The Defiance of Grace in the Ministry of Jesus
By Dane Ortlund, Ph.D.
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Jesus is surprising. His coming fulfilled ancient prophecies, but not expectations. He shattered expectations.

Each of the four Gospel accounts in the Bible uniquely gives us a Jesus who turns upside down our intuitive anticipations of who He is and how following Him works. Like a bad back that needs to return to the chiropractor repeatedly for straightening out, our understanding of Jesus needs to be straightened out repeatedly as our poor spiritual posture throws our perception of Him out of whack—domesticating Him and conforming Him to our image rather than transforming us into His.

For the grace that comes to us in Jesus Christ is not measured. This grace refuses to allow itself to be tethered to our innate sense of fairness, reciprocity, and balancing of the scales. It is defiant.

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Easier said than done. However much we may laud grace with our lips, our hearts are so thoroughly law-marinated that the Christian life must be, at core, one of continually bathing our hearts and minds in gospel grace. We are addicted to law. Conforming our lives to a moral framework, playing by the rules, meeting a minimum standard—this feels normal. And it is how we naturally medicate that deep sense of inadequacy within. The real question is not how to avoid becoming a Pharisee; the question is how to recover from being the Pharisee we already, from the womb, are.

Law feels safe. Grace feels risky. Rule keeping breeds a sense of manageability; grace feels like moral vertigo. But the Jesus of the Gospels defies our domesticated, play-by-the-rules morality. It was the most extravagant sinners of Jesus’ day who received His most compassionate welcome; it was the most scrupulous law abiders who received His most searing denunciation. The point is not that we should therefore take up sin. The point is that we should lay down the silly insistence on leveraging our sense of self-worth with an ongoing moral scorecard.

It is time to enjoy grace anew. Not the decaffeinated grace that pats us on the hand, ignores our deepest rebellions, and doesn’t change us, but the high-octane grace that takes our conscience by the scruff of the neck and breathes new life into us with a pardon so scandalous that we cannot help but be changed. It’s time to blow aside the hazy cloud of condemnation that hangs over us throughout the day with the strong wind of gospel grace. “You are not under law but under grace” (Rom. 6:14). Jesus is real; grace is defiant; life is short; risk is good. For many of us, the time has come to abandon once and for all our play-it-safe, toe-dabbling Christianity and dive in. It is time, as Robert Farrar Capon (Episcopal Priest) put it, to get drunk on grace. Two-hundred proof, defiant grace.

(continued on page 12)
Who is the best candidate for President? What do we know about that candidate’s beliefs, wisdom, intellect and actions? Do they practice what they preach? Are they the type of person who would make good decisions and look out for the best interests of our nation?

I’ve been convicted lately at how much time I spend appraising the moral character, integrity, words and actions of presidential candidates, as opposed to how rarely I use these same litmus tests to evaluate my own life.

Jesus was once asked, “What is the greatest commandment?” In other words, what is the best way to be assured that I am living in a way that is pleasing to God? Jesus answered, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.” Jesus is quoting and adapting Deuteronomy 6:5, which also included the idea that we should love God with all our strength.

Jesus makes it clear that in order to test the integrity of our love for God and neighbor that we must evaluate our lives from several different angles. There should be a consistency of love evidenced in our heart, which includes our soul and mind — our passions, our inner life, our words and thoughts — and our physical actions (strength). In theological terms, our love for God is tested by our orthodoxy (right belief and understanding of God’s truth and doctrine), by our orthopathy (right passions and affections that are pure and in line with God’s desires), and by our orthopraxy (right practice demonstrated through our actions and habits).

David prayed to the Lord, “Examine me, O Lord, and prove me; try my reins and my heart” (Psalm 26:2). This election season, I am going to continue to evaluate the presidential candidates and try to determine who would best serve our country. At the same time, I hope to be just as diligent in asking the Lord to examine me to see if my orthodoxy, orthopathy, and orthopraxy are demonstrating my love for God and neighbor. The good news is that I know that where I fall short, there is forgiveness to cleanse me, and grace to help me get it right the next time around. Hopefully the end result will be a daily, fresh infilling of the Holy Spirit that enables me to love God with all my heart, soul, mind and strength.

Joel

Notes from the President
by Joel S. Woodruff, Ed.D.
President, C.S. Lewis Institute

Presidential Candidates vs. Me
Engaging Conversation in an Age of Distraction

by Randy Newman, Ph.D.

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Editor’s Note: Much of this article was originally posted on The Gospel Coalition website at: http://resources.thegospelcoalition.org/library/gospel-conversation-in-an-age-of-texting-tweeting-and-distraction

I expected a revolt. Instead, I got expressions of gratitude. I anticipated accusations of being a crotchety old man, but students told me they felt a sense of relief. I had just announced my decision no longer to allow computers or cell phones (or other tools of technology) in my classroom. I teach a course called Principles of Biblical Reasoning at a small Christian college, and I want our times together to be rich conversations about why we believe what we believe. Students updating their Facebook statuses, texting friends outside the class, or checking scores at ESPN.com doesn’t promote the atmosphere I hope for.

The class includes training in evangelism, and it seems to me that a core component for most people’s evangelism should involve good conversational skills. But, alas, such “common” knowledge is far from common these days. Many people are bemoaning the death or, at the least, the gradual demise of good conversation. The implications for evangelism loom large in my wrestling with how we can proclaim truth in an age of distraction.

If we hope to engage in conversation about weighty topics such as knowing God, acknowledging sin, and trusting in Christ’s death, we need to have some level of competence in listening, asking good questions, and pursuing rich conversation. If we can’t connect with people about the weather or their jobs, we may find it difficult to talk about eternity or their souls.

When providing evangelism training for churches or as part of our C.S. Lewis Institute Fellows Program, I include a workshop on listening skills. I pair people up and have one partner start the dialogue while the other is only allowed to ask questions. I’m hoping this helps them engage in better two-way dialogues instead of the more commonly practiced “simultaneous monologues.” For some people, it’s like learning a foreign language.

And so I was both encouraged and challenged to read Sherry Turkle’s New York Times article “Stop Googling. Let’s Talk,” (September 27, 2015) about her research on how technology is harming conversation. A professor in the program in Science, Technology, and Society at MIT, Turkle focuses on “What has happened to face-to-face conversation in a world where so many people say they would rather text than talk?”

She believes, “when two people are talking, the mere presence of a phone on a table between them or in the periphery of their vision changes both what they talk about and the degree of connection they feel.” She quotes research that suggests a significant decline in empathy among college students, which she attributes to an increase in use of cell phones, especially texting. But she sees some merit to a college junior’s view that, “Our texts are fine. It’s what texting does to our conversations when we are together that’s the problem.”

Make it a goal to grow in comfort with eye-to-eye conversation. (This may take some practice.)

Turkle values conversation so highly as to see it in almost theological terms. “Conversation is the most human and humanizing thing that we do.” Thus she bemoans the decline of conversation, because it leads to loneliness, cripples our ability to express empathy, and diminishes our capacity for concentration. This, she insists, is because, “Our phones are not accessories, but
Editor’s Note: This article, originally published in the Winter 2001 issue of Knowing & Doing, was written in the aftermath of the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on the United States. In the article, Dennis Hollinger addressed how we should understand and respond to the new threat of terrorism through the eyes of faith. Now, nearly 15 years later, we continue to live under a threat of terrorism in the United States and abroad. We decided to republish this article, slightly edited, because, while the context may be slightly different today, Hollinger’s article provides excellent guidance in understanding, from a Christian perspective, the ongoing problem of terrorism.

The events of September 11, 2001, have produced a broad array of conflicting emotions within all of us. We have struggled to know how to think, feel, and respond to the attacks. Of course as followers of Christ, it should not have come as a total surprise, for we know the world is not the way it’s supposed to be. The words of C.S. Lewis at the outbreak of World War II are applicable to our own situation: “War [attack] creates no absolutely new situation; it simply aggravates the permanent human situation so that we can no longer ignore it. Human life has always been lived on the edge of a precipice … We are mistaken when we compare war with ‘normal life.’ Life has never been normal.”1

But, despite a worldview that predisposes us to understand such evil, we are still left reeling within ourselves. As we think about our responses to the new threat of terrorism, it is helpful to recall that our emotions and cognitive processes are ultimately good gifts of God to help us navigate our way in the face of danger, evil and uncertainty within the world. But of course there’s a problem. We are fallen creatures, and thus our emotions and cognitive responses aren’t as God intended. While they are still fundamentally good gifts of God, they are twisted, distorted, and miss the mark of their original intention. As those redeemed by God’s grace in Jesus Christ, we need to allow our emotions and thinking to be transformed. Thus terrorism through the eyes of faith needs a clear understanding of our natural emotions and thinking, in contrast to the redeemed perspective.

Righteous Indignation, Not Unbridled Anger

Likely one of our first responses to the terrorist acts was anger. Whenever we are attacked physically or psychologically, resentment and belligerence arise within us. Anger is a good gift, for it enables us to deal emotionally with violations, injustices, and evil that threaten our life and integrity. But anger is also fallen, and so it easily turns to unbridled anger that comes to control us. In its fallen state unbridled anger tends to build a history that won’t let go and thus perpetuates disgust, disrespect, and eventually violence, as the blood boils within us. As Horace, the Roman poet, put it, “Anger is a short madness.”

It’s because of the brutal impact of anger upon both the victim and the offender that the Bible has wise direction, “Be angry and do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger” (Eph. 4:26, ESV). Our natural unbridled anger needs to be transformed into righteous indignation, a holy wrath with strong feelings directed toward the evil, sin, and injustice.

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Terrorism through the Eyes of Faith

by Dennis Hollinger, Ph.D.

President, Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary

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perpetrated. Righteous indignation moves us beyond the uncontrollable outrage directed against individuals to a more principled anger focusing on the evil done. Such redeemed anger is perhaps akin to God's own holy wrath, “The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the ungodliness and wickedness of the people, who suppress the truth by their wickedness” (Rom. 1:18, NIV). Such anger arises from God's holiness, for sin and evil are direct contradictions to God's own nature and actions.

If we are not angered by the events of September 11, we likely have little sense of either goodness or evil. But if we live in unbridled anger, we may succumb to the very evil that outrages us in the first place. Thus righteous indignation, not unbridled anger.

Hope, Not Fear

After anger, the next emotion many of us felt on September 11 was fear. And, as we hear more of the potential terrorist strategies, fear proliferates. After all, what is terrorism but the attempt to overthrow or control others by engendering intense fear or terror in the hearts and minds of a given people? Fear is a natural emotion and one of God's good gifts to us. It's an emotion of distress in response to impending danger, pain, or evil, and it enables us to become aware of and respond to these realities.

But fear has great dangers—most visibly its sinister ability to immobilize and cause paralysis of action. It prevents us from performing responsibilities and engaging new opportunities in life. So fear needs to be redeemed. We might think that the antidote to fear is courage, since it is one of the classical cardinal virtues. But the biblical response to fear is hope. Courage tends to reside within our own natural proclivities and self-discipline, while hope is supernatural in its source and nature. Our hope in perilous times is not ultimately in nation, military power, or our own ability to cope; our hope is in a God who is ultimately in control. Christians have hope because we believe that in the midst of terror and evil God is nonetheless there, turning human desecration into good, for “we know that in all things God is working for the good of those who love him and who are called according to his purposes” (Rom. 8:28). There is hope because there is One beyond the finite, sinful realities of this world, and it is that ultimate hope that motivates and sustains us in a troubled, dangerous world.

If we look at the world from a natural lens, there is reason to fear. But when we look at the world through a supernatural lens, there is hope, for

The Lord is my light and my salvation—whom shall I fear?
The Lord is the stronghold of my life—of whom shall I be afraid? . . .
Though an army besiege me, my heart will not fear;
though war break out against me, even then will I be confident. (Ps. 27:1, 3 NIV)

Thus hope, not fear.

Justice, Not Revenge

After anger and fear, terrorism tends to breed an emotional response of revenge. This is a natural retort wanting to hit back, get even, and take out vengeance on the evil doers. Revenge has roots in our created being, for it is the innate desire to make right the wrong. But, as fallen creatures, in us that deep impulse becomes twisted, excessive, and misguided. Revenge wants to strike back without principle or limitation on the basis of emotional outrage. Since September 11, we’ve heard the language of revenge, as people pour out contempt toward Muslims, Arabs, and people of Middle Eastern descent. Even Arab Christians in this country have had to fear for their lives.

But in place of revenge, we need justice. Life in a fallen world calls for justice, even as believers are called to a spirit of forgiveness that ultimately seeks restoration. A voice for justice in a world that seeks unrestrained vengeance (continued on page 20)
Knowing God Personally
by Thomas A. Tarrants, III, D.Min.

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My past two articles in Knowing & Doing were titled “Who is God?” This is the central question of our day, and many believers do not have an adequate answer for it. The articles sought to give a very basic answer to that question from the Old and New Testaments. But simply knowing about God is not adequate for life with God; we must know Him personally. Thus we need to ask, how can I know God?

The Call to Know God

When we speak of knowing God, it is important to understand that we are not talking about abstract or speculative thought concerning God or mystical experiences but about coming alive to God through Jesus Christ and surrendering ourselves to Him in grateful love (Rom. 12:1). As John says, “Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life” (1 John 5:12).1

We must also understand that knowing God is not an optional part of the Christian life; it is the Christian life. Jesus said, “And this is eternal life, that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent” (John 17:3). The English word know in this verse is a translation of the Greek word ginosko, which, in this context, means an experiential knowing, not simply an intellectual understanding of facts about God or Jesus or the Bible. In other words, it refers to an “I-Thou” relationship.

This relationship begins when we come alive to God -- that is, when, by grace, we are awakened from the state of spiritual death into which everyone is born, and receive the eternal life Jesus offers to those who trust in Him for salvation. The first part, recognizing and turning from our sins, is repentance; the second part, trusting in Jesus and His atoning death on the cross to forgive our sins, is faith. Coming alive to God requires both. Jesus described this as being born from above or born of the Holy Spirit. It means birth into God’s family and entrance into His kingdom (John 3:3–8). Without rebirth by the Holy Spirit, a person cannot see, perceive, understand, or know God or His kingdom.

The Call to Go Deeper

As vitally important as the new birth is, that is not the focus of this article. Here I will address what is involved in growing to know God more deeply after the new birth. This is a major and pervasive need in the American church today.

The metaphor of birth provides a helpful way of understanding fuller implications of what it means to know God and to grow in that relationship. Just as a human being is physically born into the world and moves through a developmental cycle from infant to child to adolescent to adult, so a child of God is born spiritually and is called to move through a similar developmental cycle. These stages are mentioned in the New Testament. Paul, for example, makes a distinction between “the mature” and “infants in Christ” (1 Cor. 2:6; 3:1), and the writer to the Hebrews does the same (Heb. 5:11–14). John distinguishes between “little children,” “fathers,” and “young men” (1 John 2:12–14). What does this mean? Spiritually the newest infant in Christ knows God, but not very well. As this baby grows in grace, he or she will progress toward maturity and, in doing so, will come to know God better and better. We have probably seen this if we have been believers for a while. What a joy it is to encounter an infant in Christ, a new convert, eager and zealous for the things of God. But what a blessing to meet a father or mother in Christ, a mature believer who has faithfully walked with God for decades and whose life is characterized by a degree of
love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control that is truly Christlike! This kind of mature relationship with God is what every believer is called to pursue.

The opening chapters of Genesis paint a beautiful picture of Adam and Eve enjoying a personal relationship with God. The story of God and Abraham does the same. But Moses and David open a window into their hunger to know God more intimately. On Mount Sinai, Moses cried out to God, “If I have found favor in your sight, please show me now your ways, that I may know you,” and God responded with an extraordinary revelation of Himself (Exod. 33:13; 34:7–9). Though he was by no means perfect, King David’s life (1 & 2 Samuel) and his many psalms reveal a deeply personal relationship with God and a longing for Him: “O God, you are my God; earnestly I seek you; my soul thirsts for you; my flesh faints for you, as in a dry and weary land where there is no water” (Ps. 63:1). Their hunger for God is an example given to encourage our desire for God (Rom. 15:4).

Knowing God more deeply was not the privilege of only a few luminaries in the Old Testament. God called all of His people to know Him personally and love Him supremely with heartfelt devotion. He called Israel to “love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might” (Deut. 6:5). And through Jeremiah we hear, Thus says the Lord: “Let not the wise man boast in his wisdom, let not the mighty man boast in his might, let not the rich man boast in his riches, but let him who boasts boast in this, that he understands and knows me, that I am the Lord who practices steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth. For in these things I delight, declares the Lord.” (Jer. 9:23–24)

God delights when His people truly know Him, love Him, and enjoy the blessings of His faithful love, justice, and righteousness.

A notable New Testament example of hunger for God is the apostle Paul. Near the end of his life, Paul said that his greatest passion was “that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings” (Phil. 3:10). Paul had had a dramatic encounter with Christ thirty years earlier on the road to Damascus, and he had had several other experiences with Him afterward, but he longed to know Him more deeply. His example shows us that no matter how long or how well we have known the Lord, there is always more.

Paul’s longing to know Christ points the way for us as we seek to know God today. We see God most clearly and know Him most nearly through His Son, Jesus Christ. Jesus said, “Whoever has seen me has seen the Father” (John 14:9), and Paul says, “He is the image of the invisible God,” and “in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell” (Col. 1:15, 19).

But (lest we fall into law and self-generated-works righteousness) we must note well, and always remember, that this “straining and pressing on” is not merely unaided human willpower.

(continued on page 23)
Surprised by Belfast: Significant Sites in the Land and Life of C.S. Lewis, Part II, Dundela Villas

by Sandy Smith

Author of C.S. Lewis and the Island of His Birth

The first article in this series (Knowing & Doing, Spring 2016) described Little Lea, the boyhood home of C.S. Lewis in Belfast, Northern Ireland, and the fortunate circumstances in my own life allow me to see the house frequently. If not daily, certainly weekly I pass by and remember the events that took place there. The specific events that draw me to Lewis's boyhood home include the many tours I lead of Lewis's Belfast.

Recently I received an e-mail from a friend and enthusiastic reader of Lewis who participated in one of these tours. He indicated that the tour had added to his appreciation of Lewis. My friend noted that he had been only vaguely aware that Lewis was Irish. Rereading Lewis with a heightened awareness of the Irish background kindled in my friend a new enjoyment of his work. Similarly, I trust that reading this article will encourage some readers to delve deeper into Lewis's background and maybe even make the trip to Ireland to see for themselves.

This article focuses specifically on Dundela Villas in East Belfast where Lewis was born and where he lived until 1905 before he and his family moved to Little Lea.

Dundela

C.S. Lewis was born at Dundela Villas, on Dundela Avenue in East Belfast. The villas comprised two separate, semi-detached houses, each with its own separate entrance on a common site. The Lewis family lived in one of the villas, rented from Thomas Keown, a relative. In 1898, when Lewis was born, the location had a semi-rural feel to it. Dundela lies between the areas of Strandtown, Belmont, and Ballyhackamore to the east of the city. In 1898 the official boundary of the City of Belfast was extended to bring these outlying areas within the control of Belfast City Corporation (which has now become Belfast City Council). Today these areas are still identifiable by their specific names, but they have been subsumed within the outward march of the expanding city. Lewis's parents, Albert and Florence (Flora) Lewis, moved into Dundela Villas following their marriage in 1894. At this location their two sons were born, Warren Hamilton Lewis (Warnie) and Clive Staples Lewis (Jack).

