The Self-Understanding of Jesus

Dr. Michael Gleghorn examines some sayings and deeds of Jesus, accepted by many critical scholars as historically authentic, to see what they imply about Jesus' self-understanding.

Jesus and the Scholars

You might be surprised to learn that today many New Testament scholars don't believe that the historical Jesus ever claimed to be the Son of God, the Lord, or even the Messiah.{1} But if that's the case, how do they explain the presence of such claims in the Gospels? They believe the Gospel writers put them there! The actual Jesus of history never made such exalted claims for *himself*. It was the early church that started all that business.



Is this true? What are we to make of all this? Let's begin with a deceptively simple question: How did the early church come to believe in—and even worship—Jesus as both Lord and Messiah, if he never actually claimed such titles for himself? Just think for a moment about how strange this would be. Jesus' earliest followers were Jews. They firmly believed that there is only one God. And yet, shortly after his crucifixion, they began worshiping *Jesus* as God! As Dr. William Lane Craig asks, "How does one explain this worship by monotheistic Jews of one of their countrymen as God incarnate, apart from the claims of Jesus himself?"{2} In other words, if Jesus never made such exalted claims for *himself*, then why would his earliest followers do so? After all, on the surface such claims not only seem blasphemous, they also appear to

contradict the deeply held Jewish conviction that there is only one God.

But there's another issue that needs to be considered. Although many critical scholars don't believe that Jesus ever made such radical personal claims, nevertheless, they *do* believe that he said and did things that seem to imply that he had a very high view of himself. In other words, while they might deny that Jesus ever *explicitly* claimed to be Israel's Messiah, or Lord, they acknowledge that he said and did things which, when you get right down to it, seem to imply that that's precisely who he *believed* himself to be! If this is correct, if Jesus really believed himself to be both Israel's Messiah and Lord, then notice that we are brought back once again to that old dilemma of traditional apologetics.{3} Jesus was either deceived in this belief, suffering from something akin to delusions of grandeur. Or he was a fraud, willfully trying to deceive others. Or he really was who he believed himself to be—Messiah, Lord, and Son of God.

In the remainder of this article, we'll examine some of the sayings and deeds of Jesus that even many critical scholars accept as historically authentic to see what they might tell us about Jesus' self-understanding.

Jesus and the Twelve

Today, even most critical scholars agree that Jesus probably chose a core group of twelve disciples just as the Gospels say he did. In fact, Dr. Bart Ehrman refers to this event as "one of the best-attested traditions of our surviving sources . . ."{4} Now you might be thinking that this sounds like a rather insignificant detail. What can this possibly tell us about the self-understanding of Jesus? Does his choice of twelve disciples give us any insight into what he believed about himself?

Let's begin with a little background information. E. P. Sanders, in his highly acclaimed book, *Jesus and Judaism*, observes that ". . . in the first century Jewish hopes for the future would have included the restoration of the twelve tribes of Israel."{5} Now this hope was based on nothing less than God's prophetic revelation in the Hebrew Bible. Sometimes the primary agent effecting this restoration is said to be the Lord (e.g. Isa. 11:11-12; Mic. 2:12). At other times it's a Messianic figure who is clearly a human being (e.g. Isa. 49:5-6). Interestingly, however, still other passages describe this Messianic figure as having divine attributes, or as being closely associated with the Lord in some way (e.g. cp. Mic. 2:13 with 5:2-4). But why is this important? And what does it have to do with Jesus' choice of twelve disciples?

Many New Testament scholars view Jesus' choice of twelve disciples as symbolic of the promised restoration of the twelve tribes of Israel. The restoration of Israel is thus seen to be one of the goals or objectives of Jesus' ministry. As Richard Horsley observes, "One of the principal indications that Jesus intended the restoration of Israel was his appointment of the Twelve."{6} But if one of Jesus' consciously chosen aims was the restoration of Israel, then what does this imply about who he believed himself to be? After all, the Old Testament prophets attribute this restoration either to the Lord or to a Messianic figure possessing both divine and human attributes.

Might Jesus have viewed himself in such exalted terms? Some scholars believe that he did. Dr. Ben Witherington poses an interesting question: "If the Twelve represent a renewed Israel, where does Jesus fit in?" He's *not* one of the Twelve. "He's not just part of Israel, not merely part of the redeemed group, he's forming the group—just as God in the Old Testament formed his people and set up the twelve tribes of Israel."{7} Witherington argues that this is an important clue in uncovering what Jesus thought of himself. If he's right, then

Jesus may indeed have thought of himself as Israel's Messiah and Lord!

Jesus and the Law

What was Jesus' attitude toward the Law of Moses? Some scholars say that Jesus was a law-abiding Jew who "broke neither with the written Law nor with the traditions of the Pharisees."{8} Others say the issue is more complex. Ben Witherington observes that Jesus related to the Law in a variety of ways.{9} Sometimes he affirmed the validity of particular Mosaic commandments (e.g. Matt. 19:18-19). At other times he went beyond Moses and intensified some of the commandments. In the Sermon on the Mount he declared, "You have heard that it was said, 'Do not commit adultery.' But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart" (Matt. 5:27-28). We shouldn't skip too lightly over a statement like this. The prohibition against adultery is one of the Ten Commandments. By wording the statement as he did, Jesus apparently "equated his own authority with that of the divinely given Torah."{10} Indeed, it's because of sayings like this that one Jewish writer complained: "Israel cannot accept . . . the utterances of a man who speaks in his own name—not 'thus saith the Lord,' but '*I* say unto you.' This 'I' is . . . sufficient to drive Judaism away from the Gentiles forever."{11}

But Jesus went further than this! In Mark 7 he declared all foods "clean" (vv. 14-19). That is, he set aside the dietary laws found in Leviticus and Deuteronomy. To really grasp the radical nature of Jesus' declaration one must only remember that these dietary laws had been given to Israel by God Himself! But what sort of person believes he has the authority to set aside the commandments of God? Ben Witherington notes, "Jesus seems to assume an authority over Torah that no Pharisee or Old Testament prophet assumed—the authority to set

it aside."{12} And Jacob Neusner, a Jewish scholar, seems to agree: "Jews believe in the Torah of Moses . . . and that belief requires faithful Jews to enter a dissent at the teachings of Jesus, on the grounds that those teachings at important points contradict the Torah."{13}

How does this relate to the self-understanding of Jesus? Think about it this way. What would Jesus have to believe about himself to seriously think he had the authority to set aside God's commandments? Although it may trouble some critical scholars, the evidence seems to favor the view that Jesus believed that in some sense he possessed the authority of God Himself!

Jesus and the Demons

One of the amazing feats attributed to Jesus in the Gospels is the power of exorcism, the power to cast out demons from human beings. Although this may sound strange and unscientific to some modern readers, most critical scholars agree that both Jesus and his contemporaries at least *believed* that Jesus had such power. Of course, this doesn't mean that the majority of critical scholars believe that demons *actually* exist, or that Jesus *actually* cast such spirits out of people. Many of them do not. But they do think there is persuasive historical evidence for affirming that both Jesus and his contemporaries *believed* such things.{14} In fact, Dr. Bart Ehrman notes that "Jesus' exorcisms are among the best-attested deeds of the Gospel traditions."{15} But why is this important? And what can it possibly tell us about Jesus' self-understanding?

Most scholars are convinced that the historical Jesus declared, "But if I drive out demons by the Spirit of God, then the kingdom of God has come upon you" (Matt. 12:28). Prior to making this declaration, the Pharisees had accused Jesus of casting out demons "by Beelzebub, the ruler of the demons" (12:24). Jesus responded by pointing out how absurd it

would be for Satan to fight against himself like that (v. 26). What's more, the charge was inconsistent. There were other Jewish exorcists in Jesus' day and it was widely believed that their power came from God. Wouldn't it be more reasonable, then, to conclude that Jesus' power also came from God?

If so, then notice the startling implications of Jesus' claim: "*If I drive out demons by the Spirit of God, then the kingdom of God has come upon you*." At the very least, Jesus appears to be claiming that in himself the kingdom of God is in some sense a present reality. But his claim may actually be even more radical. Some scholars have observed that in ancient Jewish literature the phrase, 'kingdom of God,' is sometimes used as a roundabout way for speaking of God Himself. If Jesus intended this meaning in the statement we are considering, then William Lane Craig's conclusion is fully warranted: "In claiming that in himself the kingdom of God had already arrived, as visibly demonstrated by his exorcisms, Jesus was, in effect, saying that in himself God had drawn near, thus putting himself in God's place."{16}

It increasingly appears that Jesus thought of himself as much more than just another teacher or prophet. Even when we limit ourselves to material accepted as authentic by the majority of critical scholars, Jesus still seems to unquestionably communicate his divinity!

Jesus and the Father

In one of the most astonishing declarations of Jesus in Matthew's Gospel he states, "All things have been handed over to Me by My Father; and no one knows the Son, except the Father; nor does anyone know the Father, except the Son, and anyone to whom the Son wills to reveal Him" (11:27). Many scholars believe that this verse forms a unit with the two preceding verses. It's clear from the context that the "Father" referred to by Jesus is God, for Jesus begins this

section by saying, “I praise Thee, O Father, Lord of heaven and earth” (11:25). So in the verse we are considering, Jesus claims to be God’s Son in an absolutely unique sense. He refers to God as “My Father,” and declares that no one knows the Father, “except the Son, and anyone to whom the Son wills to reveal Him.” Jesus not only claims to be God’s unique Son, he also claims to have special knowledge of the Father that no one else can mediate to others!

Because of the radical nature of these claims, it’s hardly surprising to learn that some critical scholars have denied that Jesus ever really said this. Nevertheless, other scholars have offered some very good reasons for embracing the saying’s authenticity. Dr. William Lane Craig notes that this saying comes from the hypothetical *Q* source, a source that both Matthew and Luke may have used in writing their Gospels. If that’s true, then the saying is quite early and thus has a greater likelihood of actually going back to Jesus. Additionally, “the idea of the mutual knowledge of Father and Son is a Jewish idea, indicating its origin in a Semitic-speaking milieu.”{17} Finally, Dr. Ben Witherington notes that the eminent New Testament scholar Joachim Jeremias showed “how this saying goes back to an Aramaic original” which “surely counts in favor of it going back to Jesus.”{18} Aramaic was probably the language most often used by Jesus and his disciples. After discussing this saying in some detail, Witherington concludes, “In the end, all the traditional bases for judging this saying to be inauthentic no longer will bear close scrutiny.”{19}

In this brief overview of the self-understanding of Jesus, I’ve attempted to show that even when we limit ourselves to Gospel traditions that are generally considered historically authentic by a majority of scholars, Jesus still makes impressive claims to deity. But as Dr. Craig observes, “. . . if Jesus was not who he claimed to be, then he was either a charlatan or a madman, neither of which is plausible.

Therefore, why not accept him as the divine Son of God, just as the earliest Christians did?”{20}

Notes

1. William Lane Craig, *Reasonable Faith: Christian Truth and Apologetics* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1994), 242-43.
2. Ibid., 243.
3. Ibid., 252.
4. Bart D. Ehrman, *Jesus: Apocalyptic Prophet of the New Millennium* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 186.
5. E. P. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 98.
6. Richard A. Horsley, *Jesus and the Spiral of Violence: Popular Jewish Resistance in Roman Palestine* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987), 199.
7. Lee Strobel, *The Case for Christ* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 134.
8. Donald A. Hagner, *The Jewish Reclamation of Jesus: An Analysis and Critique of Modern Jewish Study of Jesus*, ed. Gerard Terpstra (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 109-10. This quotation does not represent Hagner’s own position.
9. Ben Witherington, *The Christology of Jesus* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 65.
10. Craig, 246.
11. Ahad ha’ Am, “Judaism and the Gospels,” in *Nationalism and the Jewish Ethic,* ed. H. Khon (New York: Schocken, 1962), 298, cited in Hagner, 101-02.
12. Witherington, 65.
13. Jacob Neusner, *A Rabbi Talks with Jesus* (New York: Doubleday,
1993), xii, cited in Craig, 247.
14. Ehrman, 197.
15. Ibid.
16. Craig, 249.
17. Ibid., 246.
18. Witherington, 224.

19. Ibid., 225.
20. Craig, 252.

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The Historical Jesus Matters

Tom Davis provides several lines of evidence that Jesus was a real, physical person of history.

Introduction

Does the historical Jesus matter?

Can Christians get by with purely theological Jesus? Some early Christians asked if faith needed philosophy to function. They used Athens to represent philosophy and Jerusalem to represent faith. In a similar way New Testament scholar Dale Allison asks, "What can the historical Jesus of Athens have to do with the biblical Christ of Jerusalem? Where two or three historians are gathered together, can the biblical Christ be in their midst?"{1} Allison thinks that by using historical methodology we cannot connect the historical Jesus to the Biblical Jesus. Faith and historical knowledge cannot be completely reconciled. Is this the case?

While there are many biblical scholars that agree with Allison's view, there are other scholars that believe that the historical Jesus and the biblical Jesus must be the same Jesus in order for Christianity to be true. N. T Wright states, "The Bible, after all, purports to offer not just 'spiritual' or 'theological' teachings but to describe events within the 'natural' world, not least the public career of Jesus of Nazareth, a first-century Jew who lived and died within the

‘natural’ course of world history.”{2} New Testament scholar Ben Witherington also calls out Allison’s way of thinking:

> “The problem with this bifurcation is that despite numerous attempts in this century to turn Christianity into a philosophy of life, it is and has always been a historical religion—one that depends on certain foundational events, particularly the death and resurrection of Jesus, as having happened in space and time. A faith that does not ground the Christ of personal experience in the Jesus of history is a form of docetic heresy, for it implies that what actually happened in and during Jesus’ life is inconsequential to Christian faith.”{3}

Wright and Witherington think that a methodology that does not allow for the possibility of miracles is flawed. The Old Testament and the New Testament claim that certain events happened. Either these events happened in the real world, or they did not. If these events happened in the real world, then we can know about them using the same methods that historians use to investigate any other historical event. Dale Allison cannot have it both ways.

