

A couple of helpful tips:

1. Begin spending some time each day with God both in prayer and reading the Bible (find a good translation that you like and can read without too much difficulty). You may want to begin reading a chapter a day in the Gospel of John.

2. Find a good, conservative, Bible-believing church where you can get involved with other believers in studying the Bible and serving the Lord. If they have small groups for fellowship and Bible study, then get involved in one of those.

May the Lord bless you as you sincerely begin seeking Him again!

Shalom in Christ,

Michael Gleghorn

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"Is Faith Fact, or Are They Opposites?"

A fellow Christian friend and I recently got into a discussion over faith and facts, and I would like your opinion on the subject. It started by her asking me "Is faith fact?" Well I replied yes, because our faith is grounded in the fact of the resurrection, our faith has to be based on something true or our faith is in vain. She was arguing faith is not fact and it

takes faith to believe in the resurrection in the first place and she said because we walk by faith not sight that facts are a "worldly" way of doing things. I feel the Bible teaches fact and reason as being viable and complimentary to faith. I would appreciate your biblical opinion on this subject.

Facts and faith are different things, and both are necessary. In Acts 17 and 1 Corinthians 15 Paul exhorts his readers and listeners toward an examination of the facts. Paul clearly believed that the facts of creation, Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, made his case for the deity of Christ reasonable. Facts rarely prove a point but they do indicate its reasonableness. (That is why in a court room you are asked to convict beyond a "reasonable" doubt, they don't say beyond any doubt). What matters in faith is the object of our faith. I can believe the sun will not rise tomorrow, but the facts argue that this is not a reasonable faith. The same is true of our faith in Christ. I cannot prove that he lived, died, and rose from the dead, but I can gather facts of history which make that conclusion not only reasonable, but I believe, compelling. Based on my faith in the reality and person of Jesus Christ, I also have faith in the truth of what he said about spiritual things and future events. There are few facts if any to back up his statements, only those which verify his person and events which are significant enough to believe whatever he said, but there are no specific facts to back up his claim that He will come again.

I hope this helps.

Ray Bohlin

Probe Ministries

“I Don’t Believe in Jesus, But What If. . .”

I was raised into a liberal, and yet Protestant family. As a child I went to church like any other, and even within the past five years I’ve attended the occasional session. Often people will tell me, “All you have to do is ask God to forgive your sins.”

The problem with this, and one that I’ve seldom been able to ask without feeling alienated, is that within my heart I don’t believe in Jesus. And so even assuming I repented and following the Bible to the word, I wouldn’t have what is called true faith. This is difficult to explain, but while I want to be a part of this religion if it’s real, several parts of it have ill logic. Logic that I can’t convince myself to ignore. Here are some comments and questions that I’d appreciate feedback on.

1. If Christianity is such a good thing, then why has it caused so much death in the past? The Crusades are only one example.

2. When the world is so full of grey, then how can there be a strict set of guidelines that clearly defines right and wrong? If you follow these rules, you’ll go to Heaven where everything’s inexplicably perfect. If you don’t, then you burn in eternal fire. It all sounds a little stretched to me.

3. I’ve been to sermons, and it’s emphasized there that if you don’t stay true to His word, then you’ll burn in Hell. Doesn’t it feel a little selfish to be praying and worshiping a supreme being specifically so that you aren’t punished forever? In a few scriptures, there’s an implication that you must be concerned with anything but yourself. An oxymoron?

4. Gay people are often criticized for their actions in the

world, especially by Christians. I have homosexual friends, and several of them take to it rather naturally. Being hetero myself, I could never have sexual relations with another man and like it. I find it highly unlikely that something like this could be anything but real. Especially given the constant state of harrassment that many of them live in.

5. I've never felt the presence of Jesus Christ in my life. I went to church for years, and the closest thing to divineness for me was hearing women mumble in what I heard as jibberish. Ultimately I would like to believe, but at this point I have absolutely no reason to.

On the other hand, I'm going to tell you why I can't let myself shake the idea that there is no immortal entity.

Christianity has had such a huge influence on so many of the past. The United States of America was founded upon this religion. It's grown to have countless followers now. I inquire to myself, "How could they all have it wrong?"

There are plenty of creative freethinkers who've enveloped themselves deeply into your faith. John Fitzgerald Kennedy, Adolf Hitler (his own perception of it anyway), etc.