Although the house in which C.S. Lewis was born no longer exists, the general area is not much changed. Both of the houses that shared the name Dundela Villas were demolished in 1953 to make way for a development of apartments that are now clearly marked as the site where Lewis was born.

Descriptive details of the house, along with a few photographs that are still available, provide information on the environs. The 1901 census return describes the house as a class II dwelling, which means it had fewer than nine inhabitable rooms. On the night the census was completed it had six occupants: Albert and Flora Lewis, Warnie, Jack, Martha Barbour—the cook—and the children’s nurse, Lizzie Endicott. From the descriptions of Dundela Villas and the photographs, there was nothing particularly remarkable about either of the Villas themselves. They were adequate for a growing family; each had a stable for a pony and trap and a generously proportioned garden. The other features of the house in which Lewis was born are the views from the upstairs windows, notably those to the northwest along with those to the southeast. The garden and the views together are responsible for something that Lewis considered important.

Before considering both of these and the impact they made on Lewis, I note the more general circumstances and ambience that formed the backdrop to Lewis's childhood. The opening sentence of his book Surprised by Joy reads: “I was born in the winter of 1898 at Belfast, the son of a solicitor and of a clergyman’s daughter.”
In the paragraphs that follow, we get the only glimpses that are possible of the early months and years of Lewis’s life. It was a beginning that brought elements of privilege. His maternal grandfather was a Church of Ireland clergyman; his mother in consequence was highly educated, a graduate of Queen’s College Belfast, now Queen’s University. She was a mathematician and a linguist who, in Lewis’s boyhood, was able to contribute to and guide his early education. Lewis’s paternal grandfather was an engineer and self-made businessman who encouraged his son Albert, Lewis’s father, to train in law and to establish a legal practice in Belfast. In *Surprised by Joy*, Lewis describes his parents as “bookish” people; both had wide-ranging tastes in literature and differing sets of skills that reflected their temperaments and backgrounds. The general ambience of family life at Dundela is remembered by Lewis as one of humdrum happiness enriched by the intellectual outlook of his parents, the pleasant surroundings, good food provided by Martha Barbour and, of course, the good humor of Lizzie Endicott, the children’s nurse. Lewis writes with particular warmth of Lizzie Endicott, describing her as one of his two special childhood blessings, the other being the company of his brother, Warnie. He remembers Lizzie for her kindness, gaiety, and good sense; he could share a joke with Lizzie, and through her his first attachments with County Down were firmly rooted. He also attributes to her the development of his sense of humor.

Although the main insights we have of Lewis’s childhood are provided in the early chapters of *Surprised by Joy*, I also direct readers to the opening chapter of *The Pilgrim’s Regress*. This is the story of Lewis’s intellectual journey from atheism to Christianity told as an allegory through the eyes and experiences of a boy who is interestingly called John (Jack). The opening paragraphs of this story tell how, on one summer morning, John ran out of his parents’ garden and across the road to the wood on the other side. In reading the sentences that follow, I have often sensed that what Lewis describes here is a reflection of what was at the front of his childhood home in Dundela. Visitors to the site readily observe how this may have been, and the references to the gardens and the cook are a good match for the narrative we find in *Surprised by Joy*. Be that as it may, we are left in no doubt about the importance of (1) the panorama Lewis could see from the house in which he was born and (2) the gardens in which he and Warnie played as children.

“They taught me longing—Sehnsucht; made me for good or ill, and before I was six years old, a votary of the Blue Flower.”

**The View**

The house at Dundela stood on a slightly elevated site on Dundela Avenue. The avenue itself rises steadily from where it joins the main Holywood Road, which also rises at an incline when traveling out from Belfast City Centre. From the vantage point of the upstairs windows of the house, two ranges of the low hills that surround Belfast were clearly visible to the family.
Know the Washington Post every now and then, there’s an article about a celebrity pastor who has fallen from grace. And so you’ve probably heard a popular contention against Christianity, which usually goes along these lines: “Why are Christians so bad?” What’s so interesting about this contention is that it illustrates something important for evangelism. That is, though many objections to Christianity appear to be purely intellectual or theoretical, often it’s the personal problems that hinder people from coming to faith.

Take, for example, a book titled Why I Became an Atheist.¹ It’s written by a former evangelical pastor who lays out his arguments against Christianity. On the surface, it looks very intellectual and philosophical. But it’s fascinating that he talks vividly about his own testimony—his personal experience—of how Christians in his church treated him ungraciously. It seems that personal experience, of a lack of grace by Christians, became the greatest obstacle to his own faith.

Similarly many others who bring up this contention against Christianity give deeply personal, rather than intellectual or informational, objections. It’s important to remember that we’re dealing with people—with emotions, feelings—not robots. When being engaged by skeptics, seekers, and nonbelievers, our goal is not to win an argument or a debate; it’s not a battle of brains. Rather, it’s about building bridges with people who have these questions and experiences. So here are three quick considerations for how we can redeem this contention against Christianity:

Response Number 1: “You’re Right”

When we hear someone say, “You Christians ought to be commendable, but you’re not,” we can first acknowledge the legitimacy of the contention. In Titus 3:5–8 the apostle Paul reminds us that though we’re not saved by works, we are saved unto good works. That is, one way that we know we are saved is that our lives are full of good works. So to the skeptic who raises this objection, our response should honestly be, “I know you say you don’t believe the Bible, but you’re absolutely right, because you’re saying exactly what the Bible says.” When we respond this way, we disarm the skeptic. They’re expecting us to get defensive. They’re not expecting, “You’re absolutely right; our lives should abound with good works.” I think that’s a starting point for dialogue—and a biblical one.

My insightful friend from MIT is not a believer, but she questions, if the gospel narrative of what God has done in Jesus Christ to redeem the world is true, then why are Christians not intentional about the way they live in the world? She’s echoing the biblical message; the apostle Paul is clear that those who have come to believe in Jesus Christ ought to be “careful to devote themselves to good works” (Titus 3:8).² Another good translation would be that Christians ought to be purposeful about the way they live. That’s why C.S. Lewis is right when he says that our careless lives as Christians give the world a reason for doubting Christianity.³ If we, as professing Christians, were more purposeful in the way we live, do you think we would have a greater audience among skeptics?

Response Number 2: “The Gospel is for Broken People”

Maybe you’re asked, “Why are Christians so bad?” What is a very mistaken assumption about this contention? Again, let’s look at Titus, where Paul says that “we ourselves were once foolish, disobedient, led astray, slaves to various passions and pleasures, passing our days in
malice and envy, hated by others and hating one another,” but God our Savior “saved us” (3:3–4). What is he saying? That we were the worst of the worst. That when you look at God’s track record, He doesn’t seem particularly interested in drawing people to Himself who are “all put together.” Didn’t Jesus say it the best of all? “I came not to call the righteous, but sinners”; He came not for those who are healthy, who have no need of a doctor, but for those who are broken and sick (Mark 2:17). No wonder the church is often compared to a hospital. And this is where C.S. Lewis is so helpful.

There’s a section in Mere Christianity where Lewis compares a Christian with a non-Christian. He clarifies that both people would have different dispositions due to natural causes, different childhoods, and various life circumstances. So, although a Christian may have a more unkind tongue than a non-Christian, Lewis wants us to ask—and this is key—what would the Christian’s tongue be like if he or she had not become a Christian?

Drawing from Lewis’s example, let’s now imagine you have two men. The first is born in a very healthy household—loving parents, loving siblings, living in a nice house and nice neighborhood, getting to do all the extracurricular activities you can imagine, receiving good schooling, but never becomes a Christian. This man is probably a very functional, well-adjusted person. Now let’s imagine the second man for a moment: this person came from a broken household, never met his father, his mom was always working, he was abused in different ways, he didn’t get to do anything fun, and he is filled with anger. This second man grows up; at the age of twenty-one, he becomes a Christian. At this point, like Lewis, we may ask an important question: When you compare both people on a day-to-day basis, who is going to look more moral? Who’s going to have a better control over his temper? Who’s going to appear more like an exemplar? Obviously the first man. The other guy, the Christian, is not going to look very attractive. Why? Because God seems to be okay with attracting people who are broken, who are very much in need of help, who are subject to temptations. So when seekers and skeptics say, “Why are Christians so bad?” our response can be, “God seems to love people who are very broken.” A response like that corrects the mistaken assumption by highlighting the gospel; the gospel is not for people who are all put together but for people who need help.

How can God be proven to be someone we can trust in and feel secure about—someone who will do the right thing and who will also love us?

I’d like to suggest this: It’s one thing for us to simply respond appropriately—knowing what to say—but it’s another thing to believe it in a way that is able to build bridges with non-Christians—doing what we say. A lot of times when non-Christians, skeptics, and seekers contend, “Why are Christians so bad?” they’re saying this because they detect that professing Christians think they’re better than non-Christians. But the amazing thing about the gospel—the more you grow in it, the more acquainted you become with your sinfulness; simultaneously, therefore, you become that much more of a compassionate person. Haven’t you met much older, wiser Christians who seem to spend more and more time confessing their sins? Is it because they’re sinning more? Or is it because they’re more mature in the gospel and have come to perceive and understand their sins? Look at the one of the Pu
The Defiance of Grace in the Ministry of Jesus
(continued from page 1)

Something of a gospel resurgence is taking place today across various swaths of the Christian church. We must, of course, avoid facile generalizations. Yet it is evident from today’s preaching and teaching, books and blogs, conferences and coalitions, that the gospel of grace is being wonderfully reasserted and cherished. Many have been walking with the Lord for years yet are only now discovering the new mental and emotional universe of grace.