Craig Blomberg argues:

> “An understanding of any religion depends heavily on the historical circumstances surrounding its birth. This is particularly true of Judaism and Christianity because of the uniquely historical nature of these religions. Centered on Scriptures that tell the sacred stories of God’s involvement in space and time with communities called to be his people, the Judeo-Christian claims rise or fall with the truthfulness of those stories. For Christianity, the central story is about the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus—the story that forms the topic of the four New Testament Gospels.”{4}

Blomberg proposes that all religions should have to deal with

historical scrutiny. Among the world's religions only Islam, Judaism and Christianity claim to be built on a foundation on historical events. This historical foundation makes historical Jesus studies useful for apologetics and theology.{5} The usefulness of this field of study is important for Christian discipleship. N. T. Wright states, "I see the historical task, rather, as part of the appropriate activity of knowledge and love, to get to know even better the one whom we claim to know and follow."{6} Christians are representatives and disciples of Jesus. This means we should know who Jesus is and what He did. Studying the life of Jesus is a part of necessary discipleship.

In this article I argue that we have evidence outside the Bible that shows that Jesus existed. Then I argue that the Gospels are ancient biographies, and therefore count as historical evidence for examining the life and teachings of Jesus. Next, I demonstrate that the narratives of the virgin birth of Jesus in Matthew and Luke do not contradict each other. After that I show that the central theme of the teachings and actions of Jesus show that the kingdom of God was coming through his ministry. Finally, I provide evidence that Jesus rose physically from the dead.

Evidence Outside the Bible

One of the complaints that Christianity's critics have is that Jesus is not mentioned much outside the Bible. These critics claim that if Jesus were as prominent as the Gospels portray Him to be, there would be more evidence to corroborate the claims of the Gospels. Luke Timothy Johnson explains the issue:

> "There are a handful of authentic but very brief references to John the Baptist, Jesus, and James in the writings of the Jewish historian Josephus: but from the great ocean of Jewish literature, there are otherwise fragmentary, coded, and oblique references to Jesus and his followers. From the

> Greco-Roman side we have the cryptic and not completely comprehending observations of the Roman historians Suetonius and Tacitus: the precious firsthand observation reportedto the emperor Trajan by his governor in Bithynia, Pliny the Younger: and possible allusions by the philosopher Epictetus."{7}

For some people, this simply is not enough evidence to believe that Jesus existed. We will examine four sources outside the Bible: Josephus, Suetonius, Tacitus, and Pliny the Younger.

Josephus

Josephus is the most important historical source for Jesus outside the New Testament. He was a Jewish officer that fought in the war against Rome from A.D. 66-70. After surrendering to the Romans, he wrote several important histories. In his "Jewish Antiquities" he mentions Jesus:

> "At this time there was a wise man who was called Jesus, if indeed one should call him a man. For he was a doer of startling deeds, a teacher of people who received the truth with pleasure. And he gained a following both among the Jews and among many of Greek origin. He was the messiah. And when Pilate, because of an accusation made by the leading men among us, condemned him to the cross, those who had loved him previously did not cease to do so. For he appeared to them on the third day, living again, just as the divine prophets had spoken of these and countless other wonderful things about him. And up until this very day the tribe of Christians, named after him, has not died out."{8}

Most scholars think that this passage was changed by early Christians to add credibility to their claim that Jesus was the Messiah. Several scholars tried to reconstruct the original passage by removing the most flattering sections out of this passage.{9} In 1972 Professor Schlomo Pines released a

study of a manuscript written in Arabic. The Arabic manuscript was similar to the reconstructed passage that previous scholars had come to.{10} The original wording is as follows:

> At this time there was a wise man who was called Jesus. His conduct was good and (he) was known to be virtuous. And many people from among the Jews and the other nations became his disciples. Pilate, because of an accusation made by the leading men among us, condemned him to be crucified and to die. But those who had become his disciples did not abandon his discipleship. They reported that he had appeared to them three days after his crucifixion, and that he was alive.

Most scholars agree that the reconstruction of the text and the corresponding text from the Arabic manuscript show that this is an authentic reference to Jesus by Josephus.{11} Josephus was aware that Jesus had a reputation to be a moral person, and that he had Jewish and Gentile followers. He knows that some Jewish leaders brought Jesus to Pilate, and the result was that Pilate executed Jesus by crucifixion. Josephus also tells us the Jesus' disciples claimed that they saw Jesus alive three days after his crucifixion.

Suetonius

Suetonius was a Roman historian who wrote about the lives of the Caesars and other important men of the first century. Writing early in the second century, he makes one mention of Christus. The context is that during the reign of Claudius the Jews were causing a public disturbance over Christ. This fits with known tensions between Jews and Christians at the time. Most historians are convinced that Christus is a variant spelling or misspelling of Christ. Suetonius writes, "As the Jews were making constant disturbance at the instigation of Christus, he expelled them from Rome."{12} Suetonius also tells us about Nero persecuting Christians after a fire burned much of Rome. "Punishment was meted out to the Christians, a group of individuals given over

to a new and harmful set of superstitions."{13} While this does not tell us much, it does tell us that Christians in Rome were worshiping Jesus, and that the people of Rome noticed that they had different religious practices concerning Christ.{14}

Tacitus

Tacitus was a Roman historian who lived from A.D. 55-120. He mentions Christ in his *Annals*, which covers
Roman history from the death of Augustus to the death of Nero (A.D. 14-68). Below is his mention of Christ Christus):

> "Nero fastened the guilt and inflicted the most exquisite tortures on a class hated for their abominations, called Christians by the populace. Christus, from whom the name had its origin, suffered the extreme penalty during the reign of Tiberius at the hands of one of our procurators, Pontius Pilatus, and a most mischievous superstition broke out."{15}

While Tacitus does not give us much information to work with, there are a few observations that we can make. First, Jesus was crucified by Pontius Pilate. Second, Second, Jesus' followers were called Christians by the people. Third, the Christian movement spread to Rome quickly.{16}

Pliny the Younger

Pliny the Younger was the governor of Bithynia in Asia Minor. As governor he interrogated Christians that lived in
the area. He wrote a letter to Trajan, the Emperor at the time, to get advice on how to handle the Christians in his province. The relevant part of the letter follows:

> "They affirmed, however, that the whole of their guilt, or their error, was that they were in the habit of meeting on a certain fixed day before it was light, when they sang in alternate verse a hymn to Christ as to a god, and bound themselves to a solemn oath, not to any wicked deeds, but

> never to commit any fraud, theft, adultery, never to falsify their word, not to deny a trust when they should be called upon to deliver it up; after which it was their custom to separate, and then reassemble to partake of food—but food of an ordinary and innocent kind."{17}

From this letter we find that Christians in Bithynia held themselves to a certain moral code, sang hymns to Christ as if he was a God, and gathered to partake of food. It does not tell us much, but it does tell us that Christians early on worshiped Jesus as God.{18}

What conclusions can be reached from these sources? First, Jesus was crucified under Pontius Pilate. Second, Some of Jesus' disciples claimed to see Jesus alive after his crucifixion. Finally, the followers of Jesus worshiped him as if he were a god.{19}

The Gospels

The gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John are the primary sources for the life of Jesus. Many New Testament scholars claim that these Gospels were written anonymously, but there is good reason to think that the traditional authors wrote these gospels. Nonetheless, skeptical scholars do not trust the Gospels as reliable sources.

Skeptical scholars argue that the traditional authors could not have written these Gospels because they were wrong about geographical details, and that they were illiterate. Concerning the geographical details, while there are several good scholarly responses addressing the asserted errors, this simply does not lead to the conclusion that the Gospels were not authored by Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. The worst-case scenario only shows that they made an error in describing the geography. (I don't think they made an error, I simply do not have to show that they didn't make an error to show who the authors were.)

Matthew was a tax collector, so he would have known how to write, probably in both Aramaic and Greek. Mark was from a wealthy family and easily could have learned to write in Greek. Luke was an educated Gentile that would have been able to write in Greek. Even if John couldn't read or write, he could have had a literate Christian record what John dictated to him as a scribe.

In claiming that we do not know who the authors of the Gospels were, the skeptics also ignore the traditions and the manuscript evidence. The earliest attestation of authorship for the Gospels is a Christian named Papias, a student of John. Papias claims that John wrote a gospel. He tells us that Mark wrote a gospel based on Peter's teachings. He also tells us that Matthew wrote a sayings gospel in Hebrew. From Papias we can conclude that John and Mark wrote gospels, and that Matthew wrote a sayings gospel that we do not have.{20}

The next person of importance is Irenaeus, a student of Polycarp, who was a student of John. Irenaeus tells us that the gospels were written by Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. The most reasonable explanation as to how Irenaeus came across this information is that it is what Polycarp taught him.{21} There are two early sources that the gospels were written by the traditional authors. This means that the tradition is early, and no one challenged it until the Enlightenment.

Most scholars believe that Mark was the first gospels to be written. The majority of scholars think Mark wrote his gospel around A.D. 70, although it could have been earlier. Most scholars believe that John was the last gospel to be written, around A.D. 90. Jesus' death occurred in either A.D. 30 or 33. This means that these gospels were written within living memory of the earthly life of Jesus. The gospels being written within living memory of Jesus means that people who were eyewitnesses to the events were alive and could have provided corrections if they thought that the gospels were in error.

This combined with the unanimous traditions and manuscript evidence of who the authors were gives us good reason to say that the information in these gospels is reliable, and that they are good historical sources for examining the life of Jesus.{22}

The Virgin Birth

In studying the life of Jesus, the first event we come to is his birth. This is a fantastic claim, and it is understandable why people would be skeptical of a claim like this. The question is, where does the evidence lead?

The narratives of the virgin birth are found in Matthew chapter 1 and Luke chapters 1 and 2. When examining these narratives, skeptical scholars like Bart Ehrman point out perceived contradictions in Matthew and Luke.{23} They see that in Matthew, Joseph and Mary live in Bethlehem; in Luke they lived in Nazareth and moved to Bethlehem. In Matthew the angel appears to Joseph, but in Luke the angel appears to Mary. In Matthew the baby Jesus is visited by magi, in Luke Jesus is visited by shepherds. In Luke Jesus is presented in the temple, in Matthew he is not. In Matthew Joseph takes Mary and Jesus to Egypt to protect them from Herod, in Luke they move to Bethlehem. They conclude that these differences mean that both stories are made up. Is that the right conclusion?

When examined closely the perceived contradictions disappear and the narratives fit together like a puzzle to form one consistent narrative. The following narrative solves all the issues listed above.

Zechariah was burning incense in the temple when an angel appeared and told him that his wife Elizabeth would become pregnant. An angel visits Mary in Nazareth and tells her that she will become pregnant with Jesus. When Elizabeth was six months along, Mary came to visit her. When Mary returns to Nazareth, Joseph sees that she is pregnant and was going to

divorce her. An angel appears to Joseph and tells him that Mary's pregnancy is from God and he is to care for Mary and the Child. Due to a Roman census Joseph and Mary travel to Bethlehem. When Jesus was born angels appeared to shepherds and told them that the Messiah was born and that they could find him in Bethlehem. The shepherds go to Bethlehem and visit Jesus. Joseph and Mary take Jesus to be presented at the temple according to Jewish law. The magi from the east come to visit Jesus. After the magi leave, Joseph is told by an angel to take Mary and Jesus to Egypt because Herod wants to kill Jesus. After living in Egypt, an angel appears to Joseph and tells him to move back to Israel.

This shows that while the narratives in Matthew and Luke are different, they do not contradict each other. This also shows that the birth narratives in Matthew and Luke are not borrowing from each other. These two sources are independent historical sources.

Jesus Proclaimed the Kingdom

The central theme of the preaching of Jesus is the coming of the kingdom of God, also called the kingdom of heaven. These two phrases appear eighty-three times in the gospels. The kingdom was the central message of Jesus' preaching.

In Luke, when the angel visitedMary, the angel told her that Jesus would ". . . be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end."{24} Mark states that Jesus first preached, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe the gospel."{25} John records a conversation Jesus and Nicodemus, a Pharisee, who wanted to learn about what Jesus was doing. Jesus' first statement to Nicodemus was, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God."{26} Matthew described the beginning of

Jesus ministry: “And he went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom and healing every disease and every affliction among the people.”{27} These quotes, and all the teachings of Jesus, show that proclaiming the kingdom of God was the central theme of His preaching.{28}

Jesus also demonstrated that He was bringing the kingdom of God with his ministry by casting out demons. After one particular instance of casting out a demon the Pharisees said, “It is only by Beelzebul, the prince of demons, that this man casts out demons.”{29} Jesus’ response was, “But if it is by the Spirit of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you.”{30}

We can see that the instances of Jesus casting out demons is proclaiming the kingdom of God and the end of the reign of the ruler of this age through His actions. Orthodox priest Andrew Stephan Damik describes the meaning of Jesus’ exorcisms: “Therefore, the exorcisms Jesus performed in His time on earth were not a mere sideshow to demonstrate his power or an *ad hoc* fix for people’s bodily ailments. Driving out demons was core to His mission. He had come to claim the world for God’s kingdom, so it makes sense that He would spend time driving out the oppressors and false rulers.”{31}

Through His proclamations of the coming kingdom, and by casting out demons, Jesus demonstrated that God was bringing His kingdom to earth. Jesus, and later his apostles, called people to come to God and join His kingdom. The kingdom of God is God’s kingly rule over His people and His creation.{32} The coming of God’s kingdom means that through Jesus, God has begun the work of setting things right.{33}

The Resurrection of Jesus

The resurrection is the most foundational claim made by the earliest Christians. Jesus is the central person

in the New Testament. The central event in the life of Jesus that confirms all His claims about who He is and what He said about the kingdom is the resurrection. Paul states the importance of the resurrection clearly:

"But if there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised. And if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain. We are even found to be misrepresenting God because we testified about God that he raised Christ, whom he did not raise if it is true that the dead are not raised. For if the dead are not raised, not even Christ has been raised. And if Christ has not been raised your faith is futile and you are still in your sins."{34}

In Paul's view there is no other event in history that is more important than the resurrection. William Lane
Craig, a Christian philosopher, summarizes the importance of the resurrection, "The Christian faith stands or falls on the event of the resurrection. If Jesus did not rise from the dead, then Christianity is a myth, and we may as well forget it."{35} In theology and history, nothing is more important than the resurrection.