Sometimes when I'm thinking about life and how I got here, I become increasingly afraid of what'll happen when I finally die. Possibly because deep down, I know that there's something I need to fulfill that I've yet to. Whether this is knowing God or something else, I have no idea at this point. I'm hoping that you might have some insight to my questions.

> *I was raised into a liberal, and yet Protestant family. As a child I went to church like any other, and even within the past five years I've attended the occasional session. Often people will tell me "All you have to do is ask God to forgive your sins."*

Sounds like a rather simplistic formula, doesn't it? And

there’s something in your intellect that rebels that surely, *something* must be missing. And you would be right.

Because true, biblical Christianity is about a personal relationship with a personal God. It’s about two beings communicating with each other, and loving each other. It’s more than a simple “forgiveness transaction.” There are a lot of people who see God as some kind of cosmic vending machine; we put in our coin of “belief” and out comes forgiveness? How hokey is that?>

> *The problem with this, and one that I’ve seldom been able to ask without feeling alienated, is that within my heart I don’t believe in Jesus. And so even assuming I repented and following the Bible to the word, I wouldn’t have what is called true faith. </em*
> *I honor you for your intellectual integrity to admit the truth. You are in good company; there are a lot of people who have come into a personal relationship with God through Jesus, who discovered along their journey that the Jesus they didn’t believe in was a false Jesus—a too-small Jesus. So I am suggesting that you investigate the REAL Jesus and not the stereotype you may have been exposed to.*
>
> *This is difficult to explain, but while I want to be a part of this religion if it’s real, several parts of it have ill logic. Logic that I can’t convince myself to ignore. Here are some comments and questions that I’d appreciate feedback on.*

1. If Christianity is such a good thing, then why has it caused so much death in the past? The Crusades are only one example.

Great question. First, please consider that true Christianity is not a belief system or a religion like the rest of the world religions, but a relationship with Jesus. And every single follower of Jesus is a sinful, fallen, imperfect person

who is going to follow Him in varying degrees of sinfulness, fallenness, and imperfection. The validity of Christianity is not the weakness of us Christ-followers, but the strength and truthfulness of Jesus Christ himself.

Many horrible things that were done in the name of Jesus Christ, such as the Inquisition and the excesses of the Crusades, were inflicted by people who were not his followers. Many people have done evil in the name of Jesus, but in the end he will tell them, “Away from me—I never knew you.”

While there are mortifying blots on history, I think it’s also important to realize that people who understand how to view life and the world from a biblical perspective were world changers. The Christian influence is responsible for the invention and development of hospitals and orphanages. Many schools were founded by Christians. The abolition of slavery and the very foundation of modern science are both based on Christian principles. So I think it’s important to see a balance of good and evil, and this is exactly what we would expect from fallen, sinful people trying to live out the principles rooted in the character of a good, loving God.

> *2. When the world is so full of grey, then how can there be a strict set of guidelines that clearly defines right and wrong? If you follow these rules, you’ll go to Heaven where everything’s inexplicably perfect. If you don’t, then you burn in eternal fire. It all sounds a little stretched to me.*

Let’s visit the “back story” that explains why it is we live in a world so full of grey. The world God originally created was perfect and sinless, but man made a choice that plunged us into shades of murkiness. You’ve probably heard the phrase “the fall of man,” but it truly was a fall of gigantic proportions. One of the things that fell when Adam sinned was our intellect, our reason. We no longer apprehend things correctly or accurately.

When God speaks truth to us, when he communicates his set of guidelines that explain how to make life work according to his design, there is now a problem. Two, actually. First, our fallen intellect doesn't grasp what he says as well as it would have before the fall. Second, another thing that fell was our will, and we are all rebellious, stiff-necked people who insist on having our own way and being god of our own lives. So between fuzzy minds and rebellious hearts, it can sure seem like the world is full of grey!

Nonetheless, God was never unclear about his intentions for his creation, and he communicated his set of guidelines very clearly. Interestingly, the same set of written-down laws in the Ten Commandments, are also written on the hearts of all people in all places at all times. We all intrinsically know it's wrong to murder and steal and lie and disrespect God.

The rules are clear—it's our hearts that want to excuse them and find loopholes to justify our bad behavior.