All this we happily receive from the hand of the Lord. The need of the hour, however, is neither self-congratulation nor smug diagnosis of who “gets” the gospel of grace. The need of the hour is deeper reverence, new levels of wonder at the kindness shown oneself, and a whispered prayer that the good news of God’s free mercy in Christ would spread with a continued contagion the effects of which will be felt for generations to come. After all, wherever the gospel is recovered, diseased forms of the gospel sprout, too. Also, as is always the case, some of the most articulate trumpeters of the gospel of grace lose their way and torpedo their lives and ministries through scandal and sin. Such adversities are not reason to rein the gospel but to trumpet it—the full, comprehensive, biblical gospel—more than ever.

Paul is often seen as the key biblical writer to write of grace. But as a German Bible scholar from another generation, Ernst Käsemann, said, Paul taught what Jesus did. Paul’s letters give us the prose of grace; Jesus’ life paints us a portrait of grace.

This grace shines through uniquely in each of the four Gospels. In Matthew we see the surprise of disobedient obedience. Jesus’ rebuke is counterintuitive. Mark shows us the surprise of the king as a criminal. Jesus’ mission is counterintuitive. In Luke we are confronted with the surprise of outsiders becoming the insiders and insiders, oddly, becoming the outsiders. Jesus’ community is counterintuitive. And in John we see the surprise of the Creator taking on flesh and blood as a creature. Jesus’ identity is counterintuitive.

Matthew

The deepest distinction among human beings is not between the bad and the good, but between those who know they are bad and those who do not. Yet strangely, it is not the blatantly wicked who have the greatest difficulty seeing this but the carefully obedient. Jesus consistently diagnoses the quiet guilt of the rule keepers. Scrupulous obedience is, more often than we are aware, thinly veiled disobedience. Obedience, therefore, can be damning.

Nowhere is this put more sharply than in Matthew’s Gospel. Throughout the book, the strange key to participation in the joys of God’s kingdom is not qualifying ourselves for it but frankly acknowledging our disqualification, a disqualification that manifests itself not only in rule breaking, but also in rule keeping. Keeping the rules extinguishes the sin in our hearts no more than buckets of gasoline extinguish the flames in our fireplaces.

Consider a string of accounts in the middle of Matthew’s Gospel. In each passage, a central character assumes one has to “qualify” to gain some corresponding approval.

• The disciples thought little children needed to qualify with age in order to gain Jesus’ attention (19:13–15).
• The rich young man thought he needed to qualify with law keeping in order to gain eternal life (19:16–22).
• Peter and company thought they had to qualify with sacrifice in order to gain a reward (19:23–30).
• The early hired workers thought all employees had to qualify with sufficient work in order to gain a day’s wage (20:1–16).

The greatest danger for followers of Christ is not the ways they fail Him, but the ways they succeed. Failures are precisely the kind of people God is looking for. For failures instinctively understand how to open the windows of their hearts to let in help. Successes invariably turn in on themselves in satisfied self-reliance.

Mark

The deepest surprise built into the fabric of the Gospel of Mark lies not mainly in the realm of what it means to be a truly obedient follower of Jesus but rather deals with Jesus Himself (though the two are closely linked). Jesus’ definition of morality is counterintuitive in Matthew; Jesus’ own mission is counterintuitive in Mark. For in Mark, we see most clearly the surprise of the king being treated as a criminal.

The Gospel of Mark falls neatly into two halves. The first half (1:1–8:30) shows us Jesus the king. The second half (8:31–16:8) shows us Jesus increasingly hurtling toward the fate of a criminal. The hinge on which this transition takes place is Mark 8:22–38. In this hinge passage, we find three short accounts stacked up next to one another: a blind man is healed; Peter boldly confesses that Jesus is the Christ, the messiah-king; and Jesus announces His impending suffering and death, refuting in the strongest terms Peter’s resistance to this suffering. The three accounts are mutually interpreting.

The moment at which Peter proclaims “You are the Christ” is the point at which the disciples have been won over to see that Jesus is the coming king they have so long anticipated. This confession is the conclusion to which all of Mark 1–8 has been driving. It has taken seven chapters and thirty verses, and the disciples are finally convinced. This is the high point of Mark.

Yet it is here, halfway through the Gospel, that the whole story swivels around and begins moving in the opposite direction. For this is only half of what the disciples need to see. They see that He is the king—and if He is the king they have been expecting, that would be enough. But if He is not the king they expect but the king they most deeply need—if He has come not to deal with their circumstances but their sins—then something more is needed. This half of Jesus’ mission the disciples have not yet grasped.

And this is what the two-staged healing of the blind man (an account told only in Mark) is showing us. Jesus “dealt with the blind man as he did,” preached Martyn Lloyd-Jones, “in order to enable the disciples to see themselves as they were.”2 The disciples wanted liberation. But they were nearsighted. They wanted liberation from their circumstances—Roman occupation, pagan overlords, Israel’s internationally undervalued reputation. But Jesus had come to truly liberate them. He had come to liberate them from their sins. He came to free them not from others but from themselves. Not from the overlords of Rome but from the overlord of sin (Rom. 6:14).

This is why the Gospel of Mark does not end at Mark 8:30. Circumstantial liberation required a kingly messiah and a kingly messiah only. Spiritual liberation—real liberation—required a kingly messiah who would Himself be bound like a criminal so that His followers could be liberated in the only sense that ultimately matters.

It’s time to blow aside the hazy cloud of condemnation that hangs over us throughout the day with the strong wind of gospel grace.
The Defiance of Grace in the Ministry of Jesus

Luke

In Luke we find that Jesus’ community is counterintuitive. Those whom one would expect to be “in” are excluded, and those whom one would expect to be “out” are included. The deepest twist of Luke is that Jesus includes the outsiders and excludes the insiders.

The dynamic here is similar to that of Matthew, yet Matthew highlights a moral question, Luke a social one. The two are by no means mutually exclusive. Yet what we emphasized in Matthew is mainly a vertical issue; what we are focusing on in Luke is mainly a horizontal issue. In Matthew we saw the human desire to be in with respect to God; in Luke we see the desire to be in with respect to other people.

A quick trip through Luke makes clear how pervasive a theme this is. In Luke 1 an angel appears to both Zechariah the priest and Mary the young virgin. Yet Zechariah, the insider, responds the way Mary, the outsider, ought to have responded. Mary, the outsider, responds the way Zechariah, the insider, ought to have responded. In Luke 2 it is lowly shepherds who are highlighted as noteworthy visitors to the newborn Jesus (2:8–20)—not, as in Matthew’s Gospel, the wise men from the east who were important enough to drop in to the king’s palace on their way to Bethlehem (2:1–7). (One rabbinic tradition lumped shepherds in with tax collectors and revenue farmers as those who will have a particularly hard time being accepted before God.) In Luke 3, it is those of direct Abrahamic descent who are designated by John the Baptist as a “brood of vipers” (3:7–9).

In Luke 4 Jesus outrages His hearers by reminding them that two of the ultimate Jewish insiders, Elijah and Elisha, healed not the Israelites but the outsiders of the day—a Gentile widow and a diseased pagan soldier named Naaman (4:25–27). In chapter 5, Jesus invites a tax collector named Levi to become an insider and then eats with him at his house while those Jewish men with the best education, the best pedigree, and the best moral résumés grumble (5:27–32). Jesus blesses outsiders and curses insiders in Luke 6, blessing the poor, the weeping, and the reviled while pronouncing woes on the rich, the laughing, and those about whom others speak well (6:20–26).

Showing that He does not have a kind of reverse bias against insiders simply because they are insiders, Jesus accepts a dinner invitation from a Pharisee named Simon in chapter 7 just as He had eaten with a tax collector in chapter 5. The same pattern of embracing outsiders surfaces once more, however, as a socially alienated woman—“a woman of the city, who was a sinner” (7:37)—is embraced and forgiven, while Simon appears to be left on the outside, failing to understand the debt that he himself needs forgiveness (7:36–50). In Luke 8, Jesus dubs the common crowd His mother and brothers, leaving His actual mother and brothers outside (8:19–21).

Perhaps some of us have been wading in the offshore pools of fellowship with Christ, thinking we’ve exhausted the ocean?

In Luke 9, a young child is picked up by Jesus and placed among the disciples as an example of whom they should receive, while those who are ready to leave everything behind—so long as they can first say goodbye to Dad and Mom—are not “fit for the kingdom of God” (9:46–48, 62).

In chapter 10, a socially despised Samaritan is the hero of the famous parable rather than the socially revered priest or Levite (10:25–37), and in Luke 11, Jesus says the men of Nineveh, outsiders if ever there were any, will rise up and condemn the crowds listening so attentively to Jesus (11:29–32). Chapter 12 describes the rejection of a rich man, contrasted with the abundant treasures belonging to those who sell their possessions and give to the needy (12:13–21, 31–34).

In Luke 13, many will expect to get into the kingdom of God yet be excluded while “people will come from east and west, and from north and south”—from outside—“and recline at table in the kingdom of God” (13:25–29, 34–35). In Luke 14, the insiders who are initially invited to the great banquet end up rejected, replaced by “the poor and crippled and blind and lame”
(14:15–24). The younger son in Luke 15, who wishes his father dead and wastes his inheritance, is in, while the older son, working hard all his life, appears to be out (15:11–32).

In chapter 16, it is poor, wretched Lazarus who enters heaven while his rich neighbor is tormented in hell (16:19–31). In Luke 17, it is only the despised Samaritan who returns to express gratitude to Jesus among the ten lepers who are healed by Jesus (17:11–19), and in chapter 18, it is the hated tax collector who goes home justified, not the ethically scrupulous and socially exalted Pharisee (18:9–14). In chapter 19, Jesus eats with and saves the oppressor, Zacchaeus the tax collector (19:1–10). Luke 20 describes the transfer of a “vineyard,” an Old Testament symbol for the people of God, to “other” (Gentile) tenants (20:9–18), and Luke 21 praises the offering of a poverty-stricken woman instead of the gifts of the rich (21:1–4).