What kind of evidence could we have for such an event? Our evidence is the New Testament documents. These sources were written by real people in real time and places. We have already seen that the Gospels are ancient biographies of Jesus that are reliable historical sources. Paul's letter 1 Corinthians is also an important source of information about the resurrection of Jesus.

How does the evidence for Jesus' life compare with the evidence we have for other significant historical figures? Alexander the Great died in 323 B.C. The first existing biography we have of Alexander was written by Diodorus of Sicily sometime in the first century B.C. This means there is roughly a 200-year gap between the death of Alexander and the

first existing historical literature about his life. While some historians may be skeptical about accuracy on some points of the life of Alexander, no historian says that we cannot learn about Alexander from Diodorus. Muhammad died in A.D. 632. Ibn Shaq wrote the earliest biography of Muhammad 150 years after Muhammad died. What we have of that biography is found in the work of Ibn Hisham. No one doubts that we can learn about the life of Muhammad from these writings. When it comes to Jesus, we have four biographies written about him within 70 years of his death. That means that all four biographies were written while people who were alive when Jesus was crucified were still living. As I argued earlier, two of these biographies were written by people who knew Jesus. This implies that the Gospels are good sources to take seriously.

What can we learn from the Gospels? First, Jesus died by crucifixion. All the Gospels have a crucifixion narrative in them.{36} While the Gospels give different minor details, they agree that Jesus was prosecuted by the Sanhedrin in an unjust trial. The Gospels also show that Jesus died of crucifixion under the rule of Pilate. This is supported by evidence from the works of Josephus and Tacitus that were discussed earlier. New Testament Scholar Michael Licona writes, "We have looked carefully at the data pertaining to Jesus' death by crucifixion and have observed very strong reasons for granting the historicity of this event, and we have observed that it is granted by the overwhelming majority of scholars."{37} Given the evidence from the Gospels, Josephus, and Tacitus, we can confidently say that Jesus died of crucifixion.

Second, all the Gospels state that Jesus was buried in the tomb of Joseph of Arimathea.{38} Joseph was part of the Sanhedrin, the governing body that just convinced Pilate to execute Jesus. It is unlikely that Jesus' disciples would invent a story where a member of the Sanhedrin would give him an honorable burial after having him executed as a criminal.

Given the early consistent testimony from the Gospels, and that it is unlikely that Jesus' disciples would invent the story, it is reasonable to believe that Joseph took Jesus' body and buried Him in the tomb. All the evidence shows that Jesus was buried in the tomb of Joseph of Arimathea.{39}

Third, the tomb of Jesus was found empty by a group of Jesus' women disciples. Once again, this is found in every Gospel.{40} There are differences in the lists of women who showed up at the grave of Jesus, but there are no contradictions. A variation of details such as who was in the room vary when examining eyewitness testimony. It is unlikely that men would invent a story where they were hiding, and the women were going to Jesus' grave. N. T. Wright wrote, "If they could have invented stories of fine, upstanding reliable male witnesses being first at the tomb, they would have done it. That they did not tells us either that everyone in the early church knew that the women, led by Mary Magdalene, were in fact first on the scene, or that the church was not so inventive as critics have routinely imagined, or both."{41} The evidence shows that it is reasonable that Jesus' grave was found empty by a group of His women disciples.

Fourth, Jesus appeared to multiple people in multiple settings. Mark does not record a post-resurrection appearance of Jesus. The earliest manuscripts of Mark end at verse 16:8, He records the appearance of an angel to the women who found the tomb empty. Matthew, Luke, and John record Jesus appearing to the women, then several appearances to several people in different settings and even to groups of people. While harmonizing these appearances is difficult, there is enough evidence here to conclude that the apostles believed that they saw the risen Jesus.

While the Gospels are early evidence of the death and resurrection of Jesus, there is earlier evidence. This evidence is a creed found in one of Paul's letters, 1 Corinthians 15:3-8:

> "For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised in accordance with the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me."

This creed was designed to be memorized easily and is not Paul's normal style of writing. The differences and the creedal pattern indicate that this was not originally composed by Paul. So where did Paul get it?

In his letter to the Galatians Paul provides a clue to where he got this creed. In chapters 1 and 2 Paul gives his "resume" to the church at Galatia. Paul says that after his conversion he went to Arabia, then returned to Damascus. Three years later he visited Peter and James for 15 days. 14 years later Paul met with Peter, James and
John. Both times Paul says that they approved of his ministry.{42} Most scholars are convinced that Paul got this creed from Peter and James. N. T. Wright states, "It was probably formulated within the first two or three years after Easter itself, since it was already in formulaic form when Paul 'received' it. We are here in touch with the earliest Christian tradition, with something that was being said two decades or more before Paul wrote this letter."{43}

What information does this creed give us? It tells us that Christ died, that he was buried, that Jesus was raised, and that Jesus appeared to multiple people. This evidence is consistent with the evidence from the Gospels. All the evidence indicates that Jesus rose physically from the dead. William Lane Craig's conclusion is, "Each of these three great facts—the empty tomb, the appearances, the origin of the Christian faith—is independently established. Together they

point with unwavering conviction to the same unavoidable and marvelous conclusion: Jesus actually rose from the dead."{44} There are good reasons to believe that Jesus rose from the dead. If Jesus did rise from the dead, his claims about the kingdom of God/Heaven are true.

Conclusion

Skeptics often say that there is no evidence that Christianity is true. They say that faith is blind, and that Christians only believe because they were raised by Christians. It is true that many Christians were raised by Christians, but this does not show that Christianity has no evidence to support its claims. These critics say that the Bible, in this case the Gospels, are not allowed as evidence because they are religious books. The academic discipline of natural theology generally excludes the examination as well. They say if we allow the Bible to be examined this way then we have to allow all religious books to be examined this way. I welcome the challenge. N. T. Wright responds to the exclusion of the Bible in natural theology, "But Jesus was a figure of the real world. The Gospels are real documents from the real world. To refuse to treat them as 'natural' evidence because the Christian tradition has seen them as 'revelation,' and to dismiss Jesus similarly because the Christian tradition has confessed him to be God incarnate, looks like the skeptic bribing the judges before the trial."{45} The best and most important evidence for the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus is the Gospels. If my arguments are true, then Jesus is who He claimed to be, the Messiah, the world's sovereign King. Studying Jesus is not useful only for apologetics, it is a necessary part of Christian discipleship. When we know what the Gospels teach about Jesus, then we will be better followers of Jesus, we will love Him more, and we will be better at representing Him to those around us.

Notes

1. Allison Jr., Dale, *The Historical Christ and the Theological Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 2009) 8.
2. Wright, N. T. *History and Eschatology: Jesus and the Promise of Natural Theology* (Waco: Baylor Univrsity Press, 2019) xi-xii.
3. Witherington III, Ben. *The Jesus Quest; The Third Search for the Jew of Nazareth* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1995) 10-11.
4. Blomberg, Craig. *Jesus and the Gospels* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishing, 1997) 5.
5. Craig S. Keener. *The IVP New Testament Commentary Series: Matthew* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1997) 19. "The historical questions are important for apologetics, for defending the faith in a society that doubts Jesus' claims: the literary questions are important for preaching, because we want to communicate the same inspired message we find in the text."
6. Wright, N. T. *The Challenge of Jesus: Rediscovering Who Jesus Was and Is* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1999) 14.
7. Johnson, Luke Timothy. *The Real Jesus: The Misguided Quest for the Historical Jesus and the Truth of the Traditional Gospels* (San Francisco: HarperCollins Publishers) 87.
8. Josephus, Antiquities 18.3.3
9. Ehrman, Bart. *Did Jesus Exist? The Historical Argument for Jesus of Nazareth* (New York: HarperCollins, 2012) 60-61.
10.Habermas, Gary R. *The Historical Jesus: Ancient Evidence for the Life of Christ* (Joplin: College Press, 1996) 193-194.
11. Bock, Darrell L. *Studying the Historical Jesus: A Guide to Sources and Methods* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002) 55-58.
12. Claudius 25.4
13. Nero 16
14. Habermas, 190-191. Edwin Yamauchi, "Jesus Outside the New Testament: What is the Evidence," in *Jesus Under Fire: Modern Scholarship Reinvents the Historical Jesus*, ed. Michael J. Wilkins, J. P. Moreland (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995) 215-216; Bock, 47-49; Ehrman, 53-54.

15. Tacitus, Annals 15.44
16. Williams, Peter J. *Can We Trust the Gospels?* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2018) 23. “We may therefore conclude from Tacitus that Christianity spread far and fast and that being a Christian could be very difficult.” Yamauchi, ” 216. “Note that Tacitus, who despised Christians even more than he despised Jews, knew that they were called after Christ, who had been crucified (“suffered the extreme Penalty”) and Pontius Pilate in the reign of Tiberius.”
17. Pliny, Epistles 10.96-97.
18. Ehrman, 199-200.
19. Yamauchi, 217. “That Christ was crucified under Pilate under the reign of Tiberius, that despite his ignominious death his followers worshiped him as a god…”
20. Craig Keener, *Christobiography: Memory, History, and the Reliability of the Gospels* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 2019), 405-407.
21. Bock, 164-167.
22. Bock, 14-22.
23. Ehrman, Bart. *Jesus: Apocalyptic Prophet of the New Millennium* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999) 36-39.
24. Matthew 1:32-33
25. Mark 1:14
26. John 3:3
27. Matthew 4:23
28. Edersheim, Alfred. *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah Vol. 1* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1969) 270. “In fact, an analysis of 119 passages in the New Testament where the expression ‘Kingdom’ occurs, shows that it means the rule of God; which is manifested in and through Christ; is apparent in the Church: gradually develops amidst hindrance; is triumphant in the second coming of Christ, (the end); and, finally, perfected in the world to come.” Ratzinger, Joseph (Pope Benedict XVI). *Jesus of Nazareth: From the Baptism in the Jordan to the Transfiguration* (New York: Doubleday, 2007) Translated by Adrian J. Walker, 62. “The ‘Kingdom of God’ is a theme that runs through the whole of Jesus preaching.”

29. Matthew 12:24
30. Matthew 12:28
31. Damek, Andrew Stephan. *Arise O God: The Gospel of Christ's Defeat of Demons, Sin, and Death* (Chesterton: Ancient Faith Publishing, 2021) 91.
32. Morris, Leon, *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries: The Gospel According to St. Luke* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1974) 73. "Jesus is thus brought into relation with this kingdom of God, a kingdom that is not to be understood as a temporal kingdom, an earthly realm; rather it is God's kingly rule, as Jesus would in due time make clear."
33. Witherington, 72. "Jesus, as part of his program of reform, confronts supernatural evil, nature gone haywire and human nature that is sick. This means that his mission is about more than just the salvation of individuals, for the coming of the kingdom means a world set right, in the fuller sense of the term world."
34. 1 Corinthians 15:13-17
35. Craig, William Lane, *The Son Rises: The Historical Evidence for the Resurrection of Jesus* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 1981), 7.
36. Matthew 27:32-56; Mark 15:21-41; Luke 23:26-49; John 19:16-37
37. Licona, Michael. *The Resurrection of Jesus: A New Historiographical Approach* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2010) 318.
38. Matthew 27:57-61; Mark 15:24-42; Luke 50-56; John 19:38-42
39. Craig, 53-57.
40. Matthew 28:1-10; Mark 16:1-8; Luke 24:1-12; John 20:1:10-18
41. Wright, N. T. *Christians Origins and the Question of God: The Resurrection of the Son of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 608.
42. Galatians 1:11-2:9
43. Wright, N. T. *Christians Origins and the Question of God*, 319.
44. Craig, 134.

45. Wright, *History and Eschatology*, 74.

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Reasonable Faith – Why Biblical Christianity Rings True

Dr. Michael Gleghorn briefly examines some of the reasons why noted Christian philosopher William Lane Craig believes that Christianity is an eminently reasonable faith.

Reasonable Faith

One of the finest Christian philosophers of our day is William Lane Craig. Although he has become very well known for his debates with atheists and skeptics, he's also a prolific writer. To date, he has authored or edited over thirty books and more than a hundred scholarly articles.{1} His published work explores such fascinating topics as the evidence for the existence of God, the historical evidence for the resurrection of Jesus, divine foreknowledge and human freedom, and God's relationship to time. In 2007 he started a web-based apologetics ministry called Reasonable Faith (www.reasonablefaith.org). The site features both scholarly and popular articles written by Craig, audio and video recordings of some of his debates, lectures, and interviews, answers to questions from his readers, and much more.



But before he launched the Reasonable Faith Web site, Craig had also authored a book by the same title. One of the best apologetics books on the market, a revised and updated third edition was recently released. His friend and colleague, the philosopher J. P. Moreland, endorsed Craig's ministry with these words:

> It is hard to overstate the impact that William Lane Craig has had for the cause of Christ. He is simply the finest Christian apologist of the last half century, and his academic work justifies ranking him among the top one percent of practicing philosophers in the Western world. Besides that, he is a winsome ambassador for Christ, an exceptional debater, and a man with the heart of an evangelist. . . . I do not know of a single thinker who has done more to raise the bar of Christian scholarship in our generation than Craig. He is one of a kind, and I thank God for his life and work.{2}

Although the book has been described as "an admirable defense of basic Christian faith,"{3} many readers will find the content quite advanced. According to Craig, "*Reasonable Faith* is intended primarily to serve as a textbook for seminary level courses on Christian apologetics."{4} For those without much prior training in philosophy, theology, and apologetics, this book will make for some very demanding reading in places. But for those who want to seriously grapple with an informed and compelling case for the truth of Christianity, this book will richly repay one's careful and patient study.

Although we cannot possibly do it justice, in the remainder of this article we will briefly consider at least some of the reasons why Craig believes that biblical Christianity is an eminently reasonable faith.

The Absurdity of Life Without God

Imagine for a moment that there is no God. What implications would this have for human life? Science tells us that the universe is not eternal, but that it rather had a beginning. But if there is no God, then the universe must have come into being, uncaused, out of nothing! What's more, the origin of life is nothing more than an unintended by-product of matter, plus time, plus chance.{5} No one planned or purposed for life to arise, for if there is no God, there was no one to plan or purpose it. And human beings? We are just the unpredictable result of a long evolutionary process that never had us in mind. In fact, if one were to rewind the history of life to its beginning, and allow the evolutionary process to start anew, it's virtually certain that none of us would be here to think about it! After all, without an intelligent Agent guiding this long and complicated process, the chances that our species would accidentally emerge a second time is practically zero.{6}

Depressing as it is, this little thought experiment provides the appropriate backdrop for Craig's discussion of the absurdity of life without God. In his view, if God does not exist, then human life is ultimately without meaning, value, or purpose. After all, if human beings are merely the accidental by-products of the unintended forces of nature, then what possible meaning *could* human life have? If there is no God, then we were not created for a *purpose*; we were merely "coughed" into existence by mindless material processes.

