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Clearing up Confusion about Heaven and Hell

REVELATION 20:11–21:4

PLUS Social Media / Scattered Seed / Three Tragic Consequences of a Two-Party System
Not Willing to Believe / Who Is the Elder Brother? / Islam and Calvinism **AND MORE**

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FROM THE EDITOR

The “society” in Grace Evangelical Society means *you*. We exist to not only reach the lost with the promise of life but also to build up believers like you with sound doctrine and Bible studies.

That’s why we publish *Grace in Focus*, as well as our books, journal, and blog.

But in order to serve and minister to you better, we need to know more about you.

You support this ministry financially, so we want your input on what we should be doing. As a small ministry, we often change things based on what we hear from our supporters.

So we came up with a survey (see pp. 41-42) that I hope you will fill out and return to us. You already bless us with your generous donations, and I pray you also bless us with your considered opinions. You can also fill out the survey online, by going to our website, faithalone.org.

In this issue of *Grace in Focus* there are a number of thought-provoking articles I trust you will enjoy. To give you just a few highlights—

Ken Yates shows that the real problem with sinners is not that they are *unable* to believe, but that they are *unwilling*.

Phil Congdon offers a provocative comparison between the beliefs of Islam and Calvinism.

John Niemelä defends the evangelistic nature of John’s Gospel against the objection that it was written so disciples would continue to believe, instead of being written so unbelievers would come to believe for the first time.



Well, That’s *Your* Opinion

Shawn Lazar, **EDITOR**

Brad Daskocil gives an example of why you should trust God’s Word when it appears to conflict with the sciences.

And Bob makes some observations about heaven and hell, in order to bring the traditional beliefs about the location of our eternal destiny, and the nature of suffering in hell, more in line with Scripture.

I trust you’ll find all the articles in this issue to be helpful and I hope to hear from you soon.

Warmly,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read "S. Lazar".

Clearing up Confusion about Heaven and Hell

REVELATION 20:11–21:4





By Bob Wilkin

Most people think that they know a lot about heaven and hell. But most popular ideas about heaven and hell do not actually come from the Bible, but from Greek philosophy, especially Plato, and from medieval writings like Dante's *Inferno*.

Part 1: Heaven Isn't What Most People Suppose

We sing many songs about heaven, like “When We All Get to Heaven” and “Heaven Is a Wonderful Place.”

But what are we thinking about when we sing such songs? Are we thinking about where we will be if we die before the Rapture? That is not what these songs are about. These songs are about where we will spend *eternity*.

The reason we sing about heaven as our eternal home is because most pastors and theologians believe it will be our eternal home. As a result, many churchgoers believe that as well. Most people in Christianity think that heaven will be the eternal home of Christians.

Most Fail to Recognize That There Are Three Heavens, Not One Heaven

The Greek word which is often translated as *heaven* is *ouranos*. Yes, it sometimes refers to the place where believers who have died are now.

But more often it refers to the place where the birds fly. It is sometimes translated as *sky*, sometimes as *air*, and sometimes as *heaven* when what is meant is the atmosphere around the earth. See Matt 6:26; 8:20; 13:32; Mark 4:4, 32; Luke 13:19; Acts 10:12; 11:6.

In Scripture that is *the first heaven*.

It also often refers to the place where the stars and the planets outside our solar system are. Outer space is often called *the heavens*. When God created “the heavens and the earth,” the heavens there refers to all the planets and the stars outside of earth. See Heb 1:10-11; 2 Pet 3:7, 10, 12; 21:1.

In Scripture that is *the second heaven*.

Occasionally, but not often—except in the Book of Revelation—the term *ouranos* refers to the place where God’s glory is localized and where departed believers await Christ’s return. See 2 Cor 12:2-4; Rev 4:1-11; 8:1-6; 16:11.

That is called *the third heaven* in Scripture.

The Lord Jesus and His Apostles Said That the Current Heavens Will Be Destroyed

When the Scriptures say that “heaven will pass away,” they do not mean the third heaven will pass away. That refers to the first and second heavens.

The entire universe, except for the third heaven, will be destroyed and the taint of sin completely eliminated. Sin, I believe, is why we will get a new universe.

I’m not sure if the fall, and possibly the flood, resulted in change in the universe. Were asteroids and meteors part of the original design? Will they be part of the new heavens and the new earth?

Were all planets originally inhabitable? Will all planets be inhabitable in the eternal state?

The Bible does not answer these questions. But what it does say is that the first and second heavens will be destroyed and new untainted ones created. See Matt 5:18; 24:35; 2 Pet 3:10; Rev 21:1-3.

Most Fail to Read the Bible to the Very End

When I was on staff with Campus Crusade for Christ we used to sing a song called, “Heaven Is a Wonderful Place.” We’d sing about how wonderful heaven is, how it is filled with glory and grace. “I want to see my Savior’s face! Heaven is a wonderful place. I want to go there.” Students and staff alike loved the song. But, unfortunately that song presents a flawed view of heaven.

Yes, heaven is a wonderful place, filled with glory and grace. And yes my Savior is there right now. However, the song gives the distinct impression that we will spend eternity in heaven in the presence of Jesus. But neither the Lord Jesus nor believers will spend eternity in the third heaven. Jesus and believers

will spend eternity on the new earth. The third heaven wasn’t made for humans, and humans weren’t made for the third heaven. See Revelation 21-22.

Most Fail to Carefully Read the First Three Chapters in the Bible

One simple way we know this is by reading the opening chapters of Genesis. If Adam and Eve had not sinned, then there is no question but Adam and Eve and all their descendants would have lived on earth at least until they filled it. Think about that for a moment. God’s design for human beings was not that they live in the third heaven forever. He didn’t design us for the third heaven. He gave us bodies and a planet on which to use those bodies. While angels arguably

were designed to spend at least some of their time in the third heaven, humans were not.

The first and last chapters of the Bible make it clear that God has come to dwell with us on earth. If your aim has been to spend eternity in heaven, I hope you will give up on that ambition. That isn’t for you.

What Will the New Earth Be Like?

Revelation 21-22 tells us that it will be beautiful, with streets and buildings of gold. It will have lots of precious stones. The world capital, the New Jerusalem, will be bigger than most countries today.

Surely the new earth will be better than this earth and better even than the earth before the flood. Remember, before the flood people lived 900+ years even on a fallen world. The new earth will be perfect. And the people there will be perfect. No more sin. It will be an amazing place to live.

We Need to Change the Way We Think about Heaven

The way we think about heaven is wrong and we need to be transformed by the renewing of our minds (Rom 12:2; 2 Cor 3:18). Our eternity is more glorious than we can imagine. But we should be imagining living in the right place to start with. And we should imagine *serving* the Lord Jesus Christ forever (Rev 22:5).

“If your aim has been to spend eternity in heaven, I hope you will give up on that ambition. That isn’t for you.”

Most likely, believers who are now in heaven are longing for the Rapture. They want to be reunited with living believers. Earth is calling them home. They long to see Israel restored to its glorious position as God's chosen nation. The thought of seeing the Lord Jesus sitting on the throne of David and ruling from Jerusalem thrills them. The Millennium is such a glorious time to anticipate. And the New Jerusalem, the twelve gates of pearl, the streets of gold, the nations, and the glorious sinless new earth in which righteousness dwells, is something to capture our imaginations, as well as the imaginations of those now in heaven.

Of course, no one in heaven is upset or disappointed. But they know that heaven is not their home. They realize they are just passing through on their way back to earth.

One day Sharon and I were walking with our friends Will and Sue Nece. I said something about how I longed to spend eternity in heaven. Will looked over and asked, "Why would you long for that? Our eternal home is the new earth, not heaven. Revelation 21-22 shows that."

That was a eureka experience for me. I saw right away he was right. And I began to study more. And my enthusiasm grew for the life to come. I believe your enthusiasm will grow as well if you get your eternal focus on the new earth, where it should be.

Part 2: Hell Isn't What Most People Suppose

Here are some popular ideas about hell that are not actually found anywhere in the Bible:

- People's skin is on fire.
- Fire shoots from the noses, mouths, eyes, and ears of people.
- The physical pain is worse than any pain ever experienced in this life including childbirth, kidney stones, and torture.
- The pain is intolerable all the time and never lessens.

In an article on hell in *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* (NIDNTT) Bietenhard says, "In contrast with later Christian writings and ideas, the torments of hell are not described in the New Testament" (Vol 2, p. 209).

While it might be possible that some of those popular ideas are true, if they are not found in the Bible, we should back off on saying "Thus saith the Lord" when it comes to speculation, which is what that is.

Let's start by looking at three leading passages in Scripture about hell.

Three Key Biblical Passages on Hell

The Rich Man, Lazarus, and Abraham (Luke 16:19-31)

We really don't know the level of the rich man's torment. Since he is able to carry on an intelligent conversation, it is highly unlikely his suffering is at the very top end of the scale. We do know his torment is conscious and that the flames in his environment are real flames.

But there is no hint here that the man is on fire. He is in a fiery environment,¹ like being near a roaring fire or a lava flow.

We do not know how this man's sufferings compares to others in Sheol. Is this the worst type of suffering there? Is this average? Is this the least?

This is but a snapshot of the man's experience in Sheol. Is his experience like this all the time? Or might his experience be worse than this at times and better at other times? The Lord does not reveal that information.

The bottom line is that while this text gives us some ideas about what hell is like, it doesn't tell us much.

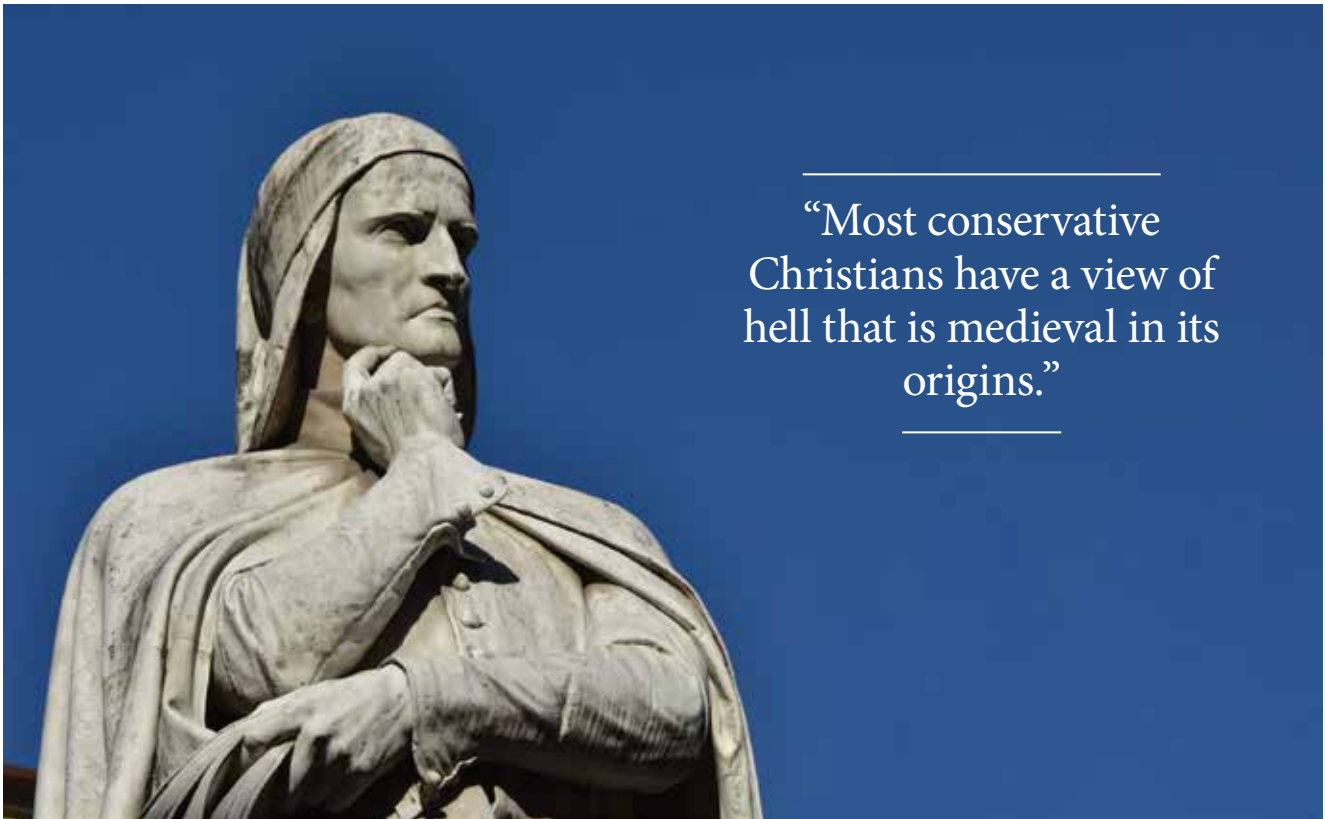
The Smoke of Their Torment Ascends Forever (Revelation 14:11)

An angel reports that all who take the mark of the beast during the Tribulation will be tormented: "The smoke of their torment ascends forever and ever; and they have no rest day or night, who worship the beast and his image, and whoever receives the mark of his name."