Throughout Luke, the insiders and the outsiders are reversed—threatening to the privileged, liberating to the marginalized.

What’s the point? Hell is filled with people who believe they deserve to be outside hell and inside heaven. Heaven is filled with people who believe they deserve to be outside heaven and inside hell. Such grace defies our sense of fair play. But it is the logic of the gospel.

John

The scandal of incarnation is the surprise that lies at the heart of the fourth Gospel.

Here we are not asking, as in Matthew, what obedience looks like; nor, as in Mark, what Jesus came to do; nor, as in Luke, who comprises His community. We are asking who He is.

In John 1, we read that “the Word became flesh and dwelt among us” (1:14). The term used here is the verb form of the Greek noun skene, meaning “tent” or “tabernacle.” Readers of John’s Gospel familiar with the Old Testament would immediately think of the portable temple, the tabernacle that was transported throughout the wilderness in Israel’s wanderings between Egypt and the Promised Land.

What was the tabernacle? What was the point of this temple?

Unlike some other elements of Jewish faith, such as monotheism, temple worship was not unique to Judaism. Virtually every ancient religion had a temple of some kind. The temple, for Judaism as well as for other religions, was a physical location, a building, where the immortal met the mortal. Here the supernatural and natural collided. The eternal and temporal intersected. The temple was where the divine and the fleshly could temporarily meet—never to mix (lest the profane contaminate the sacred!) but rather to come into brief contact with one another.

But at the center of human history, the divine and the fleshly, the supernatural and the natural, did mix. “And the Word became flesh and tabernacled among us.”

Rumbling through the Old Testament was the development of the theme of the presence of God among His people, a presence restricted to the most sacred of Jewish places, the tabernacle and then the temple. It was here that God dwelt among His people (Exod. 25:8). It was here that glory rested. Fellowship with God, if only for a few moments, was restored. In fact, the tabernacle was a miniature, representative Garden of Eden—complete with sky-blue ceiling and a lampstand decorated like a flourishing tree. The Hebrew word that corresponds to the Greek word skene was shekan, from which we get our language of Shekinah, the “glory” of God that became so terrifyingly palpable in the temple.
This helps make sense of what John then says in the rest of verse 14: “And the Word became flesh and dwelt [tabernacled] among us, and we have seen his glory.”

In 1 Kings 8:27, Solomon offered a prayer of dedication to the newly built temple, wondering aloud at the absurd notion that an earthly building could contain the God of the heavens: “But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Behold, heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you; how much less this house that I have built!”

“Will God indeed dwell on the earth?”
Yes.

The Foundation

In theological terms, our treatment of Matthew lies in the realm of morality, of Mark in atonement, of Luke in ecclesiology, and of John in Christology. Time and again our intuitive expectations of who Jesus is and what He has come to do are turned upside down—whom He excludes, what He came to do, whom He welcomes, and who He is. The Jesus of the Gospels defies our safe, law-saturated, recompense-mindful existence.

But though Jesus’ intuition-defying grace surprises us, our confusion does not surprise Him. He knows all about it. And He is a patient teacher, more patient than we have yet dared believe.

But how can such grace be ours? Each gospel account not only takes a particular angle on grace, but each also concludes on a lonely hill outside Jerusalem. There, on a cross, we see the foundation for how God in Christ can treat us with such mercy. The obedient one suffered for our disobedience in Matthew. The king suffered for our crimes in Mark. The insider suffered as for us outsiders in Luke. The Creator suffered for us creatures in John.

This is great grace. But it is not a soft grace. With Jesus it is all or nothing. He is not asking to be added to our lives. He is insisting on uprooting our festering anxieties and redirecting all our cowering hopes squarely onto Himself. Jesus does not medicate our lives. He renovates our lives.

Perhaps some of us have been wading in the offshore pools of fellowship with Christ, thinking we’ve exhausted the ocean? Could it be that there is more for us to experience in Jesus than we have yet dreamed?

In his 1950 reflection, “What Are We to Make of Jesus Christ?” C.S. Lewis answers this very question by remarking: “There is no question of what we can make of Him, it is entirely a question of what He intends to make of us. You must accept or reject the story.” Lewis then concludes with a penetrating depiction of what it means to hand ourselves over to Jesus. This is the defiant grace of Jesus Christ and where such grace takes us.

The things He says are very different from what any other teacher has said. Others say, “This is the truth about the Universe. This is the way you ought to go,” but He says, “I am the Truth, and the Way, and the Life.” He says, “No man can reach absolute reality, except through Me. Try to retain your own life and you will be inevitably ruined. Give yourself away and you will be saved.”
He says, “If you are ashamed of Me, if, when you hear this call, you turn the other way, I also will look the other way when I come again as God without disguise. If anything whatever is keeping you from God and from Me, whatever it is, throw it away. If it is your eye, pull it out. If it is your hand, cut it off. If you put yourself first you will be last. Come to Me everyone who is carrying a heavy load, I will set that right. Your sins, all of them, are wiped out, I can do that. I am Re-birth, I am Life. Eat Me, drink Me, I am your Food. And finally, do not be afraid, I have overcome the whole universe.”

Notes
1 Scriptural quotations are from the English Standard Version. Any italics are added by the author.
3 Babylonian Talmud, Baba Qamma 94b; quoted in Kenneth E. Bailey, Jesus through Middle Eastern Eyes: Cultural Studies in the Gospels (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2008), 183.
4 Samaritans, inhabitants of the small region south of Galilee and north of Judea, were considered half-breeds (to use an admittedly disparaging word), as they were descendants of the Jews who had stayed behind and intermarried with Gentiles during the exiles.
5 Here we remember the divine blessing that was presumed by ancient Jews to rest on those whom God had materially prospered.
6 I owe this sentence to a June 13, 2010, sermon by Ray Ortlund at Immanuel Church in Nashville. A similar statement can be found in Martyn Lloyd-Jones, The Cross: God’s Way of Salvation (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1986), 75.
7 C.S. Lewis, “What Are We to Make of Jesus Christ?” in God in the Dock: Essays on Theology and Ethics (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), 160.
8 Ibid.

What are we to make of Christ? There is no question of what we can make of Him, it is entirely a question of what He intends to make of us. You must accept or reject the story.

C.S. Lewis

RECOMMENDED READING

This book is theology at its readable best, a contemporary restatement of the meaning of the cross. At the cross Stott finds the majesty and love of God disclosed, the sin and bondage of the world exposed. More than a study of the atonement, it brings Scripture into living dialogue with Christian theology.
psychologically potent devices that change not just what we do but who we are.¹

Her book *Reclaiming Conversation: The Power of Talk in a Digital Age* allows her to offer a fuller treatment of the topic. Consider these insights:

> When they work best, people don’t just speak but listen, both to others and to themselves. They allow themselves to be vulnerable. They are fully present and open to where things might go.²

In solitude we find ourselves; we prepare ourselves to come to conversation with something to say that is authentic, ours. When we are secure in ourselves we are able to listen to other people and really hear what they have to say. And then in conversation with other people we become better at inner dialogue.³

The desire to manage our time means that certain conversations tend to fall away. Most endangered: the kind in which you listen intently to another person and expect that he or she is listening to you; where a discussion can go off on a tangent and circle back; where something unexpected can be discovered about a person or an idea.⁴

“We can choose not to carry our phones all the time.”
“We can park our phones in a room and go to them every hour or two while we work on other things or talk to other people.”
“We can carve out spaces at home or work that are device-free, sacred spaces for the paired virtues of conversation and solitude.”⁵

I would add some suggestions for enhancing our spiritual lives and our evangelistic efforts.

- Put your phone in another room while reading your Bible (the paper one!) and praying.
- Leave your phone in the car while worshiping in church.
- Decide to make some meetings or conversations device-free, especially ones that focus on close Christian fellowship or potential outreach.
- Make it a goal to grow in comfort with eye-to-eye conversation. (This may take some practice.)
- Develop fluency in biblical meditation and comfort with solitude.

While Turkle has no discipleship goals for the application of her research, it is easy for us to see how her insights can help us as we seek
first the kingdom of God. She almost sounds like a preacher with her comment, “This is our moment to acknowledge the unintended consequences of the technologies to which we are vulnerable, but also to respect the resilience that has always been ours.”

God made us relational and social creatures. As we seek to introduce people to that God, we can pave the way toward rich gospel conversations by keeping our eyes on them, keeping our ears attuned to their words, and keeping our phones in our pockets.

Notes
3 Ibid., 10.
4 Ibid., 23.
5 “Stop Googling. Let’s Talk”
6 Ibid.
7 Ibid.

[If] you meet a really humble man … [p]robably all you will think about him is that he seemed a cheerful, intelligent chap who took a real interest in what you said to him.

C.S. Lewis

RECOMMENDED READING
Freedom from Tyranny of the Urgent, by Charles E. Hummel (IVP Books, 1997)
Now for the first time he expands on the life-changing perspective that has transformed the lives of thousands struggling to keep from being swept away by the rush of life. Gathered in this book are proven principles taken straight from biblical teaching, from today’s time-management experts and from Hummel’s own life experience.
Terrorism through the Eyes of Faith

(continued from page 5)

is a voice for fairness, not just emotional outrage. Justice seeks to limit our passions and feelings and to respond from principle not internal sentiments. It is never in personal hands but develops mechanisms to effect it. Justice is not arbitrary but is supported by evidence. It has often been symbolized by the blindfold on “lady justice” to ensure that justice, not revenge, is our response to evil.

Without justice, revenge builds a history of injustice, perpetuates more acts of violence, and the spiral begins—generation after generation—a reality we know all too well throughout the world. The ultimate goal of justice is restoration and peace, for “the effect of righteousness will be peace” (Isa. 32:17, ESV). Thus justice, not revenge.