The thing is, no one can follow the rules. Nobody. If we break one, we've broken the set. There isn't a single person who is good enough to go to heaven. Rebellious, sinful, wayward people (and that is every one of us), left on our own, will enter life as enemies of God and stay what way. If God hadn't intervened, NO ONE would be in heaven.

But he did.

He reaches out to us and offers us one way, the only way, to have a restored relationship with him. Someone had to pay the penalty for our sins, so he sent Jesus from heaven to live a perfect life, showing us what God is like, and then die on the cross in our place. He was perfect and sinless, so he didn't die for his own sins—but for ours instead. Three days later God raised him from the dead to give his life back, and it's that new, resurrected kind of life Jesus offers to those who trust in him.

Heaven isn’t a reward for those who did “good enough” to get there, since no one qualifies. It is a place to enjoy an intimate personal relationship with God. A relationship that is entered into as a gift we don’t earn and never could.

Hell isn’t the place where people go who didn’t do enough good to cancel out their bad. When people have spent their life saying “no” to God (and “yes” to doing life their own way, worshiping themselves, or others, or things), it’s where God lets them have their own rebellious way forever.

> *3. I’ve been to sermons, and it’s emphasized there that if you don’t stay true to His word, then you’ll burn in Hell. Doesn’t it feel a little selfish to be praying and worshiping a supreme being specifically so that you aren’t punished forever? In a few scriptures, there’s an implication that you must be concerned with anything but yourself. An oxymoron?*

All of us here at Probe would disagree with those sermons. There are many people who believe God puts people on a performance standard, requiring us to stay on “the straight and narrow” or we get zapped. It not only overestimates our ability to be good, since we are fallen people, but it underestimates God’s ability to hold onto us. When we receive his gift of eternal life by trusting in what Christ did for us, God gives us a new heart and a new source of power to live a life pleasing to him. But He also understands that change is a process and a journey, and as the Bible says, “He knows that we are but dust.” He knows how incredibly frail and weak we are. Good thing he is strong and powerful, not to mention amazingly loving! The Bible actually says that we can KNOW we have eternal life, and that God will complete what he starts. We disagree strongly that what God gets started in us, we have the power to wreck forever.

The Bible says that our relationship with God is like that of a lover and his bride. We are God’s beloved, and he delights

in us. I don’t know if you are married, but I hope if you are, you know what it is for your beloved to have adoring eyes for you. That’s the kind of love we receive from God, and when one is loved like that, it’s easy and natural to love him back and worship him with joy and surrender.

The idea of praying to and worshiping a supreme being for the sole purpose of avoiding eternal punishment is a cruel hoax and a horrible counterfeit of the real thing. Which is why I suggest you find out who the REAL Jesus is, since apparently the one you’ve been hearing about is a gross caricature.

> *4. Gay people are often criticized for their actions in the world, especially by Christians. I have homosexual friends, and several of them take to it rather naturally. Being hetero myself, I could never have sexual relations with another man and like it. I find it highly unlikely that something like this could be anything but real. Especially given the constant state of harrassment that many of them live in.*

Their attractions are real, but not chosen. What is not real is the contention that they were born gay, or that God made them gay. There are certain patterns that show up in the lives of those who experience same-sex attractions: a relational deficit with the same-sex parent and with same-sex peers, a sense of gender insecurity, often the ridicule and rejection of peers. Everyone is created with the need to connect in a deep and lasting way with our same-sex parent and peers, and if that need goes unmet, it can become sexualized with the onset of adolescence. Everybody wants to be loved and accepted, but those who are attracted to those of their same sex didn’t get the kind of affirmation that would have allowed them to move on to the next step of emotional development, which is connection with the opposite sex.

> *5. I’ve never felt the presence of Jesus Christ in my life. I went to church for years, and the closest thing to divineness*

> *for me was hearing women mumble in what I heard as jibberish. Ultimately I would like to believe, but at this point I have absolutely no reason to.*

I can well imagine why, given what you have experienced and were taught!

I want to recommend to you a couple of books I think you will find satisfying and challenging. Lee Strobel is a former journalist (he used to be a reporter for the *Chicago Tribune*) and atheist, who tracked down credible sources to answer his questions about Jesus and Christianity. *The Case for Faith* and *The Case for Christ* are both really excellent books. A third book, *Mere Christianity* by C.S. Lewis, would also probably appeal to you.