This verse shows that the torment in the lake of fire for unbelievers from the Tribulation will be eternal. That they have no rest day or night (a figure of speech called *merism*) probably is not saying one way or the other whether the torment varies in intensity throughout each day, but about an inability to escape the torment. Torment will be a daily experience forever for those in the lake of fire.

Compare Rev 20:10, which uses the same language to say that the devil, the beast, and the false prophet "will be tormented night and day *forever and ever* [*aiōnas tōn aiōnōn*]."

The verse before Rev 14:11 speaks of fire and brimstone, which is the source of the smoke mentioned in



“Most conservative Christians have a view of hell that is medieval in its origins.”

v 11. There is no reason to believe that this is anything other than literal fire, brimstone, and smoke.

While we get some general idea here of what torment in the lake of fire will be like, there is no specificity. We don't yet know how much the suffering will be, what the nature of the suffering will be, whether it will fluctuate in magnitude for each person, or whether the torment will vary from person to person.

Mocking New Arrivals in Hell (Isaiah 14:9-11)

This passage is little known, but adds some information about Sheol that we do not find in other texts.

The passage speaks of the king of Babylon going to Sheol (vv 9-11) as well as the fall of Lucifer when he led an angelic rebellion against God (vv 12-15).²

If there is some measure of pleasure in mocking *new arrivals* in Sheol, it seems likely that people in Sheol also mock each other *daily*. And it seems likely that they will mock each other for eternity in the lake of fire. This will cause emotional pain to the ones being mocked. But it will also cause a measure of sadistic delight for the ones doing the mocking. That won't eliminate their torment. But it might well distract them from it to a degree.

Where Is Hell?

Hell (also called Hades, Sheol, Abbadon, and the Pit—and possibly the Abyss and Tartarus and Gehenna) is not the place where Satan, fallen angels, demons, and unbelievers will spend eternity. That is called the lake of fire.

The location of hell is almost certainly the center of the current earth. Whenever people died prior to Jesus' ascension, they are said to have gone down. The only place down from the earth's surface is under the earth. The earth's core is molten, fitting the description of flames.

The Scriptures do not say or even hint where the lake of fire will be. Hypothetically, it might end up being in the center of the new earth. However, since the new earth and indeed the new universe will be free from sin and from its remnants, it is extremely likely that the lake of fire will be in a completely different place than the new earth and the new universe.

Two Extreme and Unbiblical Views About the Nature of the Suffering in Hell

Extreme View #1: The Suffering Will Be Intolerable

Most conservative Christians have a view of hell that is medieval in its origins. Their view of hell does not come from Bible passages on the subject.

Henry Buis writes, “There is a noticeable increase in the crudeness of the description of hell” in the Middle Ages.³ He goes on to tell of the descriptions of Venerable Bede (AD 673-735) and of Dante Alighieri (AD 1265-1321) in his famous poem *Inferno*. Bede speaks of flames coming out of people’s ears, eyes, nostrils, and even every pore of their skin.⁴

Many conservative Christians listen to preachers who have a medieval view of hell. These preachers speak of hell as a place of *intolerable* pain, of pain *worse than* anything ever suffered here on earth.

The medieval/conservative view is so horrendous that it is no wonder that liberals have developed various ways of taking the sting out of hell. However, today it is not simply liberals who believe that unbelievers will not be tormented forever. Many conservative Evangelicals now adopt this unbiblical view.

Extreme View #2: No Humans Will Experience Any Suffering in Hell

Many cannot imagine that God would allow for eternal suffering. So they create an eternal future which makes more sense to them.

There are several different ways in which Evangelicals speak of a future in which no one (or maybe just a small number of incorrigibles) suffers.

Annihilationism. Some teach that after the Great White Throne Judgment (Rev 20:11-15) all of unbelieving humans will be annihilated. That is, they will cease to exist. This view is called *annihilationism*, *conditional immortality*, or simply *conditionalism*.

The problem with this view, as with the ones which follow, is that it does not take the teachings of Scripture about eternal torment seriously.

Postmortem conversions. Others argue that the torment of unbelievers will be eternal, but that people have the opportunity to hear and believe the message of life after they die. Thus people die and go to a place of suffering in Sheol. While there, they should

become quite open to the promise of life. But then one day they will appear before Jesus at the Great White Throne Judgment. If a person has not come to faith in Jesus by that time, the Lord Himself will share the message of life at that time, giving each person one last chance to be born again and to escape eternal torment.

The idea here is that most people will come to faith in Jesus and escape condemnation. Thus, while the lake of fire will indeed be a place of eternal suffering, most people won’t be there.

While this view is not universalism, it is close to it. Instead of few finding the way (Matt 7:13-14), most find the way, at least eventually.

Universalism. Still others indeed argue for universalism. In this view 100% of mankind enters the kingdom. No human being will have the lake of fire as his eternal abode.

In the past this view was widely rejected by conservative Evangelicals. The Bible clearly rejects this notion. However, over the past decade or two, an increasing number of Evangelicals hold this view.⁵

Once again, this view fails because it ignores or rejects the clear teaching of the Word of God.

Unconscious Torment. Another view is that the suffering will be unconscious. What is unconscious suffering? I don’t know. I suppose it is pain which a person is unaware that he is experiencing. But is it really pain if a person doesn’t feel it?

This view is not supported by Scripture either.

The Truth: The Torment in the Lake of Fire Will Be Tolerable

A view closer to mine than any of the preceding, yet still significantly different, is the view that the torment in the lake of fire will be mental and spiritual, but not physical. This view is a bit unique. In a book entitled *Sense and Nonsense about Heaven and Hell*, Boa and Bowman say: “We embrace the view that there will be endless torment in Hell, but it will be spiritual rather than physical in nature.”⁶ Here is how they define *spiritual torment*: “It will consist of spiritual or mental anguish, perhaps in the form of regret, an abiding sense of loss, and the devastation of permanent exile from God, the world, and all that is good, beautiful, whole, and meaningful.”⁷ Thus in their view there will be eternal suffering that is conscious, but it will not in any sense be physical.

“God is not going to give unbelievers an eternal experience that is unbearable.”



A more accurate view is that the torment in the lake of fire will be physical, mental, and spiritual torment, but that all of it will be tolerable. None of it will be unbearable. See Matt 11:22, 24.

The Lord taught both degrees of joy in the kingdom and degrees of suffering in the lake of fire.

God is not going to give unbelievers an eternal experience that is unbearable. He could. He could set it up so people had level 10 suffering 24/7/365, with no breaks and no escape. But He will not do that. Such suffering could not be described as *tolerable* or *more tolerable*.

Which unbelievers get the more tolerable torment may surprise us. Those of Sodom and Gomorrah and Tyre and Sidon were notorious sinners. Yet their

torment will be more tolerable than law abiding, legalistic, self-righteous Jews of the first century who rejected the Messiah when they saw and heard Him directly (Matt 11:22, 24). Degree of torment will be based in great part on how much revelation from God a person rejected.

Practical Concerns about Hell

There are practical problems if our view of hell involves too much or too little torment.

If we believe and teach that the torment in the lake of fire will be worse than what the Bible actually says, these practical problems result:

1. We will hinder our evangelistic efforts with some, if not many, people (unless we do not share our view of the lake of fire). If an unbeliever is presented a view of hell that is far worse than the Bible portrays, he may be repelled from Christianity entirely. Many people under forty today are turned off by the medieval view of hell. They figure that nothing could be worse than what Hitler or Stalin or Pol Pot did. They cannot conceive of God as doing something to people that is more painful than what these men did. Thus they reject hell, and sometimes with it heaven, the kingdom, life after death, and Christianity.
2. A secondary problem is that this teaching of hell is normally not coupled with the message of justification by faith alone. Instead, it is routinely joined with a call to turn from one's sins, give one's life to Christ, follow Him, and serve Him. The message of an intolerable eternity fits well within works salvation, but not so well with justification by faith alone.

If our view of hell is too lenient there are also practical problems:

1. If a person teaches the view of annihilationism or no conscious torment, his listeners would certainly be less concerned about their eternal destiny and the possibility that they may be wrong than they would be if they had been presented with a Biblical view of hell and the lake of fire. There are many people who are not too bothered by an eternal loss of consciousness or ceasing to exist.
2. The listener might well doubt the truthfulness of the Bible. If the listener knows that the Bible speaks of eternal torment, and yet the evangelist speaking to him says there is no eternal torment, then how does he know if anything else the Bible says is true?

Conclusion

When an English reader of the Bible sees the words *heaven* and *hell*, he should not simply assume he knows what is meant.

Heaven has three main meanings in Scripture: the sky, outer space where the stars and planets are, and the place where God's shekinah glory is and where believers who have died currently are.

The third heaven will not be the eternal dwelling place for believers. Believers will spend eternity on the new earth, which is where the Lord Jesus will be.


Prior to Jesus' ascension into heaven, hell/Sheol/Hades was the place of all who had died, both believers and unbelievers.

Since Jesus' ascension, there are no believers in hell/Sheol/Hades. It only holds unbelievers who have died.

The current experience of unbelievers in hell is bad, but bearable.

Unbelievers will spend eternity not in hell, but in the lake of fire.

The eternal experience of unbelievers in the lake of fire will be bad, but tolerable.

It is time that we move back to Scripture in order to understand what heaven and hell really are. 



Bob Wilkin is Executive Director of Grace Evangelical Society. He lives in Highland Village, TX with his wife of 40 years, Sharon. His latest book is What Is the Outer Darkness? (co-authored with Zane Hodges).

*This article is condensed from chapters 5&6 of *The Ten Most Misunderstood Words in the Bible*

(Denton, TX: Grace Evangelical Society, 2012).

1. The words "in this flame" mean he is living in a fiery place. It is hot there, hence his thirst. If he had been literally on fire as some might think, then he would not have been concerned about being thirsty.

2. It should be noted that many commentators suggest that vv 12-15 also refer to the king of Babylon. In this view the designations *Lucifer* (NKJV) should be translated as *day star* or *morning star* and is being used figuratively of an earthly king, not of Lucifer himself. However, there is good reason to believe that vv 12-15 do refer to Lucifer. Compare Ezek 28:12-15.