Of course, some might wonder why we couldn't just create some meaning for our lives, or give the universe a meaning of our own. But as Craig observes, "the universe does not really acquire meaning just because *I* happen to give it one . . . . for suppose I give the universe one meaning, and you give it another. Who is right? The answer, of course, is neither one. For the universe without God remains objectively meaningless,

no matter how *we* regard it."{7}

Like it or not, if God does not exist, then the universe and our very lives are ultimately meaningless and absurd. The difficulty is, however, that no one can really live consistently and happily with such a view.{8} Although merely recognizing this fact does absolutely nothing to show that God actually exists, it should at least motivate us to sincerely investigate the matter with an open heart and an open mind. So let's now briefly consider some of the *reasons* for believing that there really is a God.

The Existence of God

In the latest edition of *Reasonable Faith*, Craig offers a number of persuasive arguments for believing that God does, in fact, exist. Unfortunately, we can only skim the surface of these arguments here. But if you want to go deeper, his book is a great place to start.

After a brief historical survey of some of the major kinds of arguments that scholars have offered for believing that God exists, Craig offers his own defense for each of them. He begins with a defense of what is often called the *cosmological* argument. This argument takes its name from the Greek word *kosmos*, which means "world." It essentially argues from the existence of the cosmos, or world, to the existence of a First Cause or Sufficient Reason for the world's existence.{9} Next he defends a *teleological*, or design, argument. The name for this argument comes from the Greek word *telos*, which means "end." According to Craig, this argument attempts to infer "an intelligent designer of the universe, just as we infer an intelligent designer for any product in which we discern evidence of purposeful adaptation of means to some end (*telos*)."{10} After the design argument, he offers a defense of the *moral* argument. This argument "implies the existence of a Being that is the embodiment of the ultimate Good," as well

as “the source of the objective moral values we experience in the world.”{11} Finally, he defends what is known as the *ontological* argument. Ontology is the study of being, and this much-debated argument “attempts to prove from the very concept of God that God exists.”{12}

Taken together, these arguments provide a powerful case for the existence of God. As Craig presents them, the cosmological argument implies the existence of an eternal, immaterial, unimaginably powerful, personal Creator of the universe. The design argument reveals an intelligent designer of the cosmos. The moral argument reveals a Being who is the transcendent source and standard of moral goodness. And the ontological argument shows that if God’s existence is even possible, then He must exist!

But suppose we grant that all of these arguments are sound. Why think that *Christianity* is true? Many *non-Christian* religions believe in God. Why think that Christianity is the one that got it right? In order to answer this question we must now confront the central figure of Christianity: Jesus of Nazareth.

The Son of Man

When the previous edition of *Reasonable Faith* was published in 1994, most New Testament scholars thought that Jesus had never really claimed to be the Messiah, or Lord, or Son of God. But a lot has happened in the intervening fourteen years, and “the balance of scholarly opinion on Jesus’ use of Christological titles may have actually tipped in the opposite direction.”{13}

For example, we have excellent grounds for believing that Jesus often referred to himself as “the Son of Man.”{14} Although some believe that in using this title Jesus was merely referring to himself as a human being, the evidence

suggests that he actually meant much more than that. Note, for example, that "Jesus did not refer to himself as 'a son of man,' but as '*the* Son of Man.'"{15} His use of the definite article is a crucially important observation, especially in light of Daniel 7:13-14.

In this passage Daniel describes a vision in which "one like a son of man" comes before God with the clouds of heaven. God gives this person an everlasting kingdom and we are told that "all peoples, nations and men of every language worshiped him" (Dan. 7:14). It's clear that Daniel's "son of man" is much more than a human being, for he's viewed as an appropriate object of worship. Since no one is worthy of worship but God alone (see Luke 4:8), the "son of man" must actually be divine, as well as human.

According to Mark, at Jesus' trial the high priest pointedly asked him if he was the Christ (or Messiah), "the Son of the Blessed One." Jesus' response is astonishing. "I am," he said, "And you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven" (Mark 14:61-62). Here Jesus not only affirms that he is the Messiah and Son of God, he also explicitly identifies himself with the coming Son of Man prophesied by Daniel.{16} Since we have excellent reasons for believing that Jesus actually made this radical claim at his trial, we're once again confronted with that old trilemma: if Jesus really claimed to be divine, then he must have been either a lunatic, a liar, or the divine Son of Man!

Now most people would probably agree that Jesus was not a liar or a lunatic, but they might still find it difficult to accept his claim to divinity. They might wonder if we have any good reasons, independent of Jesus' claims, for believing his claims to be true. As a matter of fact we do!

The Resurrection of Jesus

Shortly after Jesus' crucifixion, on the day of Pentecost, the apostle Peter stood before a large crowd of people gathered in Jerusalem and made a truly astonishing claim: God had raised Jesus from the dead, thereby vindicating his radical personal claims to be both Lord and Messiah (see Acts 2:32-36). The reason this claim was so incredible was that the "Jews had no conception of a Messiah who, instead of triumphing over Israel's enemies, would be shamefully executed by them as a criminal."{17} Indeed, according to the Old Testament book of Deuteronomy, "anyone who is hung on a tree is under God's curse" (21:22-23). So how could a man who had been crucified as a criminal possibly be the promised Messiah? If we reject the explanation of the New Testament, that God raised Jesus from the dead, it's very difficult to see how early Christianity could have ever gotten started. So are there good reasons to believe that Jesus really *was* raised from the dead?

According to Craig, the case for Jesus' resurrection rests "upon the evidence for three great, independently established facts: the empty tomb, the resurrection appearances, and the origin of the Christian faith."{18} He marshals an extensive array of arguments and evidence in support of each fact, as well as critiquing the various naturalistic theories which have been proposed to avoid the resurrection. He concludes by noting that since God exists, miracles are possible. And once one acknowledges this, "it's hard to deny that the resurrection of Jesus is the best explanation of the facts."{19}

This brings us to the significance of this event. According to the German theologian Wolfhart Pannenberg:

> The resurrection of Jesus acquires such decisive meaning, not merely because someone
> . . . has been raised from the dead, but because it is Jesus of Nazareth, whose execution was instigated by the Jews

> because he had blasphemed against God. If this man was raised from the dead, then . . . God . . . has committed himself to him. . . . The resurrection can only be understood as the divine vindication of the man whom the Jews had rejected as a blasphemer.{20}

In other words, by raising Jesus from the dead, God has put His seal of approval (as it were) on Jesus' radical personal claims to be the Messiah, the Son of God, and the divine Son of Man! This forces each of us to answer the same haunting question Jesus once asked his disciples, "Who do you say I am?" (Matt. 16:15).

Notes

1. See "About William Lane Craig" at www.reasonablefaith.org/william-lane-craig/, accessed 20 May 2018.
2. J. P. Moreland, cited in William Lane Craig, *Reasonable Faith: Christian Truth and Apologetics*, 3rd ed. (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2008), 1.
3. C. Behan McCullagh, cited in Craig, *Reasonable Faith*, 1.
4. Craig, *Reasonable Faith*, 12.
5. Ibid., 76.
6. In the minds of some people, this is a rather controversial claim. But it's been convincingly defended by naturalist authors like Stephen J. Gould and Michael Shermer. For a brief defense by Shermer, please see the articles on "Glorious Contingency" at www.metanexus.net/Magazine/ArticleDetail/tabid/68/tabid/72/Default.aspx?aid=27, accessed 4 September 2008.
7. Ibid., 79.
8. Ibid., 78.
9. Ibid., 98.
10. Ibid., 99-100.
11. Ibid., 104.
12. Ibid., 95.
13. Ibid., 301.

14. See Craig's discussion on pp. 315-318.
15. Ibid., 315.
16. Ibid., 317.
17. Ibid., 388.
18. Ibid., 360-61.
18. Ibid., 399.
20. Wolfhart Pannenberg, "Jesu Geschichte und unsere Geschichte," in *Glaube und Wirklichkeit* (Munchen: Chr. Kaiser, 1975), 92-94; cited in Craig, *Reasonable Faith*, 399.

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Christ and the Human Condition

Dr. Michael Gleghorn looks at how God has acted in Christ to address those things which ail us most: sin, suffering, death, and our broken relationship with God.



Early in the book of Job, Eliphaz the Temanite declares that "man is born for trouble, as sparks fly upward" (5:7). Whether it's the trouble that befalls us as we're simply minding our own business or the trouble we bring upon others (or even ourselves), difficulties, sin, and suffering seem to plague us wherever we turn. Just think for a moment about some of the natural evils which afflict the human race. This class of evils includes both natural disasters like hurricanes, tsunamis, tornadoes, and earthquakes, and diseases like cancer, leukemia, Alzheimer's and ALS. While natural

evils are bad enough, they are only part of the problem. In addition to these, we must also consider all the moral evils which human beings commit against God, one another, and themselves. This second class of evils includes things like hatred, blasphemy, murder, rape, child abuse, terrorism, and suicide. Taken together, the scope and magnitude of human sin and suffering in the world are truly mind-boggling. What does God have to say about issues such as these? Even better, what (if anything) has He done about them?

The Christian philosopher Alvin Plantinga has written

> As the Christian sees things, God does not stand idly by, cooly observing the suffering of His creatures. He enters into and shares our suffering. He endures the anguish of seeing his son, the second person of the Trinity, consigned to the bitterly cruel and shameful death of the cross. Some theologians claim that God cannot suffer. I believe they are wrong. God's capacity for suffering, I believe, is proportional to his greatness; it exceeds our capacity for suffering in the same measure as his capacity for knowledge exceeds ours. Christ was prepared to endure the agonies of hell itself; and God, the Lord of the universe, was prepared to endure the suffering consequent upon his son's humiliation and death. He was prepared to accept this suffering in order to overcome sin, and death, and the evils that afflict our world, and to confer on us a life more glorious than we can imagine.{1}

According to Plantinga, then, God *has acted*, and acted decisively through His Son, to address those things which ail us most—sin, suffering, death, and our broken relationship with God. In what follows, we will briefly examine each of these ailments. More importantly, however, we will also see how God has acted in Christ to heal our bleak condition, thereby giving us encouragement, strength and hope, both now and forevermore.

Moral Evil

When Adam and Eve first sinned in the garden (Gen. 3:6), they could hardly have imagined all the tragic consequences that would follow this single act of disobedience. Through this act, sin and death entered the world and the human condition was radically altered (Rom. 5:12-19). Human nature had become defiled with sin and this sinful nature was bequeathed to all mankind. The human race was now morally corrupt, alienated from God and one another, subject to physical death, and under the wrath of God. The entire creation, originally pronounced "very good" by God (Gen. 1:31), was negatively affected by this first act of rebellion. Like the ripples that radiate outward when a stone is thrown into a calm body of water, the consequences of that first sin have rippled through history, bringing evil, pain, and suffering in their wake. As the Christian philosopher William Lane Craig has noted, "The terrible human evils in the world are testimony to man's depravity in his state of spiritual alienation from God."{2} Indeed, we are so hopelessly entangled in this web of sin and disobedience that we cannot possibly extricate ourselves. This, according to the Bible, is the sorry plight in which all men naturally find themselves.

Fortunately for us, however, God has acted to free us from our enslavement to sin, to disentangle us from the web that holds us captive, and to reconcile us to Himself. He did this by sending His Son to so thoroughly identify with us in our painful predicament that He actually *became* one of us. By identifying Himself with sinners who were under the wrath of God, He was able to take our sins upon Himself and endure God's wrath in our place, so that we might be reconciled to God by placing our trust in Him. The apostle Paul put it this way: God made Christ "who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him" (2 Cor. 5:21).

In the Old Testament book of Deuteronomy, we're told that anyone hanged on a tree because of their sins is "accursed of God" (21:23). In the New Testament, Paul picks up on this idea and says that through His substitutionary death on the cross, Christ became "a curse for us" (Gal. 3:13). We should not lose sight of the significance of these words. By identifying Himself with the guilty human race, and becoming a curse for us, He has opened the way for us to be freed from our sins and reconciled to God as *we* are identified with *Him* through faith. This is just one of the ways in which Christ has met the desperate needs of the human condition.

Natural Evil

Another reason why we suffer arises from what philosophers and theologians call *natural evil*. Natural evil refers to all the causes of human pain and suffering which are not brought about by morally-responsible agents. This would include the pain and suffering arising from natural disasters like earthquakes, famines, and storms, as well as diseases like cancer and ALS.

Now the question I want to pose is this: Is there a sense in which Christ is also a solution to the problem of natural evil? And if so, then how should we understand this? When we examine the life and ministry of Jesus as it's recorded in the Gospels, we can hardly help but be struck by the number of miracles He performs. He walks on water, calms raging storms, feeds thousands of people with a few loaves and fish, cleanses lepers, heals the sick, restores sight to the blind, and even raises the dead! Although some might demur at all these accounts of miracles, Craig has noted that "the miracle stories are so widely represented in all strata of the Gospel traditions that it would be fatuous to regard them as not rooted in the life of Jesus."{3}

So what is the significance of Jesus' miracles? According to New Testament scholar Ben Witherington, Jesus' miracles show

him to be God's special agent of blessing, healing, liberation, and salvation, as well as the "one who brings about the conditions associated with the final . . . dominion of God."{4} Since the kingdom of God is portrayed in Scripture as a reign of peace, prosperity, health, well-being and blessing, Jesus' miracles of healing, as well as his demonstrations of power over nature, indicate that He is indeed capable of ushering in such a wonderful kingdom.{5} And if Jesus has the power to bring in an era of health and well-being, both for our physical bodies and for the physical universe, and if he in fact will do so, then he clearly provides a solution to the problem of natural evil. Ultimately, in the new heaven and new earth, which God will give to those who love Him, we are promised that there "will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away" (Rev. 21:4).