A sense of mortality in the face of terrorism leads us to humility, not triumphalism; to realism, not utopianism.

Mortality, Not Invincibility

Until September 11 we thought that as a nation we were invincible. Thus one of our first responses was “How can this happen to us?” We are accustomed to thinking of ourselves as in control; since the Industrial Revolution the Western modern world has mastered nature, natural resources, reproduction, the human genome, life, death, and much in between. As moderns, we have assumed that we could solve all problems, set things right, and determine good outcomes according to desired ends.

Then came September 11. Amazingly, the terrorists used our own instruments of control, our technology, back against us. With a handful of people and a few hundred thousand dollars, the terrorists were able to do what no other nation or army on Earth could do. And now we have come to realize that we are not invincible.

If there is anything we learn from the attacks on our nation, it is our own mortality. That is the biblical perspective, for God is Creator; we are creatures. God is infinite; we are finite. God is eternal; we are temporal. As C.S. Lewis noted, events such as war or terror in the past made death real to humans, for they thought it good for us to be always aware of our mortality.

I am inclined to think they were right. All the animal life in us, all schemes of happiness that centered in this world, were always doomed to a final frustration. In ordinary times only a wise man can realize it. Now the stupidest of us knows... If we had foolish un-Christian hopes about human culture, they are now shattered. If we thought we were building up a heaven on earth, if we looked for something that would turn the present world from a place of pilgrimage into a permanent city satisfying the soul of man, we are disillusioned, and not a moment too soon.

A sense of mortality in the face of terrorism leads us to humility, not triumphalism; to realism, not utopianism. It evokes wisdom, not arrogance. It is in mortality that we seek dependence upon God and find salvation in Christ. Thus mortality, not invincibility.

Global, Not Parochial

By nature we seek to preserve ourselves, our own group, and our own nation. Particularly in time of crisis, when our very existence is threatened, we turn to that which is safe and familiar. Our natural proclivities are in one sense good, for the familiar eases our discord. Thus our
natural response to September 11 was to be parochial, and to think of ourselves. And certainly we can with good warrant argue that moral responsibility always begins at home.

But as we know too well, parochialism (the restriction of concerns to the narrow and limited—to those like me) leads to prejudice, ethnocentrism, and racism. Parochialism is able to see only “my group” and “my nation” as the center of reality and the bearer of good. All else is deemed to be evil.

In contrast, God calls us to be global Christians. Global Christians know that while national, racial, and ethnic identities are important, they are not the defining marks of a Christian. They are always to be secondary to both our humanness and our identity as members of the universal church, the body of Christ. As world Christians, we recognize that we have brothers and sisters in Christ in almost every nation and tribe. We must never look out just for us. Being a global Christian reminds us that we must be concerned for terrorist threats not only on our own turf, but all over the world—some of which have threatened for years. Global faith always keeps Christ’s Great Commission central, recognizing that some national responses can have dire consequences upon our attempts to invite men and women across the globe to experience God’s grace in Jesus Christ.

The more we know of terrorism, the more we realize that it is a world issue, not just an American issue. Parochialism will cut us off from this reality and from the responsibilities we share in our world. It will blind us to the work that God is doing around the world. Thus global, not parochial.

**Mystery, Not Certainty**

In the aftermath of September 11, many have yearned for certainty regarding God’s actions on that day. Where was God, and what was God up to? It’s only natural to seek certainty in the divine realm, for it brings consolation in the face of threat and evil in our world. As a result, some believers have felt the need to make pronouncements regarding God’s involvement in this terrorist act; with certitude they assert judgment, causality, or other kinds of divine action.

There are many things about God’s actions and character that we know with confidence. For example, we know that God is personal, triune, and simultaneously transcendent and immanent. We know that He is a God of mercy who wants to redeem us and who has taken the initiative to reveal Himself to us in the written Word, the Bible, and the incarnate Word, Jesus Christ.

But there are some things about divine actions that we just do not know, and this is especially true of the ways of God in human history—His judgments, actions, and permissions within the world. As Isaiah the prophet put it, “For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts” (Isa. 55:9 ESV). Thus we need to affirm some degree of divine mystery that we will never fully comprehend and capture within the limits of finitude. Three such mysteries are pertinent for our times.

First, there is mystery regarding human suffering and evil. If God is good and all powerful, then why are there terrorist acts within the world? All humans have wrestled in some fashion with that question, and a whole book of the Bible is devoted to it—Job. Interestingly, in the biblical drama, after all of Job’s loss, suffering, and anguish from his “friends,” he never gets an answer to his question. God never answers the philosophical, theological, or practical life questions surrounding suffering and evil. What Job receives is a new vision of God: “I had heard of you . . . but now my eye sees you” (Job 42:5 ESV). The reality of evil, suffering, and terrorism in our world cannot be attributed to God, but clearly God has the power to intervene. Thus the whys and wherefores of God’s action in the face of the evil of September 11 remain a mystery.

Second, there is mystery in God’s judgments in history. Some were, of course, quite certain that the terrorist acts were divine judgment against America and thought they knew...
the reason for them. It is quite clear that God’s judgment comes in history; it is less clear how it comes. For one thing, the judgment of God is always at work against human sin and injustice, as there are continual reverberations from actions and character that fly in the face of God. And likely the list of why God is judging us is more extensive and closer to home than we think. Moreover, it is hard for us to comprehend what is clear in the biblical story: that judgment and redemption are sometimes mingled in ways that defy human imagination.

Third, there is mystery to God’s work of redemption in the midst of evil situations. God’s ways of awakening, of vindicating justice and righteousness, and of drawing humans to Himself are always beyond our limited perceptions. If redemption were limited to our preconceived notions of how God can or must work, such redemption would hardly be worth the time.

A sense of mystery in our understanding of and relationship to God is significant for deep spirituality. After all, would we really want to entrust our lives to one whom we’d figured out? We would be trusting in the finite. Would we really seek to glorify one we fully understood?

G.K. Chesterton, with great insight, once wrote:

“We are perhaps permitted tragedy as a sort of merciful comedy: because the frantic energy of divine things would knock us down like a drunken farce. We can take our own tears more lightly than we could take the tremendous levities of the angels. So we sit perhaps in a starry chamber of silence, while the laughter of the heavens is too loud for us to hear.”

And so, as we seek to understand God’s presence and ways on September 11, 2001, we see mystery, not certitude. But in that mystery we find the hope of the world that binds our wounds, evokes our trust, ensures our freedom, and guides our paths for a journey in a very precarious world.

Notes
2 Ibid., 51–52.
3 G.K. Chesterton, Orthodoxy (West Valley City, UT: Waking Lion Press, 1908), 160.

If we thought we were building up a heaven on earth, if we looked for something that would turn the present world from a place of pilgrimage into a permanent city satisfying the soul of man, we are disillusioned, and not a moment too soon.

C.S. Lewis

RECOMMENDED READING
Lisa Beamer and Ken Abraham, Let’s Roll: Ordinary People, Extraordinary Courage (Living Books online publishing, 2006)
Lisa Beamer, wife of September 11 hero Todd Beamer, reveals what really happened on the ill-fated United Flight 93, and shares poignant glimpses of a genuine American hero.
How to Know God More Deeply

Getting to know God more deeply doesn’t happen overnight; it takes time. As noted above, Paul had known Christ for many years when he said his passion was to know Christ better. He went on to say, “Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own” (Phil. 3:12). Nor is getting to know Christ better an automatic process; it takes real effort. Is effort contrary to grace? No. Grace is opposed to earning (law) but not to effort. Effort is a vital part of how grace operates in sanctification. Thus Paul, the apostle of grace, went on to say to the Philippians:

Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. Let those of us who are mature think this way, and if in anything you think otherwise, God will reveal that also to you. (Phil. 3:12–15)

But (lest we fall into law and self-generated-works righteousness) we must note well, and always remember, that this “straining and pressing on” is not merely unaided human will-power. Rather, it is rooted in the deep work of God in our hearts, arousing hunger and desire and drawing us to engage our wills and strength to seek Him, as Paul had earlier said when he urged the Philippians to “work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure” (Phil. 2:12–13). Doing this, of course, is utterly dependent upon our being filled with the Holy Spirit daily, for He alone can supply the power we need (which Paul emphasizes in Romans 8, Galatians 5, and Ephesians 5). And the rewards of our Spirit-empowered efforts far transcend the greatest earthly pleasures!

Paul’s words reinforce the observation that there is a sense in which a person is as close to God as he or she really wants to be. But it is not just Paul who urges us onward. God told Israel, “You will seek me and find me, when you seek me with all your heart” (Jer. 29:13). Jesus told His disciples, “Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you” (Matt. 7:7). In each case, those who seek are the ones who find. And if we don’t seek, we will not find.

How do we press on? God offers everything we need in order to grow into deeper fellowship with Him and His Son, but we must embrace it. He gives the milk, but we must drink it. This is what Peter meant when he said, “Like newborn infants, long for the pure spiritual milk, that by it you may grow up into salvation—if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good” (1 Pet. 2:2–3).

God called all of His people to know Him personally and love Him supremely with heartfelt devotion.

What is the spiritual milk we should long for? Peter is using the image of “newborn infants” to say that just as babies need their mother’s milk to grow up physically, so believers need spiritual milk to grow up spiritually. In light of his statements in 1:23–25, it seems very likely that the milk Peter has in mind is the Scriptures, but the way he describes it, he may well mean all the resources necessary for healthy spiritual growth.

The Holy Spirit

Before we look at the essentials that God provides, let’s note their source. It is the Holy Spirit, who brings us to new life in Christ in the first place. But that is only the beginning. When Jesus returned to heaven, He handed over to the Holy Spirit His role of teaching, nurturing, strengthening, guiding, and encouraging His followers; the Holy Spirit brings us into union with Christ and is thus called the Spirit of Christ (Rom. 8:9–10). The Spirit now dwells in us and applies in our lives all the benefits that Christ secured for us on the cross: He assures us of forgiveness and salvation, reveals Christ to us in ever-deeper ways, empowers us for holy living, imparts spi-
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tual gifts for ministry and kingdom mission, and guides and directs us to glorify Christ in everything we do—and much more.