3. Henry Buis, *The Doctrine of Eternal Punishment* (Philadelphia, PA: P&R Publishing, 1957).

4. *Ibid.*, p. 67.

5. Brennan Manning, a promoter of contemplative spirituality, has promoted this view for years and has won many Evangelicals to his view. Many in the contemplative spirituality movement believe in either universalism or annihilationism. In March 2011 famed emerging church pastor Rob Bell, pastor of a church of 10,000, released a book in which he argues that unbelievers will not spend eternity in hell. Many others in the emerging church movement have rejected the idea of anyone being tormented forever.

6. Kenneth D. Boa and Robert M. Bowman, Jr., *Sense and Nonsense about Heaven and Hell* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2007), p. 119.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 115.

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Scattered Seed

(Acts 8:1-8)





By Zane C. Hodges

A Time of Persecution

This passage is pertinent at a time when Christians may anticipate approaching stress or persecution from an ultimate “super-church,” for it is misguided religion which most usually is hostile to the faith (cf. John 16:2). Such is represented here by Saul.

8:1. Saul is seen as **sympathizing with** the murder of Stephen. Thus, as a religious zealot, he was nonetheless as far from God as possible, for God did not sympathize with Stephen’s death. Just the opposite. God’s thoughts and Saul’s are at opposite ends of the spectrum. So also are the thoughts of many modern religionists, however sincere. Out of this springs persecution (John 16:2).

Nevertheless, even though Saul’s thoughts are opposed to God’s thoughts, he and his fellow persecutors become instruments of the divine purpose. They are used to scatter believers and hence to widen the testimony of Christ (v 4; cf. 1:8).

They were all scattered. The word *scattered* (*diesparēsan*, vv 1, 4) is related etymologically to *speirō* used of sowing seed. Indeed, the ancient method of seed-sowing, flinging a handful of seed taken from a seed-sack, was in effect scattering. Thus the parable of Matt 13:24ff finds illustration. For in

Acts 8:1 the Son of Man, reaching into the full seed-sack of Jerusalem, is flinging His seed forth into “His field” that these “children of the kingdom” might there become fruitful. Philip at Samaria illustrates the abundant fruitfulness of a single seed.

Thus the man who was making havoc of the church (v 3) was in fact being used by the Lord Jesus to further it. For all the efforts of men serve to advance the plan of God. For the only power in heaven or on earth is in the hands of the Church’s Head (Matt 28:18). Saul thus illustrates the irresistible reality of Stephen’s testimony. Christ was indeed at the right hand of God (7:56).

8:2-4. And pious men carried Stephen to his burial. This is an act of courage often overlooked. It was risky to even *identify* with Stephen (as subsequent persecution proved), much less to publicly mourn his death with **great lamentation**. It would have been easy to rationalize why they should do nothing for the martyr. For example, the authorities would have buried him, for Jewish custom called for a criminal’s burial, though no mourning (cf. F. F. Bruce, *Acts*, in loc.). But to these men Stephen was no criminal. That is why they mourned **over him**. Note that true mourning is Christian and Biblical, and it is false pseudo-piety to set it aside.

Yet they act courageously. And the secret of that courage is found in the description **pious** (*eulabēis*). The word *pious* is only used in Acts of Christians. Times of persecution reveal true piety. The nominal Christian may shrink with fear, but the “devout” believer steps out in faith, as did these men. Persecution, or danger, did not *make* them devout, but since they were already devout, they were prepared to face it. We see them as “devout” by their act recorded here.

The word group to which *eulabēis* belongs has its basic idea in the concept of “fearing.” Thus “fearing” men carried Stephen to his burial, but they were clearly fearing God, not man. The fear of God is the root of true devotion (cf. Prov 29:25; Luke 12:4-5; Heb 13:5-6). Out of true fear of the Lord emerges trust and hence a fearlessness of man. Now is the time to cultivate the devout life, the God-fearing life, so that in times of testing we may, like these, be strong.

The verb *buried* (*sugkomizō*) may be used of bringing in a harvest. Tragic though Stephen’s death was, it was also as the gathering of a sheaf into God’s barn (cf. Matt 13:30 and 43).

Philip Preaches in Samaria

8:5. This passage marks the first step in the gospel’s effort to break down “race” barriers and unite men of diverse nations into a single body in which there would be neither Jew nor Gentile.

Then Philip went down. Though this was geographically the standard way of referring to a movement from Jerusalem, it is noticeable that both of the great geographical movements of Philip’s career recorded in this chapter are “down” (cf. v 26).


Spiritually, Philip was a humble man ever willing to go “down.” There is condescension in his accepting the ministration to the widows in Acts 6, and in his willingness to go to the desert to witness to a single soul (vv 26ff) after successful “city evangelism” (v 6). There is obviously, for a Jew, condescension in preaching to Samaritans.

Morally and spiritually he *went down* to their city. Yet the great message of Christianity is of One Who came down to meet man’s need (Philippians 2). Philip was, in faint measure, like his Lord.

When he was chosen in Acts 6 as a deacon, he was obviously regarded as “full of the Holy Ghost and wisdom” (Acts 6:3). Just as Stephen was full in Acts 7, so Philip was full in Acts 8. Doubtless Philip’s wisdom here derived from a knowledge (which under Apostolic teaching he must surely have gained) of our Lord’s words in Acts 1:8. Though he might well have wondered whether it was right or wise to take this crucial step of preaching to Samaritans, that he was Spirit-led and wise the following verses make clear.

8:6-8. If he doubted whether they would listen, he

found that they **with one accord gave heed**. If he doubted God would work among Samaritans, as He had in Jerusalem, he found God liberated **the possessed** and healed **the lame**. If he feared resentment and bitterness against him as a Jew (cf., e.g., Luke 9:53), he found a city of **great joy** instead. Thus was the wisdom of winning souls again displayed. “He that wins souls is wise” (Prov 11:30).

Note that the gospel and its effects reached their *spirits* (i.e., mind) for they *gave heed* (v 6), and it reached their *bodies* (v 7), and it reached their *souls* (v 8). The gospel is not designed for a Jew as a Jew, but for man—spirit, body, and soul. It was profitable for Samaritans as it is for all men. Its man-suitedness has received worldwide demonstration, in all kinds of cultures and in all ages since that time. It comes from the Creator! 



Zane Hodges taught New Testament Greek and Exegesis at Dallas Theological Seminary. His book, *Acts of the Risen Christ* is forthcoming.

Three Tragic Consequences of a Two-Party System

By Brad Bell

Protestant Theology has long been plagued by one of the same problems as American politics. Ironically, this problem has been around much longer in theology than our current government.

What is it?

A two-party system.

Long before our modern government took form, Protestant theological discussion became gridlocked by two polarized parties—the Calvinists and the Arminians.

Sadly, this two-party system continues to dominate Protestant Theology and stifle good research and edifying conversation.

I present three tragic consequences of the two-party system.

Pre-Determined Theological Categories

When two polarized theological frameworks dominate the landscape, it obscures the possibility that there could be other options. People tend to think in an *either/or* framework.

When talking with a Calvinist, the conversation goes like this:

“So, you’re not a Calvinist?”

“No, I don’t hold to any of the five points of Calvinism.”

“Then you must be an Arminian.”

“No...”

As well, we often see individuals of a Wesleyan/Arminian background complain on our YouTube channel that we are Calvinists because we believe in eternal security.

Why does it have to be *either-or*?

Why can’t we choose *neither* or *other*?

People often write off a theological concept out of hand because they identify it with the “other” party. What other option could there possibly be?



Often, one’s perception of the other party (and sometimes even their own) is not accurate. This leads to the second consequence.

Unclear Discussion

The dominance of these two groups can make it difficult to have clear theological discussions with others. While the two parties dominate theology, what falls under the labels of *Calvinism* and *Arminianism* is extremely broad. No doubt, many self-proclaimed “Calvinists” are appalled at what other self-proclaimed “Calvinists” believe. The titles are used to cover differing and often conflicting views. Conservative, five-point Orthodox Presbyterian Calvinists differ greatly in their theology from self-proclaimed Baptist, four-point Calvinists.

The sweeping titles of Calvinism and Arminianism can make it difficult to get down to the level of discussing the actual concepts, and more fundamentally, the Word of God. This brings us to an even greater consequence of a two-party system.

WHAT IS GRACE EVANGELICAL SOCIETY?

THE GOSPEL PROMISE was under assault in Paul's time and still is today. How many "Christians" have followed the ancient Galatians in believing they can be saved by a mixture of faith and works?

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For more information about our ministry please visit


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Following Men Rather than God

It's as if the Calvinists and Arminians cry out, "vote for us, or your vote doesn't count." There is pressure to identify oneself, to affiliate if you want to be accepted or have ministry opportunities. This obsession with labeling oneself and others as a Calvinist or Arminian often results in greater emphasis on historical and speculative theology than Biblical theology.

I once discussed the need for ongoing Biblical exegesis and research with a self-proclaimed Calvinist. He remarked that Calvin and the Reformers had already done that work. I was aghast! The message was that the Reformers had done the work of going back to the Word of God to formulate their Theology, so we don't need to.

Calvin and Arminius were both Reformers (in fact, they were both ministers in the Reformed Church!) and the debates are still very much alive. How much more so is the need to be constantly renewed by God's Word! Let's scrap the two-party system and move the discussion back to where it needs to be, God's Word. 



Brad Bell is the Social Media Coordinator for Grace Evangelical Society.

"The Bible is the only source of divine viewpoint. It is the very mind of Christ, the living Word (John 1:1) expressed in written form. Therefore, if you, as a believer, are to have the divine viewpoint of life, you must know Bible doctrine. If you do not know God's thoughts on any given matter, how can you possibly think according to the divine viewpoint?"

~R. B. Thieme, Jr.
Mental Attitude Dynamics

NOT WILLING TO BELIEVE

(JOHN 5:40)

By KEN YATES



I have a confession to make. It is a confession that marks me off in many circles today as both an ignorant and an evil man. But it is: I am simply *unwilling* to believe the preachers of global warming.

I have heard their sermons many times. Man has caused the world to warm. As a result, polar bears are dying. The seas are rising. The ice is melting. If something is not done man will destroy the earth.

These preachers of doom and gloom bring forth the evidence. We see polar bears standing on a small patch of ice. They show complicated charts apparently showing changes in temperatures and other atmospheric conditions. Pictures are shown depicting what coastal and tropical areas will look like in just a few decades. Forests will be deserts, and cities along the coast will be under water. There are a host of scientists that confirm our dire future. Books are written by people like the former vice-president of the United States warning us about what is going to happen. President Obama said it was the most important issue facing our nation, and indeed the world, today.

But I am *unwilling* to consider that their evidence is valid. Why? There are a host of reasons. Primarily, as a believer in Jesus Christ, I don't believe man can or will destroy this world. The Bible says that

God Himself will destroy the world after the Millennial Kingdom. It is not until then, at least 1007 years from now, that there will be a new earth.

There are other reasons as well as to why I am *unwilling* to believe in the evidence supposedly supporting man-made global warming. One is my past. I remember well when I was a teenager many scientists were saying an ice age was coming. They had their charts and pictures “proving” time was short indeed. It would be like the time when the dinosaurs died off. Mankind would not survive. The world was getting *colder*.

Another reason is that many times I do not have much confidence in those giving the evidence. In some cases I think there is a political agenda. In other cases I think it is just the accepted mantra of the day and people who are concerned about the environment genuinely feel they are doing what they can to save the world. If we can use enough solar panels and drive smaller cars we will be able to deliver ourselves from disaster.

A further reason is that their prophecies have proven false. For example, I remember, not too long ago, that one expert on global warming said the world would be destroyed by 2015. Similar predictions abound today, with the date moved back a little further.