> *On the other hand, I'm going to tell you why I can't let myself shake the idea that there is no immortal entity.*
>
> *Christianity has had such a huge influence on so many of the past. The United States of America was founded upon this religion. It's grown to have countless followers now. I inquire to myself, "How could they all have it wrong?"*
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> *Sometimes when I'm thinking about life and how I got here, I become increasingly afraid of what'll happen when I finally die. Possibly because deep down, I know that there's something I need to fulfill that I've yet to. Whether this is knowing God or something else, I have no idea at this point. I'm hoping that you might have some insight to my questions.*

The Bible intriguingly says in one place, "God has set eternity in our hearts." I think this is what you're experiencing, _____. God made you for a purpose, and he made

you to have a relationship with him that is more deeply satisfying than you could possibly imagine. But first you need to find the true God and not the little-bitty false god that is worth rejecting.

I truly respect your position and your intellectual integrity, and I am so glad there are real answers for your important questions.

I do hope this helps.

Sue Bohlin
Probe Ministries

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Shark Victim Surfer Girl's Simple Faith

Bethany Hamilton looks like any fun-loving young American teenager—bright eyed, smiling, excited about what she enjoys doing. She's athletic, attractive, trim, tanned and blonde—qualities that in this culture can open many doors.

But Bethany faces a special challenge that many her age do not. She is missing her left arm just below the shoulder, lost to a shark attack while surfing in Hawaii in the fall of 2003. The 1,500-pound tiger shark also chomped a huge chunk from her surfboard. She's fortunate to be alive.

Bethany, who lives on Kauai, was the state's top-ranked female amateur surfer before the attack. Such a loss might seem devastating. *USA Today* reports that Bethany seems undismayed. Merely three months after the mishap, she was surfing

competitively again. She aims to be among the world's best surfers.

Rather than hiding her left arm under clothing, she displays it in tank tops and calls it "Stumpy." When her prosthetic turned out to be too light in color to match her suntan, she nicknamed it Haole Girl, slang for a non-Hawaiian. She peels tangerines by holding them between her feet and using her right hand.

How to account for her bright spirits? Determination and dedication seem part of her makeup. But is there something more?

Her dad gives a clue. "She's not suffering," Tom Hamilton told the newspaper. "Somehow God gave Bethany an amazing amount of grace in this. I am in awe. She never says, 'Why me?'"

Bethany confirms her father's analysis: "This was God's plan for my life, and I'm going to go with it… I might not be here if I hadn't asked for God's help."

This surfer girl's simple faith astounds observers. She has become a media darling—with TV appearances on Oprah, 20/20 and Good Morning America. Book and movie offers have come. She threw out the first pitch for baseball's Oakland Athletics on opening day. Through it all, her family ties remain strong.

Her optimism echoes that of an early follower of Jesus, Paul, whose life-experience log included unjust imprisonments, beatings, stoning, shipwrecks and social ostracism. He was convinced that "God causes everything to work together for the good of those who love" Him.

Life can throw many curve balls: serious illness, accidents, terrorism, domestic strife, employment hassles, theft and more. Answers to "Why me?" and "What to do?" are often complex. Accompanying feelings of fear, confusion, grief or despair should not be ignored or minimized.

But perhaps a perspective that includes God in the picture can be a starting place for coping. Maybe the surfer girl's belief and trust have something valuable to say to a society filled with pain and risk.

During a winter New York City media tour, Bethany spontaneously gave her ski jacket to a homeless girl sitting on a Times Square subway grate, then called off a shopping spree, citing her own material abundance.

Something very significant is happening in this young athlete's life. Watch for more.

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Freudian Slip

His "True Enemy"

In 1937, shortly before World War II, a Jewish doctor had a colleague who urged him to flee Austria for fear of Nazi oppression. The doctor replied that his "true enemy" was not the Nazis but "religion," the Christian church. What inspired such hatred of Christianity in this scientist?{1}

His father Jakob read the Talmud and celebrated Jewish festivals. The young boy developed a fond affection for his Hebrew Bible teacher and later said that the Bible story had "an enduring effect" on his life. A beloved nanny took him to church as a child. He came home telling even his Jewish parents about "God Almighty". But eventually the nanny was accused of theft and dismissed. He later blamed her for many of his difficulties, and launched his private practice on Easter Sunday as (some suggest) an "act of defiance."