Physical Death

The apostle Paul, in his first letter to the Corinthians, described death as an "enemy" (1 Cor. 15:26). People fear death for any number of reasons. Some fear that the process of dying will be painful. Others dread the thought of leaving behind the ones they love. Some may fear that death is simply the end, that whatever joys and pleasures this life holds, death takes them away forever. But others may fear that there *is* an afterlife and worry that things may not go well for them there. For many people, however, death is feared as the great unknown.{6} Friends and relatives die and we never see or hear from them again. For these people, death is like the ultimate black-hole, from which nothing and no one can ever escape.

But according to the Bible, Christ *did* escape the snares of death, and in doing so He dealt our mortal enemy a mortal blow of his own. I said that Paul describes death as an "enemy," but this is simply to inform us of the fact that our enemy has been conquered by Christ. "The last enemy that will be

abolished," he writes, "is death" (1 Cor. 15:26). But how has Christ conquered this enemy? And how does *His* victory help *us*?

Christ conquered death through his resurrection from the dead and all who put their trust in Him can share in his victory. Pastor Erwin Lutzer has written:

> Thus the resurrection of Jesus is the cornerstone of the Christian faith. Standing at the empty tomb, we are assured of the triumph of Jesus on the Cross; we are also assured that He has conquered our most fearsome enemy. Yes, death can still terrify us, but the more we know about Jesus, the more its power fades.{7}

Consider the life and death of the great Reformation theologian Martin Luther. As a young Augustinian monk, Luther struggled with a very sensitive conscience and a terrible fear of death. But once he understood the gospel and placed his trust in Christ, his fear gradually began to fade. By the time he died, his fear was gone. It's reported that on his deathbed, he recited some promises from the Bible, commended his spirit to God, and quietly breathed his last.{8} Believing that Christ had conquered death and given him eternal life, he was able to die at peace and without any fear. And this is the hope of *all* who trust in Christ!

The Weight of Glory

Christian theologians sometimes describe the knowledge of God as "an incommensurable good."{9} By this they mean that knowing God in an intimate, personal way is quite literally the *greatest good* that any created being can experience. It is an "incommensurable" or "immeasurable" good—a good so great that it surpasses our ability even to comprehend. The apostle Paul once prayed that the Ephesians might "know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge" (Eph. 3:19). He understood that "intimate relationship with God . . . is incommensurately

good-for created persons."{10}

Of course, this doesn't mean that one who is intimately related to God will never experience any of the trials and difficulties of life. In fact, it's possible that such a person will actually experience *more* trials and difficulties than would have been the case had they *not* been intimately related to God! Knowing the love of Christ doesn't make one immune to suffering. It does, however, provide indescribable comfort while going through it (see 2 Cor. 1:3-5).

The apostle Paul understood this quite well. In his second letter to the Corinthians, he described himself as a servant of God who had suffered afflictions, hardships, beatings, imprisonments, labors, sleeplessness, and hunger (2 Cor. 6:4-5). In spite of this, however, he did not lose heart. He famously wrote that "momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison" (2 Cor. 4:17).

But how could Paul describe his sufferings as just a "momentary, light affliction"? Because, says Craig, he had an *eternal* perspective. "He understood that the length of this life, being finite, is literally infinitesimal in comparison with the eternal life we shall spend with God."{11}

The greatest hunger of the human heart is to know and experience the love and acceptance of God and to enjoy Him forever. In his magnificent sermon "The Weight of Glory," C.S. Lewis wrote, "In the end that Face which is the delight or . . . terror of the universe must be turned upon each of us either with one expression or . . . the other, either conferring glory inexpressible or inflicting shame that can never be . . . disguised."{12} Incredibly, just as Christ has dealt with the problems of sin, suffering, and death, He has also acted decisively to reconcile us to God. Through faith in him, anyone who wants can eventually experience "an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison" (2 Cor. 4:17).

Notes

2. Craig, *Hard Questions, Real Answers*, 96-97.
3. William Lane Craig, *Reasonable Faith: Christian Truth and Apologetics*, 3rd ed. (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2008), 324.
4. Ben Witherington, *The Christology of Jesus* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 43-44.
5. Some biblical passages that pertain to Christ's coming kingdom are Isaiah 11:1-9, Matthew 19:28, and Acts 3:19-21.
6. I was reminded of many of these examples while watching the round table discussion on suffering and death in Catherine Tatge, "The Question of God: Sigmund Freud and C.S. Lewis" (U.S.A.: PBS Home Video, 2004).
7. Erwin W. Lutzer, *The Vanishing Power of Death* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2004), 13.
8. Mike Fearon, *Martin Luther* (Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 1986), 157-58.
9. See, for example, Craig, *Hard Questions, Real Answers*, 100.
10. Marilyn McCord Adams, Christ and Horrors: The Coherence of Christology (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 47.
11. Craig, *Hard Questions, Real Answers*, 99.
12. C.S. Lewis, "The Weight of Glory," in *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses*, ed. Walter Hooper (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1980), 13.

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"Can You Recommend Resources for Sharing Christ in a

Secular Society?”

Hello, Mr. Gleghorn! I want to thank you for what you do. As a Christian, I find it to be of invaluable importance to remain current and educated in fields of history, science, logic and philosophy, etc. Age 20, I’m confronting more and more difficulty sharing Christ with generation in a secularized society that will less and less have Him. Any books you might recommend? Thank you!

Thanks for your letter. There are many good books and websites which address the concerns you have in one way or another. However, let me recommend two books and three websites that have personally been very helpful to me over the years.

1. An excellent popular-level book on apologetics and evangelism is *I’m Glad You Asked* by Ken Boa and Larry Moody: www.amazon.com/Glad-You-Asked–Depth-Difficult/dp/B004IEA2Z2/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1323708380&sr=8-1

2. A superb intermediate-level apologetics book is *Reasonable Faith* (3rd edition) by William Lane Craig: https://amzn.to/36sVinp

3. An excellent popular-level website on apologetics is the Probe Ministries website here: www.probe.org

4. An excellent scholarly-level site (with some popular-level material) is the Reasonable Faith site here: www.reasonablefaith.org

5. Finally, a really great site for biblical and theological issues is this: bible.org

I hope these resources prove helpful as you continue to prepare yourself to give an account to all who ask about the hope that you have in Christ!

Shalom in Christ,

Michael Gleghorn

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Reasonable Faith

Reasonable Faith

One of the finest Christian philosophers of our day is William Lane Craig. Although he's become very well known for his debates with atheists and skeptics, he's also a prolific writer. To date, he has authored or edited over thirty books and more than a hundred scholarly articles.{1} His published work explores such fascinating topics as the evidence for the existence of God, the historical evidence for the resurrection of Jesus, divine foreknowledge and human freedom, and God's relationship to time. In 2007 he started a web-based apologetics ministry called Reasonable Faith (www.reasonablefaith.org). The site features both scholarly and popular articles written by Craig, audio and video recordings of some of his debates, lectures, and interviews, answers to questions from his readers, and much more.

But before he launched the Reasonable Faith Web site, Craig had also authored a book by the same title. One of the best apologetics books on the market, a revised and updated third edition was recently released. His friend and colleague, the philosopher J. P. Moreland, endorsed Craig's ministry with these words:

> *It is hard to overstate the impact that William Lane Craig has had for the cause of Christ. He is simply the finest*

> *Christian apologist of the last half century, and his academic work justifies ranking him among the top one percent of practicing philosophers in the Western world. Besides that, he is a winsome ambassador for Christ, an exceptional debater, and a man with the heart of an evangelist. . . . I do not know of a single thinker who has done more to raise the bar of Christian scholarship in our generation than Craig. He is one of a kind, and I thank God for his life and work.*{2}

Although the book has been described as "an admirable defense of basic Christian faith,"{3} many readers will find the content quite advanced. According to Craig, "*Reasonable Faith* is intended primarily to serve as a textbook for seminary level courses on Christian apologetics."{4} For those without much prior training in philosophy, theology, and apologetics, this book will make for some very demanding reading in places. But for those who want to seriously grapple with an informed and compelling case for the truth of Christianity, this book will richly repay one's careful and patient study.

Although we cannot possibly do it justice, in the remainder of this article we will briefly consider at least some of the reasons why Craig believes that biblical Christianity is an eminently reasonable faith.

The Absurdity of Life Without God

Imagine for a moment that there is no God. What implications would this have for human life? Science tells us that the universe is not eternal, but that it rather had a beginning. But if there is no God, then the universe must have come into being, uncaused, out of nothing! What's more, the origin of life is nothing more than an unintended by-product of matter, plus time, plus chance.{5} No one planned or purposed for life to arise, for if there is no God, there was no one to plan or

purpose it. And human beings? We are just the unpredictable result of a long evolutionary process that never had us in mind. In fact, if one were to rewind the history of life to its beginning, and allow the evolutionary process to start anew, it's virtually certain that none of us would be here to think about it! After all, without an intelligent Agent guiding this long and complicated process, the chances that our species would accidentally emerge a second time is practically zero.{6}

Depressing as it is, this little thought experiment provides the appropriate backdrop for Craig's discussion of the absurdity of life without God. In his view, if God does not exist, then human life is ultimately without meaning, value, or purpose. After all, if human beings are merely the accidental by-products of the unintended forces of nature, then what possible meaning *could* human life have? If there is no God, then we were not created for a *purpose*; we were merely "coughed" into existence by mindless material processes.

Of course, some might wonder why we couldn't just create some meaning for our lives, or give the universe a meaning of our own. But as Craig observes, "the universe does not really acquire meaning just because *I* happen to give it one . . . . for suppose I give the universe one meaning, and you give it another. Who is right? The answer, of course, is neither one. For the universe without God remains objectively meaningless, no matter how *we* regard it."{7}

Like it or not, if God does not exist, then the universe—and our very lives—are ultimately meaningless and absurd. The difficulty is, however, that no one can really live consistently and happily with such a view.{8} Although merely recognizing this fact does absolutely nothing to show that God actually exists, it should at least motivate us to sincerely investigate the matter with an open heart and an open mind. So let's now briefly consider some of the *reasons* for believing that there really is a God.

The Existence of God

In the latest edition of *Reasonable Faith*, Craig offers a number of persuasive arguments for believing that God does, in fact, exist. Unfortunately, we can only skim the surface of these arguments here. But if you want to go deeper, his book is a great place to start.

After a brief historical survey of some of the major kinds of arguments that scholars have offered for believing that God exists, Craig offers his own defense for each of them. He begins with a defense of what is often called the *cosmological* argument. This argument takes its name from the Greek word *kosmos*, which means "world." It essentially argues from the existence of the cosmos, or world, to the existence of a First Cause or Sufficient Reason for the world's existence.{9} Next he defends a *teleological*, or design, argument. The name for this argument comes from the Greek word *telos*, which means "end." According to Craig, this argument attempts to infer "an intelligent designer of the universe, just as we infer an intelligent designer for any product in which we discern evidence of purposeful adaptation of means to some end (*telos*)."{10} After the design argument, he offers a defense of the *moral* argument. This argument "implies the existence of a Being that is the embodiment of the ultimate Good," as well as "the source of the objective moral values we experience in the world."{11} Finally, he defends what is known as the *ontological* argument. Ontology is the study of being, and this much-debated argument "attempts to prove from the very concept of God that God exists."{12}

Taken together, these arguments provide a powerful case for the existence of God. As Craig presents them, the cosmological argument implies the existence of an eternal, immaterial, unimaginably powerful, personal Creator of the universe. The design argument reveals an intelligent designer of the cosmos. The moral argument reveals a Being who is the transcendent

source and standard of moral goodness. And the ontological argument shows that if God's existence is even possible, then He must exist!

But suppose we grant that all of these arguments are sound. Why think that *Christianity* is true? Many *non-Christian* religions believe in God. Why think that Christianity is the one that got it right? In order to answer this question we must now confront the central figure of Christianity: Jesus of Nazareth.

The Son of Man

When the previous edition of *Reasonable Faith* was published in 1994, most New Testament scholars thought that Jesus had never really claimed to be the Messiah, or Lord, or Son of God. But a lot has happened in the intervening fourteen years, and "the balance of scholarly opinion on Jesus' use of Christological titles may have actually tipped in the opposite direction."{13}

For example, we have excellent grounds for believing that Jesus often referred to himself as "the Son of Man."{14} Although some believe that in using this title Jesus was merely referring to himself as a human being, the evidence suggests that he actually meant much more than that. Note, for example, that "Jesus did not refer to himself as 'a son of man,' but as '*the* Son of Man.'"{15} His use of the definite article is a crucially important observation, especially in light of Daniel 7:13-14.

In this passage Daniel describes a vision in which "one like a son of man" comes before God with the clouds of heaven. God gives this person an everlasting kingdom and we are told that "all peoples, nations and men of every language worshiped him" (Dan. 7:14). It's clear that Daniel's "son of man" is much more than a human being, for he's viewed as an appropriate

object of worship. Since no one is worthy of worship but God alone (see Luke 4:8), the "son of man" must actually be divine, as well as human.

According to Mark, at Jesus' trial the high priest pointedly asked him if he was the Christ (or Messiah), "the Son of the Blessed One." Jesus' response is astonishing. "I am," he said, "And you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven" (Mark 14:61-62). Here Jesus not only affirms that he is the Messiah and Son of God, he also explicitly identifies himself with the coming Son of Man prophesied by Daniel.{16} Since we have excellent reasons for believing that Jesus actually made this radical claim at his trial, we're once again confronted with that old trilemma: if Jesus really claimed to be divine, then he must have been either a lunatic, a liar, or the divine Son of Man!

Now most people would probably agree that Jesus was not a liar or a lunatic, but they might still find it difficult to accept his claim to divinity. They might wonder if we have any good reasons, independent of Jesus' claims, for believing his claims to be true. As a matter of fact we do!