Finally, in some cases, the preachers of this message do not even believe what they are saying. The former vice-president tells us we must decrease our carbon footprint while he travels in personal jets, lives in a mansion, and has a fleet of very large cars. He has the carbon footprint of a small country. In addition, he has become

extremely wealthy preaching this message. Why the need for tons of cash if the world will not exist in a few years?

It should be noted that I did not say I *couldn't* believe in global warming. I said I was *unwilling* to do so. There is a difference. I am certainly capable of doing it. Maybe in the future I will no longer believe what the Bible says

“Nobody reading the NT, especially the Gospels, can come away with the idea that people *cannot* believe.”

about the end of the world and I will meet global warming enthusiasts I trust. Maybe then I would be willing to look at the evidence and become a believer.

But right now, I am not willing to consider the evidence. My past, and my skeptical attitude towards those who preach that message, cause me to either ignore or outright reject what they say.

The same principles apply when it comes to believing in Jesus Christ for eternal life.

Unable to Believe?

There is a strange teaching that I first encountered in seminary. It is that an unbeliever *cannot believe* in Jesus Christ. He is *unable to believe*. God must give him or her faith. In fact, the unbeliever must be spiritually saved before he can believe. In his recent book, Bob Wilkin refers to one theologian

who said that he knew a man who was a Christian 65 years before he believed!

A statement like that is silly on its face. Nobody reading the NT, especially the Gospels, can come away with the idea that people *cannot* believe. Jesus rebukes those who did not believe in Him during His day, and calls people to believe. That would not make sense if these people could not believe. When God reveals the truth of the message of eternal life to people, the unbeliever is able to believe it. Whoever denies that, does so only because their theological system requires them to do so.

But it is something else to say that an unbeliever may be *unwilling* to believe. The Bible says that this is indeed possible. Many people are unwilling to consider the evidence for the truth of the gospel, just as I am unwilling to consider the evidence for climate change. Perhaps their past makes them unwilling. Perhaps they do not find reliable the one who tells them about eternal life through Christ alone. Or, perhaps they do not consider Christ as reliable. Like my feelings towards the former vice-president, perhaps an unbeliever has strong reservations about the motives of a Christian evangelist, or of Jesus of Nazareth Himself!

Unwilling To Believe

Jesus ran into people just like that in John 5. In this chapter He has a conversation with the religious leaders. The Lord says to these men that they were not willing to come to Him (5:40). The phrase “come to Jesus” meant to believe in Him (cf. John 6:35). They

were unwilling to believe in Him. Why was that?

One reason was they did not see Him as one sent from God. Later, in John 7:52, the religious leaders point out that no prophet had ever come from Galilee, where they believed Jesus originated.

In addition, Jesus was not doing what they expected. Yes, He had healed a man who had been paralyzed for 38 years, but He did it on the Sabbath (5:1-16). This went against their traditions.

Jesus' message also went against their tradition. He preached that one received eternal life simply by faith in Him (5:24). This went against their view that entrance into God's kingdom was accomplished by good works and keeping the Law of Moses. These men studied the Scriptures to find out what good works they needed to do in order to live in the Kingdom (5:39).

Another problem these men had with Jesus concerned their pride. They loved the honor they received as a result of their positions as religious leaders within the community (5:44). Jesus' teaching threatened their standing as leaders. If what Jesus was teaching was true, they would be in danger of losing what was important to them.

Jesus gave them clear evidence that He was the Messiah. He had performed many miracles through the power of God. Not only did He heal the paralyzed man in Jerusalem, He had healed many more (John 2:23). He had even healed one boy over a long distance away (4:46-51). In addition, they had heard His amazing teaching (3:2).

But, they were unwilling to look at the evidence. Jesus points out that even the Scriptures they

looked for to find good works gave evidence of who He was (5:39).

And, as long as they were unwilling to look at the evidence right before their eyes, they *could not* believe (5:44). It is clear that Jesus places the blame on them.

It is not that an unbeliever *cannot believe*. Sometimes, they simply are *unwilling to believe*. They do not want to consider the evidence. They reject the source of that evidence right from the beginning. If and when they change their mind, are willing to consider the evidence, they become able to believe.


We see this truth even among the religious leaders. The Bible says that some of them later did look at the evidence and became believers (John 12:42; Acts 15:5). For whatever reasons they became willing to do so. Perhaps it was the later miracles of Jesus. Perhaps it was the resurrection of Lazarus or even the resurrection of the Lord Himself that made them willing.

Conclusion

The same is true for us today. There are some people who at this time are simply unwilling to listen to the evidence. That may be because of their background or some other reason. But whatever the case, they are unwilling to believe.

It seems to me that in the United States this is becoming more the case. We were never a Christian country, but in the past there was a greater respect for its teachings. It was held in higher regard. People were more willing to give it a hearing.

However, today that is changing. With the dominance of postmodern thought, many do not easily

entertain the idea of absolute truth of any kind, including the truth that Jesus gives eternal life through faith in Him alone. However, we must proclaim that message. We must also remember that God is revealing the message to people who now are unwilling to believe, just like He did with the Jewish religious leaders. Once they are *willing* to consider the evidence, they *can* believe. In some cases, they will be convinced that the evidence is true. At that point they will believe. 



Ken Yates is Editor of the Journal for the Grace Evangelical Society and GES's East Coast speaker. He lives in Columbia, SC.

The Mailbag

By You

We love hearing from you, our brothers and sisters in grace. Send us your notes, letters, and prayers!

“We are thankful for your work and the resources GES provides. We pray the Lord provides for GES in 2017!” ~F.T., Sequim, WA

“I’ve been listening to the Regional Conference in Wyoming, ‘Calvinism: Is it Biblical?’ It’s been really great having you all in my house. I’m looking forward to the national conference!” ~J.H., Bynum, TX

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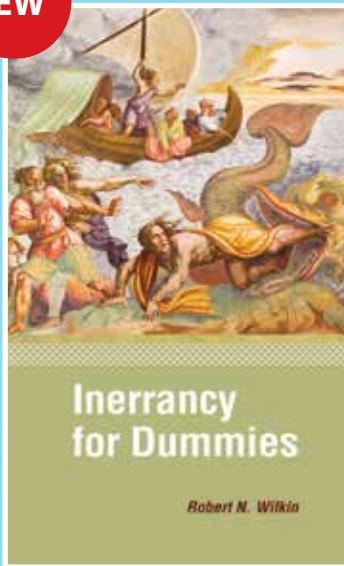
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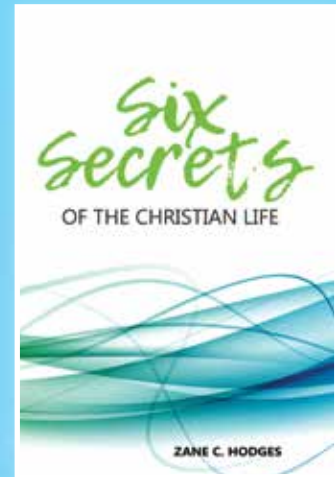
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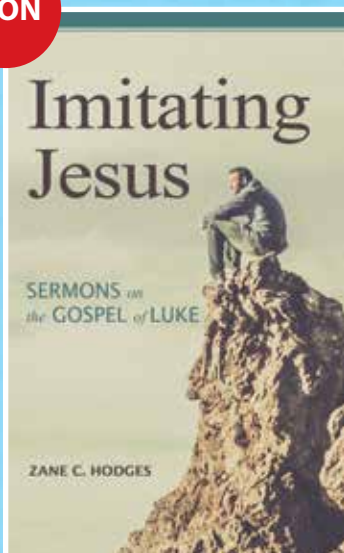
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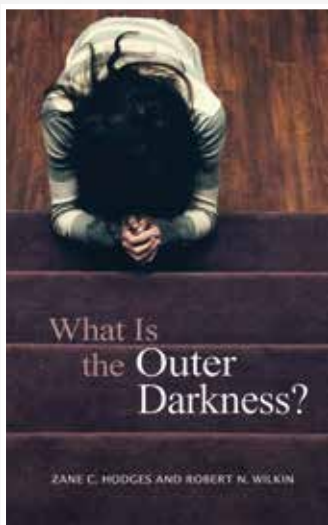
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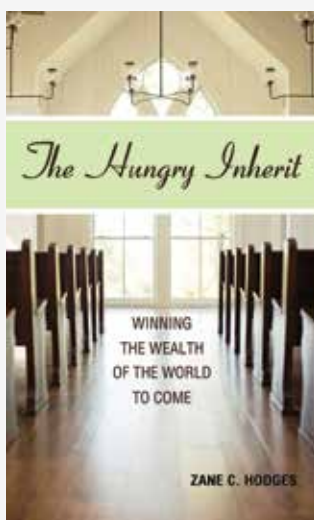
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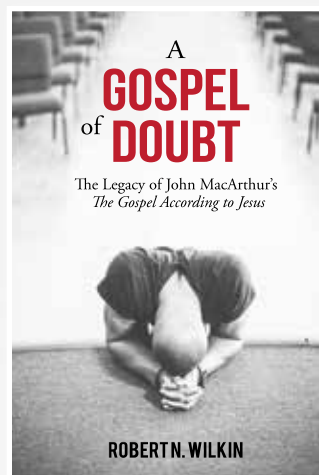
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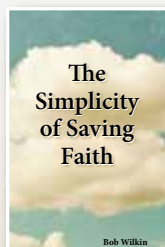
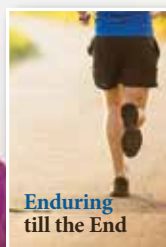
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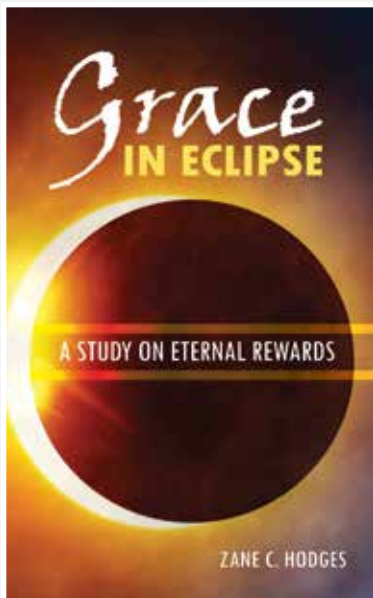
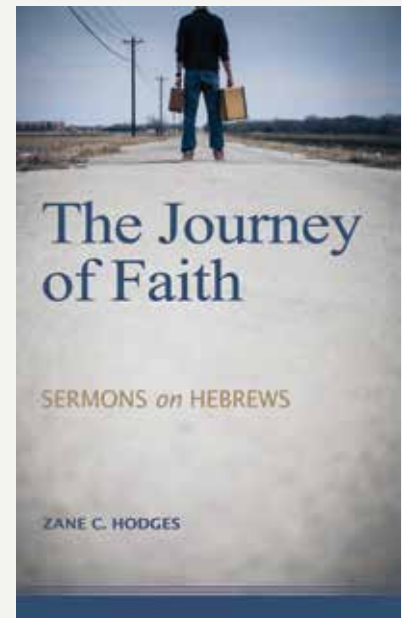
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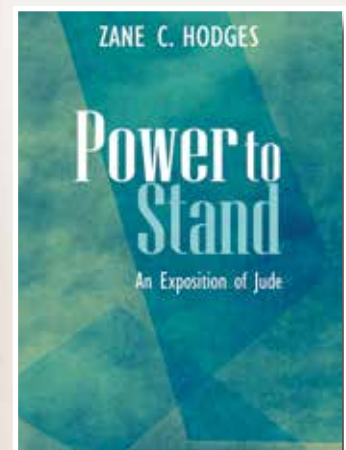
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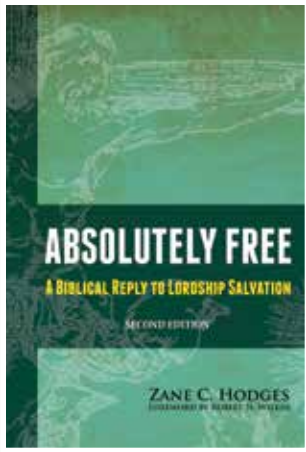
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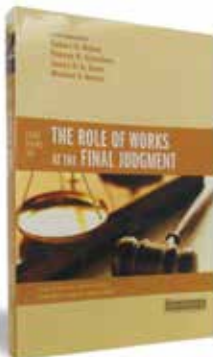
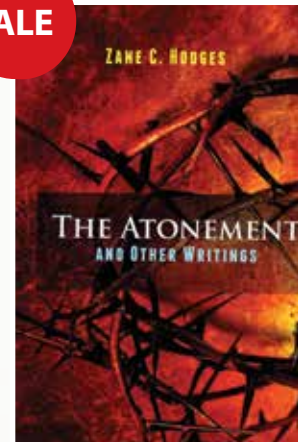
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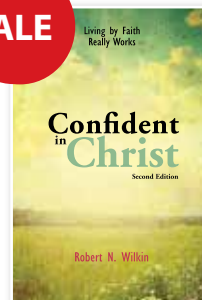
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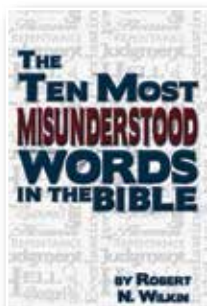
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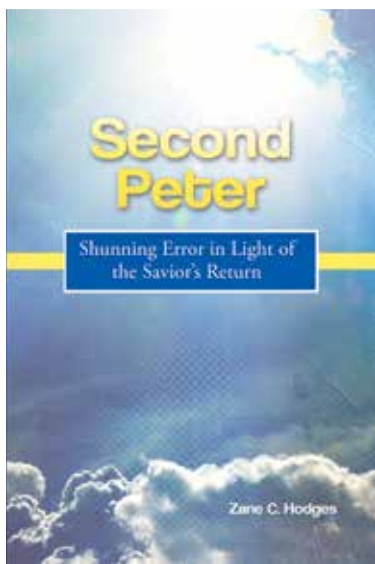
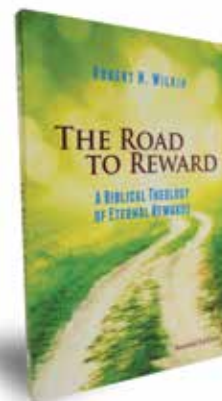
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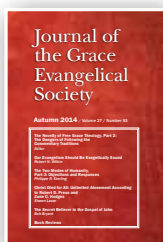
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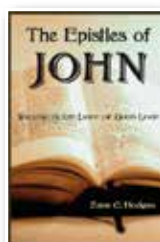