Anti-Semitism hounded the lad at school. Around age twelve, he was horrified to learn of his father's youthful acquiescence to Gentile bigotry. "Jew! Get off the pavement!" a so-called "Christian" had shouted to the young Jakob after knocking his cap into the mud. The son learned to his chagrin that his dad had complied.

In secondary school, he abandoned Judaism for secular science and humanism. At the University of Vienna, he studied the atheist philosopher Ludwig Feuerbach and carried his atheism into his career as a psychiatrist. Religion for him was simply a "wish fulfillment," a fairy tale invented by humans to satisfy their needy souls.

This psychiatrist was Sigmund Freud. He became perhaps the most influential psychiatrist of history, affecting medicine, literature, language, religion and culture. Obsessed with what he called the "painful riddle of death," he once said he thought of it daily throughout life. His favorite grandson's death brought great grief: "Everything has lost its meaning to me…" he wrote. "I can find no joy in life." He called himself a "godless Jew." In 1939, he slipped into eternity, a willful overdose of morphine assuaging his cancer's pain.

What factors might have influenced Freud's reaction to Christianity? Have you ever been discouraged about life or angry with God because of a major disappointment or the way a Christian has treated you? In the next section, we'll consider Freud's encounter with bigotry.

Anti-Semitism

Have you ever observed a Christian acting in un-Christlike ways? How did you feel? Disappointed? Embarrassed? Disgusted? Maybe you can identify with Sigmund Freud.

When Freud was about ten or twelve, his father Jakob told him that during his own youth, a "Christian" had knocked Jakob's

cap into the mud and shouted “Jew! Get off the pavement!” Jakob had simply picked up his cap. Little Sigmund found his father’s acquiescence to Gentile bigotry unheroic. Hannibal, the Semitic general who fought ancient Rome, became Sigmund’s hero. Hannibal’s conflict with Rome came to symbolize for Freud the Jewish-Roman Catholic conflict.{2}

In his twenties, Freud wrote of an ugly anti-Semitic incident on a train. When Freud opened a window for some fresh air, other passengers shouted for him to shut it. (The open window was on the windy side of the car.) He said he was willing to shut it provided another window opposite was opened. In the ensuing negotiations, someone shouted, “He’s a dirty Jew!” At that point, his first opponent announced to Freud, “We Christians consider other people, you’d better think less of your precious self.”

Freud asked one opponent to keep his vapid criticisms to himself and another to step forward and take his medicine. “I was quite prepared to kill him,” Freud wrote, “but he did not step up…{3}

Sigmund’s son Martin Freud recalled an incident from his own youth that deeply impressed Martin. During a summer holiday, the Freuds encountered some bigots: about ten men who carried sticks and umbrellas, shouted “anti-Semitic abuse,” and apparently attempted to block Sigmund’s way along a road. Ordering Martin to stay back, Sigmund “without the slightest hesitation … keeping to the middle of the road, marched towards the hostile crowd.” Martin continues that his “…father, swinging his stick, charged the hostile crowd, which gave way before him and promptly dispersed, allowing him free passage. This was the last we saw of these unpleasant strangers.” Perhaps Sigmund wanted his sons to see their father boldly confronting bigotry rather than cowering before it, as he felt his own father had done.{4}

Jews in Freud’s Austria suffered great abuse from so-called

Christians. No wonder he was turned off toward the Christian faith. How might disappointment and loss have contributed to Freud's anti-Christian stance?

Suffering's Distress

Have you ever been abandoned, lost a loved one, or endured illness and wondered, "Where is God?" Perhaps you can relate to Freud.