Scriptures

What then, are the main sources of spiritual milk that the Spirit gives to mature us in grace and help us know God more intimately? The Holy Scriptures are first. Communication is essential for knowing anyone, including God; and it is primarily through the words of Scripture that God speaks to us. These are God-breathed words that the Holy Spirit inspired holy men of old to record over the centuries, words that the Spirit now illuminates our minds to understand and empowers us to obey. The Scriptures are our only reliable source of knowledge about who God is; what He is like; what His will is; what His plans and purposes are; what He has done in the past; what He will do in the future; who we are; what life is all about; how we can know, love, and serve Him; what are the many promises He gives us; and how we can fulfill His purposes in the world. Accordingly, they are also God’s chief instrument for building our faith in Him. The Scriptures are God’s ultimate and final authority for what we are to believe and how we are to behave; they are our lifeline in this fallen world.

Prayer

If the Scriptures are God’s main way of communicating with us, prayer is our primary way of communicating with Him. It is another essential means for knowing God better. Prayer has been well described as “an offering up of our desires unto God, for things agreeable to his will, in the name of Christ, with confession of our sins, and thankful acknowledgment of his mercies.” Often, however, “we do not know what to pray for as we ought,” thus we need the Holy Spirit to pray for us and to guide us in our prayers (Rom. 8:26).

The Spirit’s normal way of guiding us in our prayers is by prompting us through the Scriptures to pray for things that are agreeable to the will of God and will be granted (1 John 5:13–14). This seems to happen more often when we are quietly listening for His word on a particular matter. The Psalms are called “the prayer book of the church,” because they give us so many examples of what to pray for across the whole range of life’s experiences. And the many promises of God throughout the Bible give us even more. As we walk with God through the ups and downs of life, lifting up our prayers to Him in faith and receiving His answers, our experience with God and our trust in Him grow. And, as the years pass, we develop a history of personal dealings with God that deepens our knowledge of Him, our faith in Him, and our love for Him.

God offers everything we need in order to grow into deeper fellowship with Him and His Son, but we must embrace it.

The Church

As vital as Scripture and prayer are, they are not enough. The church is meant to be a vital incubator for growing in the knowledge and love of God. The church was born at Pentecost through the Spirit-empowered preaching of the Holy Scriptures. The church is neither a building nor an institutional bureaucracy. The church is Christ’s body on earth, the community of the spiritually reborn, where God is worshiped, His word is faithfully preached, and baptism and the Lord’s Supper are properly celebrated. In the church, the Spirit empowers the preaching of the Scriptures, enlivens our worship and communion with the Father and the Son, deepens our bonds of fellowship with other believers, enables us to care for and minister to one another in love, and sends us out into the world on mission. And much more! This community of Christ is our family. In it we meet Christ in one another and experience His transforming power together.

Seeking God

Are you content with your Christian life, or do you long for something more? Do you hun-
ger and thirst for God? Is He the desire of your heart? Do you really want to know Him more intimately and follow Him more faithfully?

The pursuit of God is a prerequisite for those who want to go deeper with God. He invites us to seek Him. He shows us the road to travel. And He provides the spiritual nourishment for the journey. But these will do us little good unless we make time in our hurried, distracted lives to use them. Many of us need to take the advice of Dallas Willard: “Hurry is the great enemy of the spiritual life in our day. You must relentlessly eliminate hurry from your life.” Jesus was never in a hurry, and we are called to walk in His steps and follow His example. This does not mean withdrawing from normal life and adopting a monastic life. Jesus didn’t do that, nor did Moses, David, Peter, or Paul. They led active lives in the world, but their lives were not filled with the clutter, distractions, and chronic busyness that fills our lives today. They were focused, they had priorities, they marched to the beat of a different Drummer; they sought to please an audience of One. No matter where they were or what they were doing, their inner compass was oriented toward God—His presence, His will, and His purposes.

Is that what you long for? If the desire of your heart is to know God more intimately, that is a sign that the grace of God is drawing you. Your part is to respond by setting yourself to seek after and pursue Him (Matt. 6:33). Those who seek will find (Jer. 29:13; Matt. 7:7).

The following suggestions, drawn from Scripture and demonstrated over many centuries of church history, will be helpful as you seek Him in the days ahead:

• Worship God every Sunday in a church that is orthodox in its beliefs, spiritually alive, and preaches God’s word faithfully. Build Christ-centered friendships there, and join a Bible study or prayer group composed of people who want to know God better (Heb. 10:24). Find a couple of like-minded believers (of your own gender) and meet regularly to pray and encourage one another in your pursuit of Christ.

• Read Scripture daily, asking God to open the eyes of your heart and teach you (Ps. 119:18; 1 Cor. 2:12; Eph. 1:16–20). This includes learning to meditate on God’s Word and memorize key verses. Meditation takes biblical truth deeper into our minds and hearts with powerful effect. But that effect occurs only as you take to heart what you read and meditate on and become a doer of the word; otherwise you will not grow spiritually but only become self-deceived (James 1:22–25).

• Pray daily in a quiet, undistracted place. If you haven’t already done so, learn how to pray the Lord’s Prayer, which is the basic prayer Jesus gave to train His disciples. Also learn to pray other Scriptures, especially the Psalter, which is the prayerbook of the church. As you read through the Psalms, you will be surprised at how many of them speak directly to your particular needs and concerns today and give you a vocabulary for your own prayer.

• Ask the Holy Spirit to fill you each day (Eph. 5:18); seek to walk in the Spirit (Gal. 5:16) and manifest the fruit of His presence in your life (Gal. 5:22–24). It is impossible to draw near to God or to live the Christian life without the Spirit’s help. He reveals Christ to us; He opens our eyes to the Scriptures; He leads us in praying aright; He enlivens our worship; He guides and empowers us for joyful, obedient living and service, and much more. As we walk in the Spirit, we will not fulfill the desires of the flesh (Gal. 5:16).

• Take time away to be alone with God when you sense the need. A one-day or weekend retreat devoted to seeking God more earnestly about specific concerns can be a
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source of great blessing—or a prayer retreat with one or two friends.

• Fast periodically. Jesus said His followers would fast (Matt. 6:16–18; 9:14–15). Fasting and prayer is a way of intensifying our seeking after God and His help, especially in times of personal or national crisis, struggle against sin, spiritual dryness, spiritual warfare, empowerment for ministry, revival of the church, and the advance of God’s kingdom. Those who have been closest to God and most fruitful over the centuries have practiced fasting often.

• Talk with your pastor or an elder when you need guidance in your spiritual life. An older, spiritually mature man or woman in the congregation, recommended by the pastor or elders, may also be able to help. This assumes that such a person is well grounded in Scripture, is humble, manifests the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22–23), and is wise, godly, and prayerful.

• Read classic books on the Christian life. (See endnotes for suggestions.)

As we seek God and follow Jesus Christ through this fallen world, it will not be easy, “for the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life” (Matt. 7:14). But it is worth it. To be sure, we will experience joys and blessings in our life with God. But arrayed against us is the world, the flesh, and the devil. So, like Jesus whom we follow, we will meet with hardships and sorrows and encounter “many dangers, toils, and snares.” Times of trial and experiences of testing will punctuate our journey. There will be seasons of spiritual dryness; there may be tragedies and perhaps times when God is silent and our prayers seem to go unanswered. We may face persecution. Strong temptations may assail us. But God will be with us and see us through.

He has said, “I will never leave you nor forsake you” (Heb. 13:5), and He is faithful to sustain us no matter what we encounter. And He will use all the hard things of life to help us grow into greater conformity to the image of His Son (Rom. 8:28–29). In the words of a classic hymn “How Firm a Foundation,” based on Isaiah 43:1–2, the Lord’s promise speaks to us today:

When through the deep waters I call thee to go,
The rivers of sorrow shall not overflow;
For I will be with thee, thy troubles to bless,
And sanctify to thee thy deepest distress.

When through fiery trials thy pathway shall lie,
My grace, all-sufficient, shall be thy supply.
The flame shall not hurt thee; I only design,
Thy dross to consume, and thy gold to refine.

Notes

1 Scripture quotations are from the English Standard Version.
2 Westminster Catechism, Question 98
3 John Ortberg, The Life You’ve Always Wanted (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 76.

There (in the Psalms) … I find an experience fully God-centered, asking of God no gift more urgently than His presence, the gift of Himself, joyous to the highest degree, and unmistakably real.