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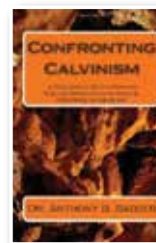


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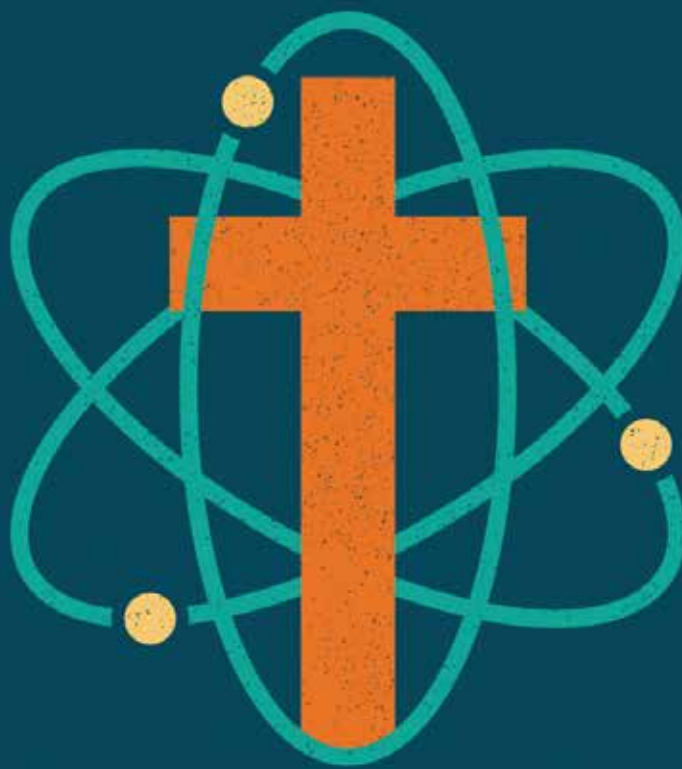
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Interpreting the Bible and the Sciences

By Brad Daskocil

When we study the Bible there can be a propensity to interpret it, and to judge it, in light of our understanding of the sciences. Often our understanding of physics, biology, history, or archaeology, is given greater weight as evidence than what the Bible reports. This diminishes the divine authorship and inspiration of Scripture.

One of the things I have learned over the years is that when the sciences appear to conflict with what the Bible reports, it is usually due to our misunderstanding of Scripture, our misunderstanding of the sciences, or both. Misplaced understandings will lead us to wrong conclusions.

Belshazzar Who?

While there may be many examples of apparent conflict between the Bible and the sciences, one that

illustrates the point is the account of Belshazzar in Daniel 5.

Belshazzar is described by Daniel as the king of Babylon (Dan 5:1). In this familiar story Belshazzar threw a large party for his leaders, which was interrupted by the handwriting on the wall. Belshazzar proceeded to offer rewards to whoever could read and interpret the handwriting, including being made the “third ruler in the kingdom.” Since Belshazzar was killed that very night, he was the final king of Babylon (Dan 5:30-31).

This account was one reason the book of Daniel is considered unreliable. Up until the late 19th century, Belshazzar was not mentioned in the historical records of Babylon known at the time. In fact, history reported that Nabonidus was the last king of Babylon.

So if you were studying the Bible in the year 1850, and there was no historical evidence (at the time) for Belshazzar as king of Babylon, and therefore scientists concluded that Daniel was unreliable, what would you think? What would you think if history told you Nabonidus was the last king of Babylon?

Would you believe the Bible or archeology?

The correct answer would be to believe the written Word of God and Daniel’s account. But would you?

Recent Discoveries

Fortunately, in the late 19th century, archaeology made discoveries that shed light on Belshazzar and the last days of the Babylonian empire.

The cuneiform writing of the Nabonidus Cylinder, as well as some other cuneiform writings, provide evidence about Belshazzar and Nabonidus.¹

You see, Nabonidus did not want to stay in Babylon and run the government. He had an interest in archeology, and travelled to old temple sites in order to excavate and repair them. So he made his son Belshazzar co-regent or co-king. Nabonidus traveled while Belshazzar ruled the government from Babylon.


This unique situation explains why Belshazzar's reward included being made the "third ruler in the kingdom" (Dan 5:7; 5:16; 5:29). Why "third" ruler? Because the first two places were already taken!

Now if you lived in the late 19th century, and you consulted a conservative commentary for help with this passage in Daniel, you would be left wondering why the historical records did not recognize Belshazzar. You might be even more puzzled by the contortions of the commentator trying to explain the apparent discrepancy.²

What Should We Learn From This?

We need to base our understanding of Scripture on sound exegesis.

We need to approach the Scriptures with an open mind, wanting to believe what we learn.

If there is an apparent discrepancy with the sciences, we should not doubt what Scripture records. Instead, we should be skeptical of what the sciences tell us. After all, the sciences change over time, but God's Word remains the same! 



Brad Duskocil is Chairman of the Board for Grace Evangelical Society.

1. See John F. Walvoord, *Daniel: The Key to Prophetic Revelation* (Chicago, IL: Moody, 1971), 113-115; and John C. Whitcomb, *Daniel* (Chicago, IL: Moody, 1985), 70-73.

2. Consider for example, C.F. Keil; *Daniel: Commentary on the Old Testament* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1866-1891), 597-608.

TRUTH IS NOT ESTABLISHED BY DEMOCRACY

"THE FACT THAT THE MAJORITY POSITION ON A GIVEN TOPIC IS ONE THING RATHER THAN ANOTHER DOES NOT IN AND OF ITSELF MAKE THE MAJORITY RIGHT. TRUTH IS NOT ESTABLISHED BY DEMOCRACY; IT IS INDEPENDENT OF THE NUMBER OF VOTES WE GIVE IT. INDEED, THE TRUTH IS SOMETIMES HELD ONLY BY A TINY MINORITY."

~Oliver D. Crisp
Saving Calvinism, p. 100.



JOHN'S GOSPEL: EVANGELISTIC OR NOT?¹

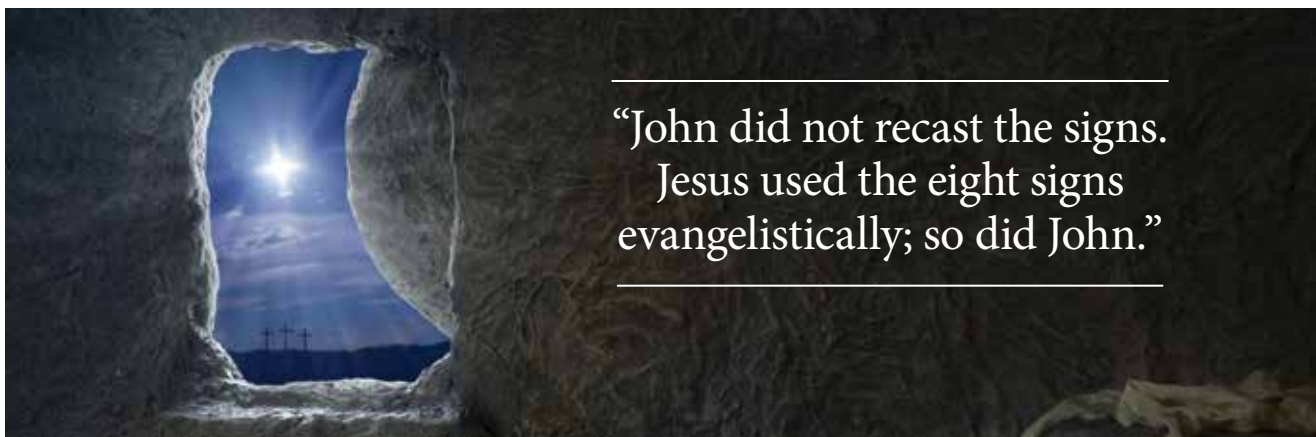
By John H. Niemelä

Believe it or not, there are rumblings against the idea that John's Gospel is evangelistic. What does John 20:30-31 say?

Thus Jesus did many other signs in the presence of His disciples, which are not written in this book. But these signs have been written so you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing this, you may have life by His name.²

There are three reasons why we know John's Gospel is evangelistic:

1. The word *believe* in John 20:31a is not a present tense.
2. Even a present tense in 20:31a would imply unbelieving readers.
3. John 20:31 stays true to the evangelistic purpose for Jesus doing each sign.



“John did not recast the signs.
Jesus used the eight signs
evangelistically; so did John.”

THE WORD “BELIEVE” IN JOHN 20:31A IS NOT A PRESENT TENSE

The critical text of the NT actually does support the aorist in John 20:31a. It prints *pisteu[s]ēte* with brackets around the *s* to signify that three out of five members of the editorial committee voted for the aorist form *pisteusēte*. The majority favored the aorist. John wrote “that you may believe...” That is, John wrote evangelistically to unbelievers.