The Resurrection of Jesus

Shortly after Jesus' crucifixion, on the day of Pentecost, the apostle Peter stood before a large crowd of people gathered in Jerusalem and made a truly astonishing claim: God had raised Jesus from the dead, thereby vindicating his radical personal claims to be both Lord and Messiah (see Acts 2:32-36). The reason this claim was so incredible was that the "Jews had no conception of a Messiah who, instead of triumphing over Israel's enemies, would be shamefully executed by them as a criminal."{17} Indeed, according to the Old Testament book of Deuteronomy, "anyone who is hung on a tree is under God's curse" (21:22-23). So how could a man who had been crucified

as a criminal possibly be the promised Messiah? If we reject the explanation of the New Testament, that God raised Jesus from the dead, it's very difficult to see how early Christianity could have ever gotten started. So are there good reasons to believe that Jesus really *was* raised from the dead?

According to Craig, the case for Jesus' resurrection rests "upon the evidence for three great, independently established facts: the empty tomb, the resurrection appearances, and the origin of the Christian faith."{18} He marshals an extensive array of arguments and evidence in support of each fact, as well as critiquing the various naturalistic theories which have been proposed to avoid the resurrection. He concludes by noting that since God exists, miracles are possible. And once one acknowledges this, "it's hard to deny that the resurrection of Jesus is the best explanation of the facts."{19}

This brings us to the significance of this event. According to the German theologian Wolfhart Pannenberg:

> *The resurrection of Jesus acquires such decisive meaning, not merely because someone*
> *. . . has been raised from the dead, but because it is Jesus of Nazareth, whose execution was instigated by the Jews because he had blasphemed against God. If this man was raised from the dead, then . . . God . . . has committed himself to him. . . . The resurrection can only be understood as the divine vindication of the man whom the Jews had rejected as a blasphemer.{20}*

In other words, by raising Jesus from the dead, God has put His seal of approval (as it were) on Jesus' radical personal claims to be the Messiah, the Son of God, and the divine Son of Man! This forces each of us to answer the same haunting question Jesus once asked his disciples, "Who do you say I am?" (Matt. 16:15).

Notes

1. See “About William Lane Craig” at www.reasonablefaith.org/site/PageServer?pagename=about_william_lane_craig, accessed 22 August 2008.
2. J. P. Moreland, cited in William Lane Craig, *Reasonable Faith: Christian Truth and Apologetics*, 3rd ed. (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2008), 1.
3. C. Behan McCullagh, cited in Craig, *Reasonable Faith*, 1.
4. Craig, *Reasonable Faith*, 12.
5. Ibid., 76.
6. In the minds of some people, this is a rather controversial claim. But it’s been convincingly defended by naturalist authors like Stephen J. Gould and Michael Shermer. For a brief defense by Shermer, please see the articles on “Glorious Contingency” at www.metanexus.net/Magazine/ArticleDetail/tabid/68/tabid/72/Default.aspx?aid=27, accessed 4 September 2008.
7. Ibid., 79.
8. Ibid., 78.
9. Ibid., 98.
10. Ibid., 99-100.
11. Ibid., 104.
12. Ibid., 95.
13. Ibid., 301.
14. See Craig’s discussion on pp. 315-318.
15. Ibid., 315.
16. Ibid., 317.
17. Ibid., 388.
18. Ibid., 360-61.
18. Ibid., 399.
20. Wolfhart Pannenberg, “Jesu Geschichte und unsere Geschichte,” in *Glaube und Wirklichkeit* (Munchen: Chr. Kaiser, 1975), 92-94; cited in Craig, *Reasonable Faith*, 399.

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Exploring God’s Relationship to Time

Written by David Pattillo and Michael Gleghorn

Introduction

Why does time flow the way it does? Can we alter time, or is it beyond our grasp? Is time travel possible? Is God inside or outside of time? Does everyone experience time the same way we do? When faced with the question, What is time? we encounter one of the most fundamental human inquiries, as well as one of the most difficult philosophical questions. Every person seems to experience the flow of time every single day, yet when asked to define it, we are often at a loss for words. Thus, for the purpose of this article, we shall define time as a relation of events involving earlier than and later than.

Two views of time

When it comes to the philosophy of the nature of time, there are essentially two views: the *dynamic, tensed,* or *A Theory;* and the *static, tenseless,* or *B Theory*. It is traditionally said that on the *A Theory*, the present is ontologically privileged. That is to say, the present is the only thing that is really real; the past has happened and the future will happen. It is much easier to see what distinguishes the *A Theory* when it is compared with the *B Theory*, which holds that all moments are equally real. That is (according to the *B Theory*), from our perspective it is 2007, 1950 is in the past and 2050 is in the future. But for the people in 1950 (who also exist at *that* time), both 2007 and 2050 are in the future. Likewise, for the people in 2050 both 1950 and 2007

are in the past. The *B Theory* holds that it is ignorant to think of our moment of the world as the real moment, or the moment occupying some privileged position. According to the *B Theory*, any tensed idea, or sentence whose verb has tense (i.e., past/present/or future), would actually be more accurate if it were translated into a tenseless idea or sentence (i.e., one that has a tenseless verb and time stamp to say when something happened, rather than a tensed verb) since tensed ideas imply that the present moment of time is superior to, or more real than, all other moments. For instance, according to the *B Theory*, the tensed sentence, JFK was assassinated, would misconstrue reality as if the year 2007 (or any year after 1963) is more real or significant than the years 1907 or 1963, because it has a verb in the past tense. This theory holds that the sentence would be better put On November 22, 1963, at 12:30 P.M. CST JFK *is* assassinated.{2} This tenseless sentence is preferred on the *B Theory* because there is no moment that can claim to be the true present moment; rather, there are just equally real moments. Advocates of the *B Theory* say that reality is one long 4-dimensional block, and we are just experiencing one moment of that block, but all the moments are equally real or existent. The *A Theory*, on the other hand, would say that *tensed verbs* (verbs in the past/present/future tense) do reflect reality; there really is a past, present, and future, and they are always changing as time flows and the future becomes present and then past.

Which one of these views is correct has vast implications for the way we interpret reality. For example, it will have an effect on the way we understand God and His relation to the world. One might think that this would be the proper time to turn to Scripture to see whether it supports an *A* or *B Theory*. However, its important to recognize the fact that Scripture is not entirely clear with respect to this issue. Therefore, we will postpone looking at the Bible until our discussion of Gods relation to time. For the present, we need to discuss

which of the two theories is superior and why.

A vs. B

The most powerful argument for the *A Theory* is its intuitiveness. That is, we experience the flow of time in just as real a way as any other experience in our lives. We very directly experience the present. To say that event e is occurring now is no different than saying that event e is occurring.{3} When we look forward to the future or regret the past, we are experiencing the *A Theory* because, if you think about it, on the *B Theory* there is no difference between past, present, and future.{4} Lastly, when a kid says: I wish it were Christmas morning, or I wish I were already done with this test, he is expressing the *A Theory*. That is, he wishes that the present moment, say t_1, were replaced by some other moment, say t_2. This expresses the idea of *temporal becoming* (the idea that the present moment changes as we pass through time), which is an experience of the *A Theory*. As William Lane Craig puts it, We thereby presuppose the reality of temporal becoming, since our wish expresses our belief in a changing and objective present.{5} Thus the *A Theory* very comfortably coheres with what we experience in everyday life.

Now, the B theorist may ask, Why accept this experience as anything more than an illusion? To answer this we must briefly digress with a discussion of Alvin Plantingas *epistemology*, or theory of knowledge. When evaluating beliefs, many skeptics want to reject anything that is not certain. This was especially prominent in the philosophy of Ren Descartes, who rejected all his sense experience because it could have been wrong. After all, when you think about it, we could be in the *Matrix*.{6} It could be that everything you think is real is just electrical impulses interpreted by your brain. Or it could be that the world was created five minutes ago, and you were created with all the memories you currently have. Or maybe you are the only mind in the universe, and everyone else

is just a robot, cleverly designed to give the appearance of having a human mind. And the list of possibilities goes on and on. None of these can be disproven, but should we conclude that we really dont know whether anyone else actually exists? Plantinga doesnt think so. He has developed a theory that labels these and other similar beliefs as *properly basic beliefs*.

Think about it this way. If you are reading this online, the belief that there is a computer in front of you is properly basic; that is, it is a foundational belief formed in correct circumstances. Therefore, you are warranted in believing it until presented with some *defeater* of your belief. In this case, a *defeater* would have to be some good reason to believe that your senses are deceiving you. In other words, according to Plantinga, common sense beliefs about sensory experience, memory, the existence of other minds or other similar beliefs should be regarded as innocent until proven guilty (i.e., judged reliable until proven otherwise). Likewise, our experience of real temporal passing and an objective past, present, and future warrants belief in the *A Theory* until a strong counterargument is offeredstrong enough to cause us to doubt this experience.

Another major argument for the *A Theory* is what is known as the *ineliminability of tense*.{7} Simply put, this is the idea that tensed statements imply tensed facts which further imply a tensed reality. B theorists have made numerous attempts to show that tensed sentences can be translated into tenseless sentences that do not imply a tensed reality. However, all these attempts have failed. Craig illustrates:

> *This point is underlined by the ineptness of some of the supposed tenseless translations of tensed sentences. Take, for example, the tensed sentence It is now 4:30. We can imagine situations in which a persons life would depend on his holding such a belief. But the tenseless counterpart of this sentence is either It is 4:30 at 4:30, which is a mere*

> *tautology, or It is 4:30 simultaneous with this utterance, which is useless unless we also know that This utterance is occurring now, which is a tensed belief. In both cases the tenseless versions are insufficient to motivate timely action because they do not inform us whether or not it actually is 4:30.{8}*

If tensed sentences lose some meaning when translated into tenseless sentences, then there is some important meaning in tense, namely, that reality is reflected by tense. Therefore, if tenseless sentences cannot capture the facts expressed by tensed sentences, then there must be tensed facts. And thus we have a strong argument for temporal reality.

Next we turn our attention to some problems with the *B Theory* of time. While there are numerous problems, we will discuss just two of them.{9} First, the *B Theory* of time greatly misconstrues some biblical ideas, one example being the doctrine of *creation ex nihilo*. For the B theorist, the universe beginning to exist simply means that it has a starting point, just like a yard stick has a first inch.{10} The problem is that on this view There is in the actual world no state of affairs of God existing alone without the space-time universe. God never really brings the universe into being; as a whole it co-exists timelessly with Him.{11} So while the universe depends on God, the idea of *creation ex nihilo* is severely stripped of meaning since the universe always timelessly exists with God. That is, in some sense, God and space-time seem to be equally necessary in their existence.

The other major biblical problem is that evil is never really vanquished.{12} On the static theory of time [*B Theory*], evil is never really vanquished from the world: It exists just as sturdily as ever at its various locations in space-time, even if those locations are all earlier than some point in cosmic time (for example, Judgment Day).{13}

Furthermore, events like the crucifixion are never past or done away with. They simply remain timelessly forever, which seems hard to reconcile with Christs victory over death.

A second argument against the *B Theory* has to do with the impossibility of the existence of *actual infinites*. It has now been almost universally agreed upon by mathematicians and philosophers that an actually infinite number of things cannot be actualized in the space-time universe. The idea of *actual infinites* creates many paradoxes. For instance, what is infinity minus infinity? Well mathematically one gets contradictory answers. For example, one could say that the answer is infinity. But the answer could also be 4, or 0, or any other number you want. This led the great mathematician David Hilbert to say, The infinite is nowhere to be found in reality. It neither exists in nature, nor provides a legitimate basis for rational thought…the role that remains for the infinite to play is solely that of an idea.{14}

Thus, what we have in the space-time universe are not *actual infinites*, but *potential infinites*. For example, you can start counting 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 and continue this process for a potentially infinite time (i.e., you can keep going as long as you want). But you will never reach a moment when you can stand up and exclaim, Im done! Ive counted to infinity! In the same way a line three inches in length can be divided in half, and then in half again, and then in half again, ad infinitum. But it can never actually be divided an infinite number of times. For this reason, in addition to compelling scientific and theological evidence, essentially all philosophers and scientists have now come to believe that time is finite in the past.

However, the future is different. We know that the future is not finite but infinite. We know this both philosophically and biblically by the promise of *everlasting* or *eternal* life. Therefore, most scholars have concluded that the future, like numbers, is potentially infinite. We can keep adding years

forever, but we will never reach an end. But this is inconsistent with the *B Theory*. Since every moment of time in fact exists at once, and the future has no end, there is an actually infinite number of years in the future. But since we know that there are no actualized infinites in the real world, we can safely conclude that the *B Theory* is wrong in its description of the future.

So we have seen two strong arguments for the *A Theory*, from our experience of temporal reality and the ineliminability of tense in language, and two ways that the *B Theory* seems clearly implausible, from *creation ex nihilo* and the impossibility of *actual infinites*. Other attempts have been made to revive the *B Theory*, but suffice it to say that they have been answered thoroughly.{15}

Gods Relation to Time

We now turn to how an infinite God relates to our passage of time. There are some things of which we are certain. First, time began a finite time ago. We know this from the Bible,{16} philosophy,{17} and science.{18} Second, we know God neither began to exist, nor will He ever cease to exist.{19} We can further conclude that God existed before time.{20} This is best exemplified in Jude 25: …To the only God our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, dominion and authority, *before all time* and now and forever. Amen.{21}

Since we know that God existed before time,{22} we can conclude that without the universe, God existed timelessly.{23}

We then must ask ourselves, how does God relate to the universe since it began? Here again we find two common positions. One is that God is timeless. By this it is meant that God, while the creator and sustainer of the world, was not affected by the creation of the world and remains constant outside the universe, just as He was before the act of creation. The other common position is that God is *temporal*.

That does not mean that God is limited by time, but rather that He is intimately related to temporal things. He thus has a past, present, and future, just like other temporal things. Since there is no beginning or end to His existence, this position is also sometimes called *omnitemporality*.

There are two main arguments in favor of Gods *omnitemporality*. First, there is the argument from Gods relation to the universe. When God brought the universe into being, He stood in new relationships that He did not have before. Once the universe exists, He now is the sustainer of and is co-existent with the universe.{24} He could have remained timeless, but since He created the universe He went through an *extrinsic change*.{25} If God undergoes this change, then surely He must be temporal. That is, we can speak of a past, present and future for God. In the past He had one relation and in the present He has another relation. This provides a way to associate God with time, and that is all the omnitemporal view of God requires.