Earlier, I spoke about Freud's Catholic nanny whom he loved dearly, who was accused of theft and was dismissed. As an adult, Freud blamed this nanny for many of his own psychological problems.{5} The sudden departure—for alleged theft—of a trusted Christian caregiver could have left the child with abandonment fears{6} and the adult Freud with disdain for the nanny's faith. Freud wrote, "We naturally feel hurt that a just God and a kindly providence do not protect us better from such influences [fate] during the most defenseless period of our lives."{7}

Freud's daughter, Sophie, died suddenly after a short illness. Writing to console her widower, Freud wrote: "…it was a senseless, brutal stroke of fate that took our Sophie from us . . . we are . . . mere playthings for the higher powers.{8}

A beloved grandson died at age four, leaving Freud depressed and grief stricken. "Fundamentally everything has lost its meaning for me," he admitted shortly before the child died.{9}

Freud's many health problems included a sixteen-year bout with cancer of the jaw. In 1939, as the cancer brought death closer, he wrote, "my world is . . . a small island of pain floating on an ocean of indifference."{10} Eventually a gangrenous hole in his cheek emitted a putrid odor that repulsed his beloved dog but attracted the flies.{11}

Like many, Freud could not reconcile human suffering with a benevolent God. In a 1933 lecture, he asserted:

> *It seems not to be the case that there's a power in the universe which watches over the well-being of individuals with parental care and brings all their affairs to a happy ending. On the contrary, . . . Obscure, unfeeling, unloving powers determine our fate.{12}*

Freud's suffering left him feeling deeply wounded. Could that be one reason he concluded that a benevolent God does not exist? Do you know people whose pain has made them mad at God, or has convinced them He doesn't exist? Intellectual doubt often has biographical roots.

Spiritual Confusion

Hypocritical Christians angered Sigmund Freud. The deaths of his loved ones and his own cancer brought him great distress. His loss and suffering seemed incompatible with the idea of a loving God. So what did he think the main message of the Christian faith was?

In the book, *The Future of An Illusion*, his major diatribe against religion, Freud outlined his understanding of Christianity. He felt it spoke of humans having a "higher purpose"; a higher intelligence ordering life "for the best"; death not as "extinction" but the start of "a new kind of existence"; and a "supreme court of justice" that would reward good and punish evil.{13}

Freud's summary omits something significant: an emphasis on human restoration of relationship to God by receiving His free gift of forgiveness through Jesus' sacrificial death on the cross for human guilt.

Discussions of the biblical message often omit or obscure this important concept. I used to feel I had to earn God's love by my own efforts. Then I learned that from a biblical perspective, no one can achieve the perfection necessary to gain eternal life.{14} Freud's view of Christianity at this

point seemed to be missing grace, Jesus, and the cross.

Two years after he wrote *The Future of An Illusion*, he seemed to have a clearer picture of Christian forgiveness. He wrote that earlier he had "failed to appreciate" the Christian concept of redemption through Christ's sacrificial death in which he took "upon himself a guilt that is common to everyone."{15}

Freud also attacked the intellectual validity of Christian faith.{16} He objected to arguments that one should not question the validity of religion and that we should believe simply because our ancestors did. I don't blame him. Those arguments don't satisfy me either. But he also felt the biblical writings were untrustworthy. He shows no awareness of the wealth of evidence supporting, for example, the reliability of the New Testament documents or Jesus' resurrection.{17} His apparent lack of familiarity with historical evidence and method may have been a function of his era, background, academic pursuits or profession.

Perhaps confusion about spiritual matters colored Freud's view of the faith. Do you know anyone who is confused about Jesus' message or the evidence for its validity?

Freud's Christian Friend

Freud often despised Christianity, but he was quite fond of one Christian. He actually delayed publication of his major criticism of religion for fear of offending this friend. Finally, he warned his friend of its release.{18} Oskar Pfister, the Swiss pastor who had won Freud's heart, responded, "I have always believed that every man should state his honest opinion aloud and plainly. You have always been tolerant towards me, and am I to be intolerant of your atheism?"{19} Freud responded warmly and welcomed Pfister's published critique. Their correspondence is a marvelous example of scholars who differ doing so with grace and

dignity, disagreeing with ideas but preserving their friendship. Their interchange could well inform many of today's political, cultural and religious debates.

Freud's longest correspondence was with Pfister. It lasted 30 years.{20} Freud's daughter and protégé, Anna, left a glimpse into the pastor's character. During her childhood, Pfister seemed "like a visitor from another planet" in the "totally non-religious Freud household." His "human warmth and enthusiasm" contrasted with the impatience of the visiting psychologists who saw the family mealtime as "an unwelcome interruption" in their important discussions. Pfister "enchanted" the Freud children, entering into their lives and becoming "a most welcome guest."{21}

Freud respected Pfister's work. He wrote, "[Y]ou are in the fortunate position of being able to lead . . . [people] to God."{22}

Freud called Pfister "a remarkable man a true servant of God, . . . [who] feels the need to do spiritual good to everyone he meets. You did good in this way even to me."{23}

"Dear Man of God," began Freud after a return home. "A letter from you is one of the best possible things that could be waiting for one on one's return."{24}

Pfister was a positive influence for Christ. But in the end, so far as we know, Freud decided against personal faith.