But what if we were to pretend that *believe* in John 20:31a were a present tense? Would that favor believers as the intended audience of John’s Gospel? No.

EVEN A PRESENT TENSE IN 20:31A WOULD IMPLY UNBELIEVING READERS

Most Greek teachers pound into their students the notion that present tense necessarily implies *continuous action*. Admittedly, it *allows* that sense, but does *not require* it. However, that is not the real issue here.

John certainly would want people (once they had believed) to continue believing until death or the Rapture (1 John 5:13). However, saying that the purpose clause in John 20:31a aims at unending faith would not say that the readers had already believed. The present-tense purpose clauses in John 15:16 illustrate:

“...I *chose* you and *appointed* you that you *should go forth* [present subjunctive of *hupagō*] and *bear* [present subjunctive of *pherō*] a great harvest, and that your harvest *should abide* [present subjunctive of *menō*], so that whatever you ask the Father in My name, He would give you” (emphases added).

Certainly, Jesus wanted the Eleven to go forth *continually*, to bear a great harvest *continually*, and for that harvest to abide *continually*.

Question 1: Which came first? (a) Jesus choosing the Eleven and appointing them? Or (b) them going forth, bearing a great harvest, and that harvest abiding? Clearly, (a) was first. He chose and appointed them so they would begin to (and continue to) go forth and bear a harvest, as well as so that the harvest would begin to (and continue to) abide.

Question 2: As Jesus spoke to the Eleven in the Last Discourse (John 13–17) had they gone out and borne a great harvest? Not at all. Pentecost (fifty-three days later) would mark the beginning of the ministry for which Jesus had chosen and appointed them.

A present tense expressing purposed action *cannot be assumed to have already begun*. Though an author/speaker may wish for a continuance of desired action into the indefinite future, one cannot assume (from this) that the intended action had already begun.

I analyzed every present subjunctive following a *hina* of purpose in John’s Gospel. The purposed action had not yet begun in 85% of the examples (35 of 41). Four uses (10%) were of already-begun actions; two (5%) were ambiguous.³

Even if John had used a present tense in 20:31a (he did not), a present tense would not have created any expectation of a believing readership. Eighty-five percent of the time John uses present tenses for purposed actions that have not-yet-begun. Hence, John 20:30–31 shows that the original readers were unbelievers.

In sum, John 20:31a uses an aorist, urging unbelieving readers to come to believe. But even if John had used a present, the intended readers were still unbelievers.

Now let’s relate John 20:31 to the rest of the book to validate the book’s readership.

JOHN 20:31 STAYS TRUE TO THE EVANGELISTIC PURPOSE FOR JESUS DOING EACH SIGN

John 20:31 reads, “But these *signs* have been written [perfect tense] so you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing *this*, you may have life by His name.”

Note the rendering of the perfect tense at the start of the verse. “These signs have been written,” rather than the generic *these signs are written* that is common. As John nears the end of his Gospel, the perfect tense portrays him reflecting on each of the signs that he had recorded. We might conceive of John saying:

I wrote about Jesus turning water to wine [2:1-11] so that you might believe. I wrote about healing the royal official’s son [4:46-53] so that you might believe. I wrote about healing the lame man [5:1-15] so that you might believe. I wrote about Jesus feeding the 5,000 [6:1-14] so that you might believe. I wrote about Jesus walking on water [6:15-21] so that you might believe. I wrote about healing the man born blind [9:1-7] so that you might believe. I wrote about raising Lazarus [11:1-44] so that you might believe. I wrote about the cross and resurrection [19:1-20:29] so that you might believe.

Now, let us ask a simple, but profound question: What was the purpose for which Jesus did each of these eight signs? Was it (a) so that unbelievers might come to believe in Him? Or was it (b) to prevent people (e.g., the Eleven) who had already believed from abandoning their faith? Of course, the purpose of each of the signs was to convince unbelievers.

Those who imagine that John wrote to prevent Christians from defecting from their faith treat John’s Gospel as revisionist history. Those who view the fourth Gospel as re-engineering the signs from *eliciting faith* to *preventing faith-defection* conceive of John saying something like the following:

Jesus did these signs to bring about faith, but my purpose in recording the signs is not evangelistic. Don’t think of the signs as Jesus did. I am recasting them in a way that Jesus did not intend. I include them to prevent you from defecting from what you have believed.⁴

It is my hope that all who reject the evangelistic understanding of John 20:31 would take a close look at this. It is also my hope that they would say, “No, I do not want to go there.” John and Jesus both conceived of the signs as having an evangelistic purpose. John

20:31 does not forsake that original evangelistic intent of the signs.


CONCLUSION

John 20:31a uses an aorist tense in speaking to the original unbelieving readership. The goal was that those readers “may believe,” that is, that they come to believe.

Even if John had used a present tense, 85% of John’s uses of the present tense in purpose clauses concern a yet-to-begin action.

John did not recast the signs. Jesus used the eight signs evangelistically; so did John. To say otherwise imagines that John would have employed a free-and-loose hermeneutic. No, he respected the Lord’s original intent in what He did and said.

John’s Gospel was designed for unbelievers. Let us not perpetuate the great omission by taking the one book designed for unbelievers from them. Let us, instead, minister with John’s Gospel to unbelievers and present it to them.

Christendom has largely ignored evangelism. Don Richardson has lamented the great omission of the idea of an evangelistic Great Commission.⁵ What a tragedy it would be if the Holy Spirit did not inspire even one book with an evangelistic focus. Is evangelism merely an afterthought? Woe to us if we steal the one book God designed for unbelievers from them. 



John Niemelä is President of Message of Life Ministries. www.mol316.com.

1. This is a condensation of John H. Niemelä, “So You May Come (or Continue?) to Believe (John 20:31),” *JOTGES* (Spring 2016): 73-89.

2. All Scripture translation, unless otherwise noted, is by the author.

3. Niemelä, “Come to Believe,” 84-86, details the analysis that led to the 85%, 10%, and 5% results.

4. My contention for years has been that John 20:31 cannot be interpreted by itself. That is, the evangelistic purpose underlying Jesus doing each of the signs would naturally underlie John’s inclusion of the signs. John 20:31 must be interpreted in keeping with Jesus’ purpose in doing the eight signs.

5. The great omission comes from Don Richardson, *Heaven Wins: Heaven, Hell and the Hope of Every Person* (Ventura, CA: Regal from Gospel Light, 2013), 188. Although the Great Commission verses focus on progressive sanctification, they presume that the message of life goes forth. John’s Gospel emphasizes Jesus’ message of life. There is no omission.

ISLAM AND CALVINISM: AN UNCOMFORTABLE COMPARISON

By Phil Congdon

In a packed baseball stadium a few days after 9/11, a Christian minister stood to pray. The minister began: “We pray in the name of our God—the God of Christianity, Judaism, and Islam...”

Ever since the attack on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, politicians and celebrities had been presenting Islam as no different than Christianity, and God as no different than Allah.

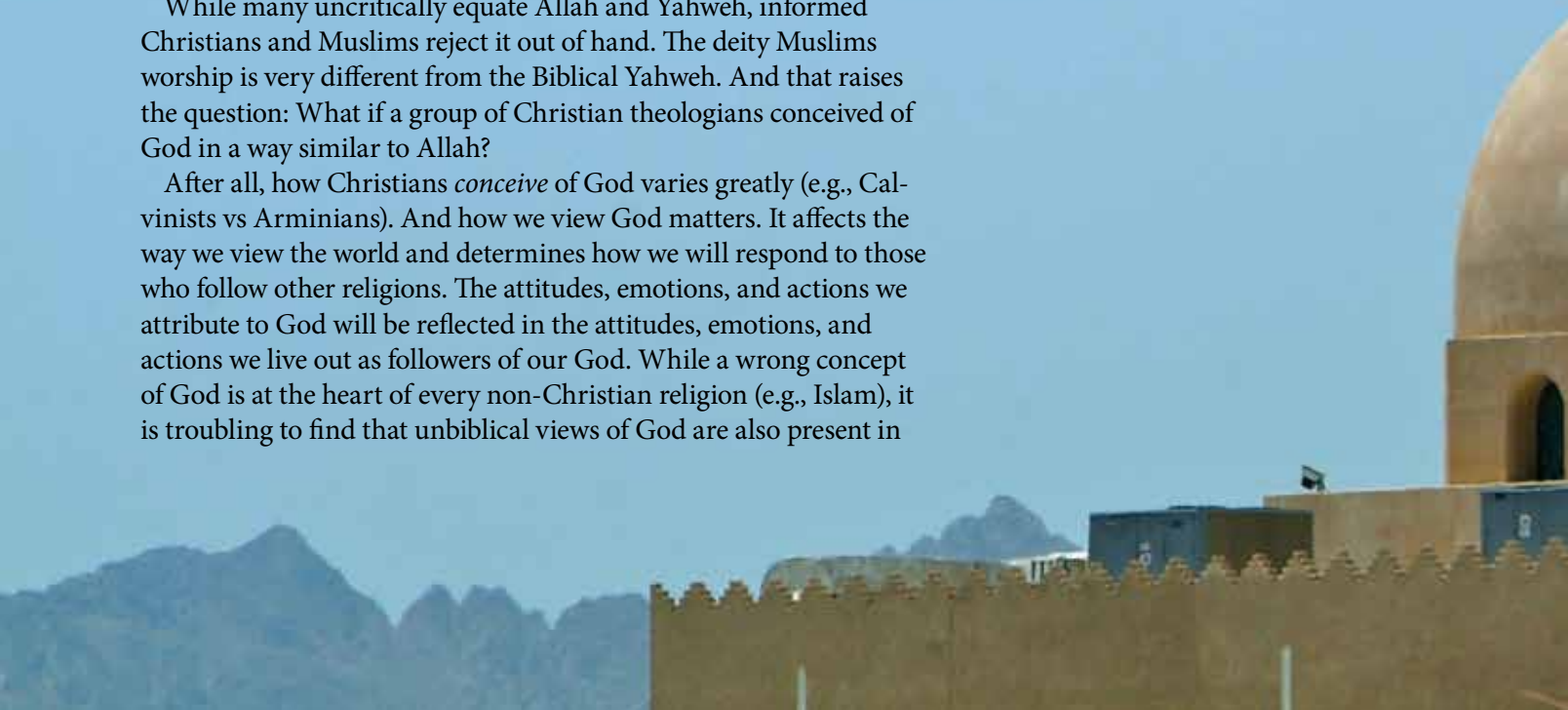
Are they right?

Twenty years earlier, while a student in seminary, I spent two summers in Saudi Arabia leading a ministry for high school and college-aged children of Aramco Oil workers. In Dhahran, a community of ex-patriots fenced off from the Saudi population, a small Protestant fellowship met in a community center each week. One night in a service, a man prayed that God would reveal Himself “in this land where You are not known.” Afterward, he was criticized by some who insisted that “Allah is just another name for God.”

Is that true?

While many uncritically equate Allah and Yahweh, informed Christians and Muslims reject it out of hand. The deity Muslims worship is very different from the Biblical Yahweh. And that raises the question: What if a group of Christian theologians conceived of God in a way similar to Allah?

After all, how Christians *conceive* of God varies greatly (e.g., Calvinists vs Arminians). And how we view God matters. It affects the way we view the world and determines how we will respond to those who follow other religions. The attitudes, emotions, and actions we attribute to God will be reflected in the attitudes, emotions, and actions we live out as followers of our God. While a wrong concept of God is at the heart of every non-Christian religion (e.g., Islam), it is troubling to find that unbiblical views of God are also present in





many strands of Christianity leading to theological and spiritual confusion in many Christians' lives.