The second major argument for Gods *omnitemporality* comes from His omnisciencespecifically, His knowledge of tensed facts.{26} That is, as the present is constantly changing, true sentences are constantly changing. For instance, there are tenseless truths that are always true such as: The World Trade Centers *are* attacked on September 11, 2001. However, on September 10, 2001, the sentence The World Trade Centers will be attacked tomorrow was true, but this statement is not true on September 11th. What is true on September 11th is the statement, The World Trade Centers are being attacked today. Finally, any time since then, the true statement has been, The World Trade Centers were attacked on September 11th. All of these statements can be true or false depending on when they are made. That is because the verbs relate the sentence to the present. Thus, a God who knows only tenseless truths (as the *tenseless view* of God proposes) would seem to be very ignorant indeed, for there are seemingly limitless things He would not

know. However, if God does possess knowledge of the truth of tensed sentences, this would seem to make Him temporal. As Dr. Craig puts it, any being which does know tensed facts cannot be timeless, for his knowledge must be in constant flux, as the tensed facts known by him change.{27} Thus we have a second powerful argument for God being temporal .

On the other hand, the major argument for Gods timelessness is what is known as the *incompleteness of temporal life*.{28} This is the idea that temporal life is so limited that a perfect God would not experience it. Certainly the fleetingness of our own lives has led to many existential questions of the meaning of life given that it will all end relatively shortly. Surely God would not be limited in this way. Well, this is a plausible argument and does carry some weight, but I am not sure how much. For one thing, because of Gods complete omniscience and ability to experience whatever He wants, the past is never really lost to God, which makes temporality far less of a limitation. Secondly, since He never ends, and we His children never cease to be in company with Him (assuming we have received His free gift of eternal life), there really is no need for Him to try to grasp onto fleeting moments as we so often do. So, while this argument seems plausible, it does not seem to me to be remotely powerful enough to call into question the powerful arguments we have for the *omnitemporality* of God.

Thus, it seems we have good reason to think that God is timeless without creation and temporal since creation.{29} But it is important to remember that He did not have to create. Rather, His free decision to create a temporal world also constitutes a free decision on His part to exist temporally.{30} Many would now ask how it makes sense for God to exist timelessly and then temporally. It seems plausible to say that time is a relation of events. That is, Gods existence without creation was just simple, unchanging Trinitarian perfection, and it does not make sense to talk about before

and after when there was no change. However, at the moment of the creation, we now have an event, and we can start relating events by temporal distance from the creation. Thus we conclude that God existed timelessly, and then created time and space, giving us the first mark of time, and time has been flowing ever since.

So then, we have seen that there is a real past, present, and future. God, though timeless, created, thus giving us temporal relations. We can speak of past, present, and future for God since He is intimately related to temporal things and has temporal knowledge. Since the first event, we now have a flow of time that will never end as we live on into eternity with or without God.

Notes

1. I owe a great credit to both Dr. William Lane Craig for most of the ideas of this paper, and to Michael Gleghorn for help in developing these ideas.
2. I have picked up Dr. William Lane Craig's use of italics to symbolize a tenseless verb.
3. William Lane Craig. *Time and Eternity, Exploring God's Relationship to Time.* (Crossway Books: Wheaton, Illinois) 133.
4. Ibid., 136.
5. Ibid., 140.
6. Reference to the 1999 film *The Matrix*, in which a complex computer program used unconscious humans to power, and thus perpetuate itself. Human brains were meanwhile tied to an imaginary world, the matrix.
7. Ibid., 115.
8. Ibid., 118.
9. Ibid., 188-215 for a more comprehensive list of the problems.
10. Ibid., 210.
11. Ibid., 213.
12. Ibid., 214.
13. Ibid.

14. *Philosophy of Mathematics*, ed. with an Intro. by Paul Benacerraf and Hilary Putnam (Prentice-Hall, 1964) p. 151.
15. Ibid., 143-188.
16. Gen 1:1; Ps 90:2; Jn 1:1-3; I Cor 2:7; Jude 25.
17. This is supported by arguments and illustrations about the impossibility of the existence of actual infinites (e.g. Hilbert's hotel, etc.). Also, it has been noted that if time never began, we could never reach our current moment. You cannot count up to infinity by adding one number at a time. If the past was infinite, and we only complete one year at a time, we would never reach 2007.
18. This is supported by the second law of thermodynamics, as well as by arguments for the Big Bang (e.g., the red shift of light from distant galaxies and the cosmic microwave background radiation). For more information see *The Kalam Cosmological Argument* by William Lane Craig.
19. name="text19″>That God is the beginningless cause of the universe is the conclusion of the Kalam Cosmological argument. Also see Gen 1:1, Ps 90:2, Is 41:4, Is 57:15, John 1:1-3, II Tim 1:9, Rev 4:8.
20. name="text20″>I Cor 2:7, Jn 17:24, Jude 25. See also the conclusions from the Kalam Cosmological argument.
21. name="text21″>The Bible, New American Standard Version (Zondervan, Grand Rapids) 2000, emphasis added.
22. name="text22″>I say before here to mean God's existing without time, even though it is actually impossible to speak of before time since before is a temporal relation.
23. Some, like Newton, have proposed that God existed in His own infinite past separate from the creation of physical time. However, I feel that this fails to cohere with the biblical and philosophical evidence.
24. William Lane Craig. *Time and Eternity*, Exploring God's Relationship to Time. (Crossway Books: Wheaton, Illinois) 87.
25. Ibid., 87. When a being goes through an extrinsic change, the change does not effect the being's nature. The idea of an extrinsic change is the idea of a change apart from you. For instance, I can be behind you in line and then cut in front of

you. You never changed, but you went through extrinsic relational changes in that you were related to me by the in front of relation and now you are related to me by the behind relation.
26. Ibid., 98.
27. Ibid., 99.
28. Ibid., 67.
29. Ibid., 241.
30. Ibid., 87.

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Problems and Promises of Petitionary Prayer

Experimenting With Prayer

We pray for all sorts of reasons. When we've done something wrong, we may unburden our conscience by confessing our sin to God. When we're grateful for some blessing, we may offer up a prayer of thanksgiving. When we're contemplating God's work in creation, we may offer up a prayer of worship or adoration. But one reason that almost all of us pray is to ask God for something. Granted, we may often do this selfishly, or foolishly, or with all manner of wrong motives. But the thing itself, our making requests of God, is a perfectly legitimate thing to do. Indeed, when Jesus taught his disciples to pray, he taught them (among other things) to make requests, such as "Give us each day our daily bread" (Lk. 11:3).

Although heaven undoubtedly receives millions of requests each day, there's possibly none more common than that which asks

God for healing. While I was writing this article, my father was admitted to the critical care unit of a local hospital. Each day, I (along with many other Christians) prayed that he might be healed. But after two weeks, he went to be with the Lord. Naturally, this raises a very serious question. Do our prayers *really* make any difference, or are we just wasting our time?

Recently the *New York Times* ran a story with an intriguing title: "Long-Awaited Medical Study Questions the Power of Prayer".{1} "Prayers offered by strangers," the story began, "had no effect on the recovery of people who were undergoing heart surgery. . . . And patients who knew they were being prayed for had a higher rate of post-operative complications like abnormal heart rhythms." What are we to make of this? Are prayers for healing to no avail? Might they even be counterproductive?

In a fascinating essay titled "The Efficacy of Prayer," C. S. Lewis questioned the value of such experiments. He realized, of course, that one could set up such an experiment and ask people to pray. But he doubted the *wisdom* of it. "You must not try experiments on God, your Master," he wrote. He also observed:

> *Simply to say prayers is not to pray; otherwise a team of properly trained parrots would serve as well as men for our experiment. . . . You are not doing it in order that suffering should be relieved; you are doing it to find out what happens. The real purpose and the nominal purpose of your prayers are at variance. . . . The experiment demands an impossibility.{2}*

Although on one level such experiments with prayer might be *interesting*, nevertheless, for those who have witnessed dramatic answers to their prayers, such studies aren't likely

to be *convincing*. But can we know whether or not prayer is *really* effective?

Providence or Coincidence?

A few years ago I was traveling to Kansas to attend a friend's wedding. The sun was just about to set for the evening when I suddenly got a flat tire. I pulled to the side of the road, got out, and prepared to change the flat. I soon realized, however, that this was going to be a bit tricky. Although I had a spare tire, I had no tools to change it!

Now there have been many times when this would have really made me angry. But on this occasion, I simply bowed my head in prayer and asked God for his help. I then sat down on the hood of my car to wait. I was a bit concerned because I knew it would soon be dark. But since there wasn't anything that I could do about *that*, I simply determined to trust the Lord.

In less than a minute, a friendly looking guy with two kids pulled to the side of the road. I explained my situation, and before I fully understood what was happening, he had his tools out and began to change my tire for me. Within about five minutes I was back on the road, praising God for his help in my time of need!

Now understandably, I looked upon this incident as a direct answer to my prayer. But can I really know if this interpretation is correct? Was it *really* God who helped me, in response to my prayer? Or would that man have stopped and changed my tire anyway? Unfortunately, apart from God telling me one way or another, there just doesn't seem to be any way to know for sure.

But I don't think we should be troubled by this. The fact that we can't *prove* a strict causal connection between what we ask God for in prayer and what actually happens in the world shouldn't really surprise us. After all, we can't *always* prove

a causal connection between what we ask our neighbor for and what actually happens! Your neighbor may feed your cat while you're away on vacation because you asked. Then again, "Your neighbor may be a humane person who would not have let your cat starve even if you had forgotten to make any arrangements."{3}

Of course, it may sometimes be possible to prove a causal connection between what I ask my neighbor and what he actually does. But this isn't *always* the case. "Thus in some measure the same doubt that hangs about the causal efficacy of our prayers to God hangs also about our prayers to man. Whatever we get we might have been going to get anyway."{4} On the other hand, the Bible also assures us that sometimes we don't have because we don't ask (James 4:2). So in the end, we may just have to learn to live with a bit of mystery about our prayers.

Whatever We Ask?

The most radical promises about prayer found anywhere in Scripture occur on the lips of Jesus. The nature of these promises is nothing short of staggering. Just listen to what Jesus tells his disciples: "And I will do whatever you ask in my name . . . . You may ask me for anything in my name, and I will do it" (John 14:13-14). Or again, "I tell you the truth, my Father will give you whatever you ask in my name" (John 16:23).

What are we to do with such incredible promises? On the surface, Jesus seems to be saying that he or the Father will do *whatever* the disciples ask. But is this *really* what Jesus meant? If so, it seems to raise a very serious problem. After all, do we *always* get what we ask for? And would it really be good if we did?

If my own experience can be trusted, then it seems to me that Christian philosopher William Lane Craig is quite correct when

he writes, “If we are ruthlessly honest with ourselves, every one of us knows that sometimes God does not answer our prayers.”{5} Indeed, he continues, sometimes God “*cannot* answer our prayers because Christians are praying for contradictory things.”{6} He asks us to imagine “two Christian athletes playing on opposite sides in the Super Bowl . . . . Each would naturally be disposed to pray that his team would win, and yet both prayers could not be answered, for the two athletes would be praying for contradictory results.”{7}

In addition, it’s not very hard to think of examples in which it might be *unwise* for God to give us whatever we ask. After all, finite and fallible human beings are often inclined to ask God for rather foolish things. It wouldn’t always be best for God to give us whatever we requested. For example, suppose a godly young man who desperately wants to serve the Lord as a foreign missionary is praying that God will grant him a particular young lady to be his wife. But suppose that this young lady has a passion to serve the Lord here in some way. Finally, suppose that they would both be miserable and spiritually unproductive if they married each other, but they would both be deeply satisfied and productive in the work of the Lord if they each married someone else. Would it really be wise for God to grant this young man’s request? It sure doesn’t seem like it. Sometimes, as Garth Brooks observed, we can all thank God for unanswered prayers!

Qualifying Christ’s Promises, Pt. 1

But if all this is so, then what’s become of Jesus’ radical promise to do whatever we ask in his name? It seems to me, quite simply, that Jesus’ promise must be qualified somehow. But is it really wise to tamper with Scripture this way?

Let me suggest two responses to this. First, I think that when his words are properly interpreted, Jesus himself qualifies his promises right from the start. Second, the other qualifications I will mention are all firmly rooted in the

Scriptures. In other words, we won't be tampering with the Bible. We'll rather be looking at its teachings to see if there are any qualifications expressed elsewhere in its pages that might qualify Jesus' promises in some way.

But let's go back to that first point. Notice what Jesus says in John 14:13: "And I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Son may bring glory to the Father." Immediately we see that Jesus hasn't really given a blanket promise to do whatever we ask. Rather, he's qualified his promise to do whatever we ask *in his name, so that the Son may bring glory to the Father*.

What does it mean to ask for something *in Jesus' name*? Many people treat this phrase as something akin to a magical formula. By saying the right words, in the proper sequence, they think that God is somehow obligated to give them what they've asked for. But this is certainly *not* what Jesus had in mind! Instead, to pray for something *in Jesus' name* is to pray for something that's consistent with the *character* and *purposes* of Christ in the world. As Merrill Tenney observes, "In prayer we call on him to work out his purpose, not simply to gratify our whims. The answer is promised so that the Son may bring glory to the Father."{8} So when Jesus promises to do whatever we ask *in his name*, He's not promising to do whatever we ask—period! He's qualified his promise to do whatever we ask that's consistent with his *character* and *purposes* in the world.

But there's more. As we search the Scriptures we find yet other principles that appear to qualify Jesus' promise. Dr. Craig mentions several of these in his book *Hard Questions, Real Answers*.{9} For instance, our requests might be denied because of unconfessed sin in our lives. The psalmist wrote, "If I had cherished sin in my heart, the Lord would not have listened" (Ps. 66:18). Further, our requests might also be denied if they arise from impure motives. James states quite pointedly, "When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask

with wrong motives" (4:3).

Qualifying Christ's Promises, Pt. 2

What are some more reasons why our requests to God might sometimes be denied?

First, our prayers may sometimes not be granted because of our lack of faith. Jesus told his disciples, "Whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours" (Mk. 11:24). This verse makes it clear that the Lord expects our prayers to be joined with faith in his ability to grant them.