People reject Christ for many reasons. Hypocritical Christians turn some off. Others feel disillusioned, bitter, or skeptical from personal loss or pain. Some are confused about who Jesus is and how to know Him personally. Understanding these barriers to belief can help skeptics and seekers discern the roots of their dilemmas and prompt them to take a second look. Examples like Pfister's can show that following the Man from Nazareth might be worthwhile after all.

Notes

1. Much of this article is adapted from Russell Sims Wright, *Belief Barriers and Faith Factors: Biographical Roots of Sigmund Freud's Reaction to the Christian Faith and Their Relevance for Christian Ministry*, unpublished M.Th. dissertation, University of Oxford (Westminster College), May 2001.

2. Sigmund Freud, The Interpretation of Dreams, 1900. In James Strachey (Gen. Editor/Translator), *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud,* Volumes IV and V (London: Hogarth, 1953-1966), pp. 196-197. Subsequent references to this Standard Edition are here abbreviated "S.E.", per professional convention.

3. Sigmund Freud; Ernst L. Freud (ed.); Tania and James Stern (translators), *Letters of Sigmund Freud 1873-1939* (London: Hogarth, 1961[1970 reprint]), pp. 92-94.

4. Martin Freud, *Sigmund Freud: Man and Father* (New York: Jason Aronson, 1983), pp. 68-71.

5. Sigmund Freud, Letters 70 (October 3-4, 1897) and 71 (October 15, 1897) to Wilhelm Fliess. In *S.E., Volume I*, pp. 261-265.

6. Sigmund Freud, The Psychopathology of Everyday Life, 1901. In *S.E. Volume VI*, pp. 49-51.

7. Sigmund Freud, Leonardo da Vinci and a memory of his childhood, 1910. In *S.E. Volume II*, pp. 136-137; quoted in Ana-Maria Rizzuto, *Why Did Freud Reject God? A Psychodynamic Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), pp. 241-242. The bracketed word is apparently Rizzuto's.

8. Ernst Freud, Lucie Freud, and Ilse Grubrich-Simitis, eds., *Sigmund Freud: His Life in Pictures and Words* (London: Andre Deutsch, 1978), p. 220.

9. Sigmund Freud, *Letters of Sigmund Freud,* ed. Ernst L. Freud, trans. Tania and James Stern (New York: Dover, 1960 [1992 unaltered reprint of 1960 Basic Books edition]), pp. 343-344.

10. Max Schur, M.D., *Freud: Living and Dying* (New York: International Universities Press, Inc., 1972), p. 524.

11. Ibid., pp. 526-527.

12. Armand Nicholi, Jr., M.D., "When Worldviews Collide: C. S. Lewis and Sigmund Freud: A comparison of their thoughts and viewpoints on life, pain and death," Part One, *The Real Issue* 16:2, January 1998, p. 11.

13. Sigmund Freud, *The Future of An Illusion,* ed. and trans. James Strachey (New York: W.W. Norton, 1961 edition of the 1928 work), pp. 23-24.

14. Ephesians 2:8-9; Romans 1-5.

15. Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents* ed. and trans. James Strachey (New York: W.W. Norton, 1961 edition of the 1930 work), pp. 99-100.

16. Sigmund Freud, *The Future of An Illusion,* p. 33.

17. See, for instance, Josh McDowell, *The New Evidence That Demands A Verdict* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1999).

18. Heinrich Meng and Ernst L. Freud, eds., Eric Mosbacher trans., *Psycho-Analysis and Faith: The Letters of Sigmund Freud and Oskar Pfister* (London: Hogarth Press/Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1963), pp. 109-110.

19. Ibid., p. 110.

20. Nicholi, loc. cit.

21. Meng and E. Freud, op. cit., p. 11.

22. Ibid., p. 16.

23. Ibid., p. 24.

24. Ibid., p. 29.

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