With that in mind, let us compare the concepts of Allah in Islam and God in Calvinism.

The Sovereignty of God

No one will dispute that God is sovereign. He alone possesses the divine attributes of omnipotence (all-powerful), omniscience (all-knowing), omnipresence (present everywhere), eternity (no beginning or end), immutability (unchanging), and holiness (perfection).

But the *implications* of the sovereignty of God are open to debate. In particular, how does the sovereignty of God “play out” in His dealings with mankind?

The answer to this question is determined by our *conception* of what sovereignty entails.

Determinism

The sovereignty of Allah in Islam and God in Calvinism is *absolutely deterministic*. They are the author of every action, word, and thought, including sin and evil. Moreover, they predetermined *before time* everything that shall occur *in time* including who will be given the gift of faith and eternal life, and who will not and be condemned to eternal death.

Calvinist church historian Phillip Schaff writes:

Calvinism...starts with a double decree of predestination, which antedates and is the divine program of human history. This program includes the successive stages of the creation of man, a universal fall and condemnation of the human race, a partial redemption and salvation: all for the glory of God and the display of His attributes of mercy and justice. History is only the execution of the original design... (*History of the Christian Church* 8.4.114).

Note that Schaff does not shy away from affirming that God Himself decreed the fall of man, and is therefore the author of sin!

The same view was affirmed by Calvin:

By predestination we mean the eternal decree of God, by which he determined with himself whatever he wished to happen with regard to every man. All are not created on equal terms, but some are preordained to eternal life, others to eternal damnation; and, accordingly, as each has been created for one or other of those ends, we say that he has been predestined to life or death (*Institutes*, 3.21.5).

Islam teaches the same doctrine as Calvinism. According to Islam, Allah is absolutely deterministic. As Caner and Caner write:

One of the foundational doctrines of Islam is the absolute sovereignty, to the point of determinism, of Allah. Allah knows everything, determines everything, decrees everything, and orders everything. Allah is even the cause of evil (*Unveiling Islam*, p. 109).

It follows that Allah predestines all who will be saved and all who will be eternally damned. Of those who cannot be saved, Surah 2:6-7 states:

It is the same to them whether you warn them or do not warn them; they will not believe. Allah has set a seal on their hearts and on their hearing. And on their eyes is a veil; Great is the chastisement they [incur].

Fatalism

It follows that Calvinism and Islam are both inherently *fatalistic*. In Calvinism, the sovereign God elects those who will be saved and rejects all others, as seen repeatedly in Calvin's writings:

...some are preordained to eternal life, others to eternal damnation; and, accordingly, as each has been created for one or other of those ends, we say that he has been predestined to life or death (*Institutes*, 3.21.5).

[God] arranges all things by his sovereign counsel, in such a way that individuals are born, who are doomed from the womb to certain death... (*Institutes*, 3.23.6).

In the same way, Allah leads astray whom he wills, and saves whom he wills (Surah 14:4):

Allah is exalted and pleased as he sends people to hell: this is the fatalistic claim of Islam. Fatalism is a belief that events are fixed in advance for all time in such a manner that human beings are powerless to change them. In this case, Allah will send to heaven whomever he pleases, and send to hell whomever he pleases (*Unveiling Islam*, pp. 31-32).

An old joke tells of a Calvinist who fell down the stairs, got up, and said, “Thank God that’s over!” Interestingly, Caner and Caner recount from their Islamic childhood:

Our father used to say, “If you fall and break your leg, say, ‘Allah wills it,’ because he caused it to

happen” (*Unveiling Islam*, p. 109).

The Love of God

Perhaps the most fundamental of all aspects of God’s character is love. “He who does not love does not know God, for God is love” (1 John 4:8). “For God so loved the world...” (John 3:16) “God demonstrates His own love toward us...” (Rom 5:8). These are just a few of the numerous Biblical texts which affirm the universal, sacrificial, eternal, personal, and unconditional love of God for all mankind. No character of God is more central to the message of the gospel. The incarnation and substitutionary atonement shout it. Everything in God’s saving action toward mankind declares it. But what do we see in Islam and Calvinism?

Love De-Emphasized

In Islam, Allah is virtually devoid of love. Caner and Caner list 99 names of Allah, and only one includes a reference to love (and this only to those who are “his own”). They write:

When Allah is discussed within the Islamic community, the absence of intimacy, atonement, and omnibenevolence becomes apparent. In all the terms and titles of Allah, one does not encounter terms of intimacy. . . Even the most faithful and devout Muslim refers to Allah only as servant to master; Allah is a distant sovereign (*Unveiling Islam*, p. 117).

But what do we find in Calvinism? God’s *sovereignty*—His power and holiness—are emphasized at the expense of His love. Dave Hunt observes:

But where is God’s love? Not once in the nearly thirteen hundred pages of his *Institutes* does Calvin extol God’s love for mankind. This one-sided emphasis reveals Calvinism’s primary defect: the unbiblical limitations it places upon God’s most glorious attribute. . . Something is radically amiss at the very foundation of this unbiblical doctrine (*Debating Calvinism*, p. 47).

Limited Love

As we look closer, we find reasons for this muting of God’s love in Islam and Calvinism. For example, Calvin’s God and Islam’s Allah are both bereft of unconditional love for everyone.

Allah’s heart is set against the infidel (*kafir*). He has no love for the unbeliever, nor is it the task of the Muslim to “evangelize” the unbelieving world (*Unveiling Islam*, p. 118).

Caner and Caner note, “This is why so many Muslims quickly disown children who have converted to another religion, especially Christianity. Why love them when almighty Allah will never love them?” (*Unveiling Islam*, p. 33).

But is this any different than Calvinism? Dave Hunt puts it bluntly:

Never forget that the ultimate aim of Calvinism... is to prove that God does not love everyone, is not merciful to all, and is pleased to damn billions. If that is the God of the Bible, Calvinism is true. If that is not the God of the Bible, who “is love” (1 John 4:8), Calvinism is false. The central issue is God’s love and character in relation to mankind, as presented in Scripture (*Debating Calvinism*, p. 21).

Conditional Love

While Calvinists (but not Muslims) would object to the idea their God has a conditional love, that is the effect of their doctrine.

This doctrine is openly announced in Islam: “Allah loves not transgressors” (Qur’an 2:190). “For [Allah] loves not any ungrateful sinner” (Qur’an 2:276). “For Allah loves not those who do wrong” (Qur’an 3:57). “For Allah loves not the arrogant, the vainglorious” (Qur’an 4:36).

Within Calvinism, God’s love is declared to be unconditional because He has given it “unconditionally”—i.e., not in response to anything we do. But whether or not one is *actually* loved in this “salvific” way is ultimately determined by *what we do*. This fact is enshrined by the last of the Five Points of Calvinism, i.e., the Perseverance of the Saints. Since all who are saved will *inevitably persevere in living a faithful life*, God’s saving love, in the end, is determined by our works.

Notably, as is always the result with synergism (i.e., salvation by faith *and* works), no amount of good works can give you assurance of salvation.

Insecure Love

It is impossible in Calvinism and Islam to know that you are loved by God. While Calvinists proclaim their belief in eternal security, what they mean is if you are

really saved (which you cannot know with absolute certainty until you die), then you will never lose your salvation. But how can you know that? Based on your works. However, the threat of falling into some sin, and thus finding out that you were never really saved in the first place, is a possibility hanging over the head of every Calvinist.

Similarly, and blatantly, Islam teaches this same doctrine:

The Qur'an hints that the believer in Allah can be confident of his or her eternal destiny, *but there is no guarantee, even for the most righteous*. . . In Islam, the answer to the question, "What must I do to go to heaven?" is "mysterious and complex. . . Islamic tradition argues that the guarantee of heaven is as impossible to find as a chaste virgin and pure speech. Consequently, the devout Muslim makes every effort to please Allah and thereby obtain heaven. But fate (*kismet*) in the hands of the all-powerful Allah will decide the outcome (*Unveiling Islam*, p. 144).

Clearly, the love of God is at best compromised in both Islam and Calvinism.

The Violence of God

Despite appeals to the contrary, Islam is demonstrably a religion of violence. This should come as no surprise. A god (Allah) who is arbitrary, distant, and devoid of love will naturally demonstrate this in violence toward whoever he chooses. Caner and Caner entitle their chapter on the history of Islam, "A Trail of Blood." In countries across the Middle East, North Africa, and Southeast Asia today, those who defy Islam, especially Christians, are beheaded and mutilated. These "infidels" are given three options: convert to Islam, leave, or face persecution (often death). For Muslims fighting in jihad (holy war), "ethical values [seem] to play little or no role. Whatever the Muslims [do is] justified, since their cause [is] just" (*Unveiling Islam*, p. 48).

This same kind of violence also showed itself in Calvin's Geneva, where rejection of Reformed dogma brought three options: convert (to Calvinism), leave (deportation), or face persecution (imprisonment or death). The similarity to Islam is unmistakable. In February of 1555, Calvin and his supporters gained absolute control in Geneva. Those who disagreed with Calvin's theology were excluded from communion, and fled. Four who failed to escape were beheaded, quartered, and their body parts hung in strategic

locations as a warning. Calvin referred to them as "henchmen of Satan," and justified his barbarity by saying, "Those who do not correct evil when they can do so and their office requires it are guilty of it." From 1554 until his death in 1564, "no one any longer dared oppose the Reformer openly." (*Debating Calvinism*, pp. 22-24).¹

While there are many cases throughout history of violence by those claiming to be Christians, when the *founder* of a religious movement demonstrates a capacity for violence it is more significant. The fact that both Calvin and Mohammed distinguished themselves by their violence toward those who disagreed with them reflects their impaired view of God and His love.

Conclusion

While this will surely be an uncomfortable comparison for most Calvinists to admit, it is undeniably true. At the very least, it should give Calvinists pause to realize that their view of God so closely reflects the view of God within Islam. ■



Phil Congdon is Senior Pastor at New Braunfels (TX) Bible Church.

1. See also Francois Wendel, *Calvin: Origin and Development of His Religious Thought*, trans. Philip Mairet, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2000), p. 100; and Bernard Cottret, *Calvin: A Biography* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), pp. 198-200.

Our First Survey

We would like to know more about our readers. Not in a creepy way, but so we can minister to you better. We want *Grace in Focus* to be a blessing to you, and for that, we need your input. We really do listen and change how we do things in response to what you tell us. So please fill out this survey and mail it back to us. Shawn called up a famous Christian polling group to do this, but it was going to cost \$30,000! So instead, he just made up these questions as best as he could, (and is thinking he's in the wrong career field!). It would be a great blessing to us if you answered these questions and mailed it to:

Grace in Focus
P.O. Box 1308
Denton, TX 76202

Or you can complete them online at faithalone.org

Name and Address (optional) _____

Telephone # (optional) _____

Email (optional) _____

Sex: M / F (circle one) Age: _____

Education level: High School / Vocational School /

Some College / College/ Grad School (circle one)

How did you first hear about *Grace in Focus* magazine? _____

How did you first hear about Grace Evangelical Society? _____

Do you attend church? Is it Free Grace? What's the name of it? _____

Are you a Classic Dispensationalist, Progressive Dispensationalist or other? _____

What denomination do you belong to, if any? _____

Do you read all the articles in *Grace in Focus*? _____

What kind of articles do you like to read? _____

Do you ever share favorite articles with your friends?