Second, as William Lane Craig observes, "Sometimes our prayers are not answered because, quite frankly, we don't really care whether they are."{10} This was certainly *not* the pattern of the great prayers recorded in Scripture. Consider the example of Hannah, who prayed out of "great anguish and grief" for a son (1 Sam. 1:16). Or Daniel, who upon learning from the writings of Jeremiah the prophet "that the desolation of Jerusalem would last seventy years . . . turned to the Lord . . . and pleaded with him in prayer and petition, in fasting, and in sackcloth and ashes" (Dan. 9:2-3). If we're honest, many of us would probably have to admit that our own prayers are often just a pale reflection of the earnest examples we find in Scripture.

So too with perseverance in prayer. We tend to give up far too quickly and easily. Apparently, things weren't much different in Jesus' day. Indeed, he told his disciples the parable of the persistent widow "to show them that they should always pray and not give up" (Luke 18:1).

These are a few more reasons why our prayers to God might not be granted. But what if none of these reasons applies in our case? What if we've confessed all known sin, our motives are pure, and we've prayed earnestly, with perseverance, and in

faith, and still our heartfelt requests to God are denied? What should we conclude then? That God doesn't really care? Or that he doesn't even exist?

Although we might be tempted to doubt God in such times, it's important to remember one last qualification that the Bible puts on our requests to God; namely, they must be consistent with his will. The apostle John wrote that "if we ask anything according to his will . . . . we have what we asked of him" (1 Jn. 5:14-15). But sometimes our requests to God just aren't consistent with his will. In cases like these, although it may not be easy, we need to trust that our loving heavenly Father really does know what's best and that he can be counted on to do it. In other words, we may not always know his mind, but we can always trust his heart.

Notes

1. Benedict Carey, "Long-Awaited Medical Study Questions the Power of Prayer," *The New York Times,* March 31, 2006, http://nyti.ms/advuuY.
2. C. S. Lewis, "The Efficacy of Prayer," in *The World's Last Night and Other Essays* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1988), 6.
3. Ibid.
4. bid., 7.
5. William Lane Craig, *Hard Questions, Real Answers* (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway Books, 2003), 43.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid., 44.
8. Merrill C. Tenney, "The Gospel of John," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary,* gen. ed. Frank E. Gaebelein (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981), 9:146.
9. The remainder of this discussion is much indebted to William Lane Craig, *Hard Questions, Real Answers,* 47-55.
10. Ibid., 49.

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Why We Shouldn't Hate Philosophy: A Biblical Perspective

Michael Gleghorn examines the role of philosophy in a Christian worldview. Does philosophy help us flesh our our biblical perspective or does it just confuse our understanding?

A Walk on the Slippery Rocks

For many people in our culture today, Edie Brickell and the New Bohemians got it right: "Philosophy is a walk on the slippery rocks." But for some in the Christian community, they didn't go far enough. Philosophy, they say, is far more dangerous than a walk on slippery rocks. It's an enemy of orthodoxy and a friend of heresy. It's typically a product of wild, rash, and uncontrolled human speculation. Its doctrines are empty and deceptive. Worse still, they may even come from demons!

Such attitudes are hardly new. The early church father Tertullian famously wrote:

> *What has Jerusalem to do with Athens, the Church with the Academy, the Christian with the heretic? . . . I have no use for a Stoic or a Platonic . . . Christianity. After Jesus Christ we have no need of speculation, after the Gospel no need of research.{1}*

Should Christians, then, hate and reject all philosophy? Should we shun it, despise it, and trample it underfoot?

Doesn't the Bible warn us about the dangers of philosophy and urge us to avoid it? In thinking through such questions, it's important that we be careful. Before we possibly injure ourselves with any violent, knee-jerk reactions, we may first want to settle down a bit and ask ourselves a few questions. First, what exactly is philosophy anyway? What, if anything, does the Bible have to say about it? Might it have any value for the Christian faith? Could it possibly help strengthen or support the ministry of the church? Are there any potential benefits that Christians might gain from studying philosophy? And if so, what are they? These are just a few of the questions that we want to consider.

But let's begin with that first question: Just what *is* philosophy anyway? Defining this term can be difficult. It gets tossed around by different people in a variety of ways. But we can get a rough idea of its meaning by observing that it comes from two Greek words: *philein*, which means "to love," and *sophia*, which means "wisdom." So at one level, *philosophy* is just the love of wisdom. There's nothing wrong with that!

But let's go further. Socrates claimed that the unexamined life was not worth living. And throughout its history, philosophy has gained a reputation for the careful, rational, and critical examination of life's biggest questions. "Accordingly," write Christian philosophers J.P. Moreland and William Lane Craig, "philosophy may be defined as the attempt to think rationally and critically about life's most important questions in order to obtain knowledge and wisdom about them."{2} So while philosophy may *sometimes* be a walk on slippery rocks, it may also be a potentially powerful resource for thinking through some of life's most important issues.

Beware of Hollow and Deceptive Philosophy

In their recent philosophy textbook, Moreland and Craig make the following statement:

> *For many years we have each been involved, not just in scholarly work, but in speaking evangelistically on university campuses with groups like . . . Campus Crusade for Christ . . . Again and again, we have seen the practical value of philosophical studies in reaching students for Christ. . . The fact is that there is tremendous interest among unbelieving students in hearing a rational presentation and defense of the gospel, and some will be ready to respond with trust in Christ. To speak frankly, we do not know how one could minister effectively in a public way on our university campuses without training in philosophy.{3}*

This is a strong endorsement of the value of philosophy in doing university evangelism on today's campuses. But some might be thinking, "What a minute! Doesn't the Bible warn us about the dangers of philosophy? And aren't we urged to avoid such dangers?"

In Colossians 2:8 (NIV), the apostle Paul wrote, "See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ." What does this verse mean? Is Paul saying that Christians shouldn't study philosophy? Let's take a closer look.

First, "the Greek grammar indicates that 'hollow and deceptive' go together with 'philosophy.'"{4} So Paul is not condemning *all* philosophy here. Instead, he's warning the Colossians about being taken captive by a particular "hollow and deceptive" philosophy that was making inroads into their church. Many scholars believe that the philosophy Paul had in mind was a Gnostic-like philosophy that promoted legalism, mysticism, and asceticism.{5}

Second, Paul doesn't forbid the *study* of philosophy in this verse. Rather, he warns the Colossian believers not to be *taken captive* by empty and deceptive human speculation. This

distinction is important. One can *study* philosophy, even "empty and deceptive" philosophy, without being *taken captive* by it.

What does it mean to be "taken captive"? When men are taken captive in war, they are forced to go where their captors lead them. They may only be permitted to see and hear certain things, or to eat and sleep at certain times. In short, captives are under the *control* of their captors. This is what Paul is warning the Colossians about. He's urging them to not let their beliefs and attitudes be *controlled* by an alien, non-Christian philosophy. He's not saying that philosophy in general is bad or that it's wrong to study philosophy as an academic discipline.

But doesn't Paul also say that God has made foolish the wisdom of the world? And doesn't *this* count against the study of philosophy?

Is Worldly Wisdom Worthless?

In 1 Corinthians 1:20 (NIV) the apostle Paul wrote, "Where is the wise man? Where is the scholar? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?" Some Christians think this passage teaches that the study of philosophy and human wisdom is both foolish and a waste of time. But is this correct? Is that really what Paul was saying in this passage? I personally don't think so.

We must remember that Paul himself had at least some knowledge of both pagan philosophy and literature – and he made much use of reasoning in personal evangelism. In Acts 17 we learn that while Paul was in Athens "he *reasoned* in the synagogue with the Jews and the God-fearing Greeks, as well as in the marketplace day by day with those who happened to be there" (v. 17; NIV). On one occasion he spent time conversing and disputing with some of the Stoic and Epicurean philosophers

(v. 18). Further, when it suited his purposes, Paul could quote freely (and accurately) from the writings of pagan poets. In Acts 17:28 he cites with approval both the Cretan poet Epimenides and the Cilician poet Aratus, using them to make a *valid theological point about the nature of God and man* to the educated members of the Athenian Areopagus. Thus, we should at least be cautious before asserting that Paul was opposed to *all* philosophy and human wisdom. He obviously wasn't.

But if this is so, then in what sense has God made foolish the wisdom of the world? What did Paul mean when he wrote this? The answer, I think, can be found (at least in part) in the very next verse: "For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not *come to* know God, God was well-pleased through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe" (1 Cor. 1:21; NASB). In other words, as Craig and Moreland observe, "the gospel of salvation could never have been discovered by philosophy, but had to be revealed by the biblical God who acts in history."{6} This clearly indicates the *limitations* of philosophy and human wisdom. But the fact that these disciplines have very real *limitations* in no way implies that they are utterly *worthless*. We need to appreciate something for what it is, recognizing its limitations, but appreciating its value all the same. Philosophy by itself could never have discovered the gospel. But this doesn't mean that it's not still a valuable ally in the search for truth and a valuable resource for carefully thinking through some of life's greatest mysteries.

In the remainder of this article, we'll explore some of the ways in which philosophy *is* valuable, both for the individual Christian and for the ministry of the church.

The Value of Philosophy (Part 1)

Moreland and Craig observe that "throughout the history of

Christianity, philosophy has played an important role in the life of the church and the spread and defense of the gospel of Christ."{7}

John Wesley, the famous revivalist and theologian, seemed well-aware of this fact. In 1756 he delivered "An Address to the Clergy". Among the various qualifications that Wesley thought a good minister should have, one was a basic knowledge of philosophy. He challenged his fellow clergymen with these questions: "Am I a tolerable master of the sciences? Have I gone through the very gate of them, logic? . . . Do I understand metaphysics; if not the . . . subtleties of . . . Aquinas, yet the first rudiments, the general principles, of that useful science?"{8} It's interesting to note that Wesley's passion for preaching and evangelism didn't cause him to denigrate the importance of basic philosophical knowledge. Indeed, he rather insists on its importance for anyone involved in the teaching and preaching ministries of the church.

But *why* is philosophy valuable? What practical benefits does it offer those involved in regular Christian service? And how has it contributed to the health and well-being of the church throughout history? Drs. Moreland and Craig list many reasons why philosophy is (and has been) such an important part of a thriving Christian community.{9}

In the first place, philosophy is of tremendous value in the tasks of Christian apologetics and polemics. Whereas the goal of apologetics is to provide a reasoned defense of the truth of Christianity, "polemics is the task of criticizing and refuting alternative views of the world."{10} Both tasks are important, and both are biblical. The apostle Peter tells us to always be ready "to make a defense" for the hope that we have in Christ (1 Pet. 3:15; NASB). Jude exhorts us to "contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints" (v. 3; NASB). And Paul says that elders in the church should "be able both to exhort in sound

doctrine and to refute those who contradict" (Tit. 1:9; NASB). The proper use of philosophy can be a great help in fulfilling each of these biblical injunctions.

Additionally, philosophy serves as the handmaid of theology by bringing clarity and precision to the formulation of Christian doctrine. "For example, philosophers help to clarify the different attributes of God; they can show that the doctrines of the Trinity and the Incarnation are not contradictory; they can shed light on the nature of human freedom, and so on."{11} In other words, the task of the theologian is made easier with the help of his friends in the philosophy department!

The Value of Philosophy (Part 2)

Let's consider a few more ways in which philosophy can help strengthen and support both the individual believer and the universal church.

First, careful philosophical reflection is one of the ways in which human beings uniquely express that they are made in the image and likeness of God. As Drs. Craig and Moreland observe, "God . . . is a rational being, and humans are made like him in this respect."{12} One of the ways in which we can honor God's commandment to love him with our minds (Matt. 22:37) is to give serious philosophical consideration to what God has revealed about himself in creation, conscience, history, and the Bible. As we reverently reflect on the attributes of God, or His work in creation and redemption, we aren't merely engaged in a useless academic exercise. On the contrary, we are loving God with our minds—and our hearts are often led to worship and adore the One "who alone is immortal and . . . lives in unapproachable light" (1 Tim. 6:16; NIV).

But philosophy isn't only of value for the individual believer; it's also of value for the universal church. Commenting on John Gager's book, *Kingdom and Community: The*

Social World of Early Christianity, Drs. Moreland and Craig write:

> *The early church faced intellectual and cultural ridicule from Romans and Greeks. This ridicule threatened internal cohesion within the church and its evangelistic boldness toward unbelievers. Gager argues that it was primarily the presence of philosophers and apologists within the church that enhanced the self-image of the Christian community because these early scholars showed that the Christian community was just as rich intellectually and culturally as was the pagan culture surrounding it.{13}*

Christian philosophers and apologists in our own day continue to serve a similar function. By carefully explaining and defending the Christian faith, they help enhance the self-image of the church, increase the confidence and boldness of believers in evangelism, and help keep Christianity a viable option among sincere seekers in the intellectual marketplace of ideas.

Of course, not all philosophy is friendly to Christianity. Indeed, some of it is downright hostile. But this shouldn't cause Christians to abandon the task and (for some) even calling of philosophy. The church has always needed, and still needs today, talented men and women who can use philosophy to rationally declare and defend the Christian faith to everyone who asks for a reason for the hope that we have in Christ (1 Pet. 3:15). As C.S. Lewis once said, "Good philosophy must exist, if for no other reason, because bad philosophy needs to be answered."{14} These are just a few of the reasons why we shouldn't hate philosophy.

Notes

1. Tertullian, "The Prescriptions Against the Heretics," trans. S.L. Greenslade, in *Early Latin Theology* (Vol. V in "The Library of Christian Classics"; Philadelphia: Westminster

Press, 1956), 31-32; cited in Hugh T. Kerr, ed., *Readings in Christian Thought* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989), 39.
2. William Lane Craig and J.P. Moreland, *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 13.
3. Ibid., 4-5.
4. Ibid., 18.
5. Norman Geisler and Thomas Howe, *When Critics Ask: A Popular Handbook on Bible Difficulties* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 2000), 487.
6. Craig and Moreland, 19.
7. Ibid., 12.
8. John Wesley, "An Address to the Clergy," delivered February 6, 1756. Reprinted in *The Works of John Wesley*, 3d ed., 7 vols. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 1996), 6:217-31; cited in Craig and Moreland, 4.
9. See Craig and Moreland, 14-17. I have relied heavily on their observations in this, and the following, section of this article.
10. Ibid., 15.
11. Ibid.
12. Ibid.
13. Ibid., 16.
14. C.S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1949), 50; cited in Craig and Moreland, 17.

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