Do you think the magazine articles are too long? _____

What kind of topics do you think *Grace in Focus* should address? _____

How would you make *Grace in Focus* better? _____

Have you ever purchased any books from GES? _____

Do you read *Grace in Focus* online? _____

What are some other Christian magazines that you enjoy? _____

Have you "liked" our Facebook page? _____

Have you seen the GES videos on Facebook and YouTube? _____

Would you listen to a GES podcast? _____

Have you ever been to a GES national or regional conference? _____

What do you like most or least about GES conferences? _____

Where should we hold a regional conference? _____

Would you be interested in going on a GES cruise? If so, how much would you be willing to pay? And where would you want to go? _____

Would you buy a Free Grace Study Bible? What features would you want? _____

Do you believe in Young Earth Creation, Old Earth Creation, Evolutionary Creation or other? _____

Do you believe in Biblical inerrancy? Is that an important issue to you? _____

Do you believe Noah's flood was global or local? _____

Do you believe the sign gifts are for today? _____

Would you be interested in organizing a study group with other Free Grace believers in your area? _____

Do you feel equipped to lead people to faith in Christ? _____

Give us some GES book ideas _____

If you had to choose between being thin or having a lifetime supply of fried chicken, would you prefer regular or extra crispy? _____

How can we pray for you? _____

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Shawn, Zane, Abby, Daphne, and Scout (inset)

Employee Spotlight

Shawn and Abby met online at a Christian dating site. Shawn signed up for the 1-week free-tryout and it was love at first sight when he spied the most beautiful red-headed nurse from Texas. He immediately set about wooing her with his amazing jokes, magical tales of life in Canada, and mind-numbing recitations of early modern German systematic theology.

Who could resist?

They met in person twice, got engaged on a third visit, and were married that summer. And from 2005 to 2012 life was a perfect carefree honeymoon of sleeping in and eating at hole-in-the-wall restaurants.

Then the first child came.

And then another.

And another.

And they haven't had a single day of sleeping in since.

Shawn was born and raised in Montreal, Quebec, but has been a proud American since becoming naturalized in 2013. He did a Bachelor of Theology


at McGill University in Montreal, and a Master of Arts at the Free University of Amsterdam.

He has worked at GES for nearly 5 years, after meeting Bob at Victor Street.

Shawn is in charge of putting together and publishing GES's books and magazines, especially *Grace in Focus*.

Before coming to GES Shawn worked in the newspaper and magazine industry and did ministry part-time. But coming to GES has allowed him to combine his love of publishing with his love of Biblical theology.

Abby is an award-winning bone-marrow transplant nurse at Baylor, in Dallas, and total spin addict. The kids do not understand the appeal of a bike that doesn't go anywhere.

They live in Denton, TX with their three children, Daphne, Zane, and Scout, and their two cats, Champ and Skeeter. They attend Gateway United Baptist Church. 



SUPERHEROES, EASTER EGGS AND BIBLICAL LITERACY

By Shawn Lazar

Who's that?"

"Black Widow," I explained to my wife.

"What can she do?"

"Martial arts."

"And?"

"And she's good with weapons."

"That's it?"

"Yeah, pretty much."

"But she's fighting hundreds of robots," my wife noted.

"I know."

"So Hulk is super strong, Iron Man has his suit, Thor has all kinds of powers, and she's basically useless."

"Well...I mean...you gotta understand that...that...Yeah, you're right. She's useless," I admitted.

"And that guy with the bow? He's going to shoot his little arrows at all those killer robots?"

"Yes."

"OK, that's it. This is too dumb for me. I'm going to bed."

I was watching *Avengers: Age of Ultron* and let's just say comic books are not my wife's "thing."

Unlike Abby—who apparently wasn't raised to enjoy the finer things in life—I grew up reading comic books. I collected them. I went to conventions. And my best friend Dennis and I would have competitions drawing our favorite heroes—his was Spider-Man and mine was Iron Man. But in my late teens I stopped reading them and moved on to other interests.

My point is, you could say that I'm *comic book literate*.

Abby, on the other hand, *not so much*.

However, while I stopped reading comic books years ago, I've now come full circle. With all the new comic-based movies and TV shows coming out, and with kids of my own—including a sword-fighting, monster slaying, death-defying, head-bonking two-and-a-half-year-old boy—eager to watch them, I've rediscovered my old love! So when I watch the latest comic movie, it's a very familiar world to me. I can enjoy the shows on a deeper level than my wife can.

I know the characters.

I know the back stories.

And I usually catch the "Easter Eggs."

EASTER EGGS

An Easter Egg is a very specific, hyper-detailed reference to the comics or to other movies in the same comic “universe.” Directors put them in for fans to recognize. It’s a way of tying the movies together into one big story, and making links to the original comic books fans would have read as kids.

An Easter Egg could be a side comment, like, “I have a colleague who is a pioneer in gamma radiation...” which my wife would not catch, but I would recognize as a reference to Bruce Banner, i.e., the Hulk.

Or maybe it’s a song playing in the background that fans will recognize as the original theme from the 1960s cartoon.

Or maybe it’s a character who seems unimportant now, like Peter Parker’s science teacher, Dr. Connors, who I know will later turn into a major villain named The Lizard.

Or maybe it’s a prop you only see for a second in the background, like Captain America’s unfinished shield, Robin’s bloodied costume, or a poster with the words “Journey Into Mystery” which my wife may not have even noticed, but which I know to be the title of the comic where Thor first appeared.

Being comic book literate, and catching the Easter Eggs, makes watching the movies more fun. It helps you understand what is going on, and helps you predict what might happen in the future. You feel like you’re part of an inner circle, like you’re in “the know.”

You get the inside joke that others are oblivious about.

I find the same applies to the Bible.

The Bible is filled with Easter Eggs—little details, allusions, and imagery that only the Biblically literate will notice and enjoy.



EASTER EGGS IN JOHN'S GOSPEL

I'm teaching through John's Gospel in Sunday school and there are so many references and allusions to the OT it's been a challenge to help the class see those connections for themselves.

We began by comparing John 1 and Genesis 1, seeing how both John and Moses wrote about beginnings, creations, God's words, light, and darkness. But they wrote about them in subtly different ways.

We noticed that John's description in v 14 sounds an awful lot like an allusion to the wilderness Tabernacle, made of animal skins, and containing God's glory, except now the Word became flesh, "tabernacled" among us, and was filled with glory.

Seeing the Tabernacle reference in v 14 made better sense of why John suddenly compares Jesus with Moses in v 17. You might think John is abruptly changing subjects, but once you're thinking about the old Tabernacle—which contained the Ark, which contained the Law—it makes perfect sense for John to continue the contrast and say that while the Law was given through Moses, Jesus realized grace and truth in Himself. In other words, Jesus embodied a better message than Moses.

And then, when the Gospel goes on to talk about John the Baptist, instead of it being another abrupt change, you begin to realize it fits with the rest of chapter 1. Why?

John declares he was preparing for the coming of the Lord, or as the original Hebrew says, for the coming of YHWH. Could that imply the Messiah was God incarnate? That certainly fits with the idea that the Word was God (v 1) and created everything (v 3).

And John the Baptist fits the contrast between Moses and Jesus too.

You'll recall that John's father was an Aaronic priest, and that John's birth was announced by an angel in the Temple, while his father was serving (Luke 1:5-13). And while John did spend his life serving God, it was not as a Temple priest, but in the wilderness, just as Aaron had. In fact, he called people out of Jerusalem, across the other side of the Jordan, in a symbolic state of exile (v 28). The anti-Temple subtext of John's actions evidently caught the attention of the Temple authorities which is why priests and Levites—John's


extended family, and the people he should have served with—were sent to question him (v 19).

And when the Baptist twice declares that Jesus is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world (vv 29, 36), it's as though, even though he did not serve in the Temple in Jerusalem, John nevertheless fulfilled his high priestly calling by pointing Israel to the true Lamb of God, the better sacrifice, the One Who would actually accomplish what the Mosaic sacrifices pointed to in a typological way.

My point is, all those seemingly disjointed pieces of John 1 actually fit together, and you can notice the inner logic of it, *if you're Biblically literate*.

But if you're *not* Biblically literate, while you could still read John 1 with profit, it will be harder to follow the inner logic of his writing. You'd miss much of what John is trying to convey.

Put in popular terms, the Bible is full of "Easter Eggs." And when you're literate enough to spot them, you can enjoy Scripture at a deeper level than if you were just skimming its pages for a good story.

But becoming Biblically literate doesn't happen automatically, and it probably won't happen simply by attending church every Sunday. You have to put in the time and effort to read and study the Bible for yourself. And when you do, you will find it amply rewarding. It doesn't take any superpowers to do it, just a little discipline. 

**"Becoming
Biblically
literate doesn't
happen
automatically."**



Shawn Lazar is Director of Publications for Grace Evangelical Society. His book, *Beyond Doubt: How to Be Sure of Your Salvation is coming soon. Real soon. Hopefully by the April 2017 Conference.*



Q&A

Who Is the Elder Brother?

Q After reading Luke 15 over and over, I'm still sure the prodigal son is a believer returning to fellowship with Christ. But the identity of the elder son honestly confuses me.

First, Jesus is telling the parable to the Pharisees who looked to their own self-righteousness. Could the elder son be referring to them?

Second, the elder son is in-fact, a *son*, and is "ever with me [the father], and all that I have is thine." Doesn't that mean he is a believer?

Putting those ideas together—is Jesus talking about a believer who is *like* the Pharisees (Gal 3:3)? Or is the elder son someone who isn't a true believer and is relying on his moral fiber?

I feel like I am answering my own question with my second point, but at the same time, given the audience Jesus is speaking to, I'm still a little befuddled. I look forward to your response.

~K.C., Wyoming

A What an outstanding question. Since the Pharisees are mentioned in Luke 15:2, it is easy to conclude they are the audience the parable is addressing. Nevertheless, it is crystal clear that Luke 15 involves truths about *believers*. Why?

The lost sheep and the lost coin already belonged to the owner, the way a believer already belongs to God. They did not *become* the owner's sheep or coin, the way an unbeliever becomes a child of God.

Likewise, the lost son was already a son before he became a prodigal, indicating he was already regenerate. Even the older brother is a "brother" of the lost son (see v 32). Jesus is not describing the unbelieving Pharisees by the Father's words "you have always been with me and all that is mine is yours" (15:31). That is not true of unbelievers. Hence, the older son is an example of a believer.

That is also evident from the audience of the parables. Although, as you point out, the Pharisees are mentioned, they are not the primary audience. Chapter 14 ends with a discussion on discipleship (14:26-35), with the warning not to lose your "flavor"



(v 34). Jesus is talking to believers and wants them to "hear" (14:35). It is these believers who come to "listen" to Him (15:1). He is speaking to "them" (15:3). Only a believer can lose his "flavor" by not following Christ. The parables in chapter 15 describes such "lost" believers.

The point is, a believer can indeed lose his "seasoning" by straying from the Lord. In that case, the Lord desires a return to fellowship. When such a believer returns, there is rejoicing in heaven. And note, this is not a reference to rejoicing in heaven when an *unbeliever* comes to *faith*, but when a *believer* comes back into fellowship.

All believers should have the same attitude of rejoicing when that happens. However, not all actually do. Some resent the return of such a "backslidden" believer into fellowship with God, and therefore act like the older brother. We resent God's grace towards others. That should not be.

We could probably also say that such an unforgiving believer is acting like the Pharisees in 15:2, since they couldn't believe that Jesus would eat (have fellowship) with nasty sinners. An unforgiving/unaccepting believer is like that—he can't believe that God would want a wayward Christian to return to fellowship with Him.

But the parables give a clear illustration of the heart of God in this matter. Returning to fellowship is a time of divine rejoicing, not bitterness.

~Ken Yates 

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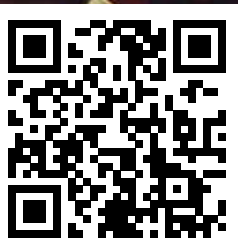
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