C.S. Lewis
Looking north from the house, the view is of the hills of County Antrim. In several places, Lewis identifies the low peaks of Divis Mountain, Colin, and the Cave Hill that he could see clearly from his natal home. This same vista was also visible from Little Lea, the house to which the family moved in 1905. There is a great paragraph in a letter written by Lewis to his Belfast friend, Arthur Greeves, in the spring of 1915. In the letter Lewis contemplates his return to Belfast from boarding school at Malvern. His mind turns to the hills that were visible from Dundela Villas, to the view of Belfast Lough and to the shipyards in which the Titanic was built. The letter contains the following sentences as he thinks of home:

Already one’s mind dwells upon the sights and sounds and smells of home, the distant murmur of the ‘yards’, the broad sweep of the lough, the noble front of the cave hill, and the fragrant little glens and breazy (sic) meadows of our own hills! And the sea! I cannot bear to live too far away from it. At Belfast, wither hidden or in sight, still it dominates the general impression of nature’s face, lending its own crisp flavour to the winds and its own subtle magic to horizons, even when they conceal it. A sort of feeling of space, and clean fresh vigour hangs over all a country by the sea.¹

To the southeast, Lewis could see the low line of the Castlereagh Hills. At this moment, I am looking through my study window and gazing at those same hills with the profile exactly as Lewis would have seen them. Frequently on Monday mornings, I play golf there. When I escort groups on tour, I take them for lunch into those hills that Lewis describes. He comments that to a child in the early 1900s the hills did not look very far away, but to him they were quite inaccessible. Of the hills he writes: “They were not very far off but they were to children quite unattainable. They taught me longing—Sehnsucht; made me for good or ill, and before I was six years old, a votary of the Blue Flower.”³

Sehnsucht is the German word for “longing,” but it conveys something more than our English word—more desire, an intense desire for something that is remembered but absent. This feeling is an important one to be captured by all students of Lewis. Miss this and you miss a central theme in his writing. He attached a particular significance to it: it is very important in his story and he came to define our English word joy in his technical sense as an expression of longing or Sehnsucht. He uses the word joy differently from either pleasure or happiness. His particular use of the word emphasizes the subtle difference that joy carries with it. That subtle difference is the stab of the unexpected. It cannot be experienced at our command; it comes without warning at times when we do not anticipate it; and it is always associated with memory. It is to these important notions that we will return.

The Garden

The other important feature of the house where Lewis was born at Dundela is the garden. Anyone wishing to obtain an extended glimpse of the garden can do so by going to www.authenticulster.com where I have placed three short film pieces detailing interesting aspects of Lewis’s Irish roots. The importance of the garden is explained by the description given to us in Surprised by Joy, of a summer morning when Warnie was sent out into that garden to play. He was given the lid of a biscuit tin to play with, and from the garden he proceeded to pull some moss, leaves, twigs, petals, and flowers. He used this vegetation to create a small toy garden on the
Surprised by Belfast: Significant Sites in the Land and Life of C.S. Lewis, Part II, Dundela Villas

lid of the biscuit tin. When the construction of the toy garden was completed, Warnie shared the result of his artistic efforts with his younger brother, who was mightily impressed. Fifty years later, when Lewis was writing *Surprised by Joy*, he recalled this episode from his childhood in Belfast and recorded: “That was the first beauty I ever knew… As long as I live my imagination of Paradise will retain something of my brother’s toy garden.”

Further on in *Surprised by Joy*, Lewis details three experiences that sparked his imagination. The first of these three experiences was the memory of the toy garden, created in the garden at Dundela. The memory was triggered by the scent from a flowering currant bush. One of the twigs that Warnie had placed in his toy garden was taken from a flowering currant bush. The scent reminded Lewis of the garden at Dundela and the feelings of longing, of joy, of Sehnsucht that it had evoked. For the rest of his life, the scent of flowering currant evoked this special memory and of the feeling he describes using the word *joy*. Lewis makes the following three momentous claims in respect to this experience:

*In a certain sense everything else that had ever happened to me was insignificant in comparison.*

*It is difficult to find words strong enough for the sensation which came over me; Milton’s “enormous bliss” of Eden . . . comes somewhere near it.*

In these comments from Lewis, readers can well appreciate why I include them. The garden at Dundela is one of the most significant locations in Lewis’s life. Here he had a special experience that gave him a special insight into the meaning of the word *joy*.

**Concluding Reflections**

What impact might the insight from Lewis’s early life at Dundela along with his later writing have on all who find Lewis helpful to any degree in their own Christian pilgrimage? The impact of his work and, in consequence, my growing un-

understanding of his use and definition of the word *joy*, has deepened my personal appreciation for the words of Saint Paul as recorded in his letter to the early believers at Philippi. In its four short chapters Philippians is filled with repeated references to the words *joy*, *longing*, and *desire*. Even a casual reading of a standard English translation will reveal that six times Paul refers specifically to joy, three times to longing, and once to desire. Often the joy is associated with something remembered. And sometimes more than one of these words is used in the same sentence. In addition, Paul peppers his letter with other associated words, such as *rejoice*, and ideas, conveying eagerness to meet the object of his desire, eagerness to complete his goal, and a straining toward the treasured prize.

Lewis, more than any other writer I know, conveys to us the effect of the stab of joy. Joy, he reminds us, is never a possession. It comes from desiring something else, something yet to be. The desire implies the absence of its object. The heightened sense of joy that Paul was expressing in his letter to the Philippians came from the things he was able to recall even while in the circumstance of being imprisoned. His joy transcended his circumstance.

These stabs of joy, mentioned by C.S. Lewis and Saint Paul, are intended to effect joy in disciples everywhere and in every circumstance. I trust this reminder of Lewis’s encounter with joy will prompt you to read Philippians again with a new insight based on what we know and enable us to personalize the determination and goal that was expressed by the apostle Paul.

**Notes:**

4. Ibid.
5. Ibid., 19.
6. Ibid.
ritan greats, Jonathan Edwards, who observed that whenever he saw sin in others, it provided an occasion for him to repent of his own sins. Have you reached that point in your spiritual growth or journey where you really believe what Paul says—that “we ourselves were once foolish, disobedient, led astray” (Titus 3:3)? The more you understand your depravity in light of God’s grace, the better you’re able to engage non-Christians because you’re not weirded out by their contentions. What’s more, they’re able to sense that you’re not weirded out. Is there a part of you that can say, “Hey, I know you think that Christians are supposed to be really good people, but our starting point is pretty low, and we need much grace”? If so, that is what begins to build bridges with skeptics, because they sense you’re not better than they are; they sense you’re both on equal ground.

Response Number 3: “There Is Someone Who Is Good”

The last thing we’ll consider is how the gospel uniquely addresses what I call the concern under the concern—also known as presuppositional apologetics. We’re talking about the underlying concern that is really driving this contention. Listen carefully, and you can hear it: When people say, “Christians are bad. They’re not commendable. They’re hypocrites,” what they’re really saying is, “I don’t want a hypocrite. I want something or someone I can really believe in and trust.” That’s the concern under the concern.

Imagine asking someone, “What is the one thing you want more than anything else?” You may receive superficial answers—for material things, for stuff. But have you considered that their underlying answer is really about security—for something they can trust in and thereby be secure? When you begin to hear this kind of concern under the surface, that’s when the gospel can uniquely address the skeptic’s contention—because the gospel’s response is to demonstrate that there is Someone they can trust.

In the Bible, we have this tremendous tension. On the one hand, you have a God who wants to love His people. He wants to bless His people. He wants them to prosper, and so forth. He’s infinitely committed to them. On the other hand, in the Bible, you have a God who is deeply committed to justice. He’s not indifferent to the fact that He makes stipulations, but people don’t keep the rules. He’s a God who is deeply committed to doing the right thing. And so the question in the Bible is, how can God remain both loving and just at the same time? How can God be proven to be someone we can trust in and feel secure about—someone who will do the right thing and who will also love us? The gospel’s answer is that there is a God who sends His Son Jesus, who dies in our place, who takes our sins upon Himself to satisfy God’s justice, so that we could be loved and cherished by God. So to the person who’s had bad experiences with Christians, our response with the gospel is, “Yes, as Christians, we’re going to fail you; people will fail you; societies will fail you; companies will fail you; churches will fail you. And yet there is a covenant-keeping God in the Bible who will never fail you, who is so committed to justice
that He gives His Son for justice to be satisfied, and who is so committed to loving you that it cost Him His Son.”

When people are saying, “Christians are so bad,” our response should be, “You’re pretty right about that. We’re trying. But you know what? We have a God who is faithful even when we are faithless; let me tell you about the gospel.” That is how the gospel uniquely addresses the concern under the concern.

Let me end with this challenge: All of this doesn’t connect with people until they feel it and touch it. This is why Jesus’ ministry in the Bible is described as being one of word and deed—knowing and doing. So as much as we must speak the truth, defend the truth, and proclaim the truth, consider what would happen if we became covenant-keeping people. Consider asking: Have I kept my promises? Am I being faithful? Am I being sacrificial? As we live out a yes, can we imagine that the original question, “Why are Christians so bad?” might change?

My non-Christian friends who have committed Christians in their lives seem to be more challenged to believe the gospel—than to disbelieve it. And that’s how the good news of Jesus Christ calls us to transform and to redeem this popular contention against Christianity. We are to live such good lives that those around us—even if they don’t agree with us, even if they think what we think is silly—will be confounded by their own doubts, because we Christians are covenant keepers like the God we worship.

I’m emphasizing this because we focus so much on the arguments and on the knowledge. But what would happen if we became a people whose lives were so commendable, so covenant keeping, so praiseworthy that skeptics would say, “I have issues with your worldview, but my biggest problem is that your life is commendable, and it seems to point me to Someone beyond just the two of us”? ♦

Notes

2 Scriptural quotations are from the English Standard Version.
Ibid., 209-211.

He came to this world and became a man in order to spread to other men the kind of life He has—by what I call ‘good infection’. Every Christian is to become a little Christ.

C.S. Lewis

RECOMMENDED READING

This thoughtful collection of sermons offers readers a thoughtful and meditative daily devotional. Compiled from both published and unpublished writings by Jonathan Edwards, readers will learn from his pen how the Christian life should be lived. Includes an Introduction.
In celebration of the 40th anniversary of the C.S. Lewis Institute, artist Nancy Ziegler was commissioned to create a painting based on the crystallizing statement of C.S. Lewis: “I believe in Christianity as I believe that the Sun has risen not only because I see it but because by it I see everything else”.

The result is the inspiring work of art entitled, “The Risen Sun.” This symbolic painting highlights the brilliance of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit who shines His light into our world so that we can truly see.

You can receive a 24” x 22” canvas giclee of “The Risen Sun” through a special, limited time opportunity! With a minimum monthly pledge of $100 or more, or a gift of $1200 or more, you can receive this limited-edition masterpiece by Nancy Ziegler. Please call (571) 350-3162 for more information or email: staff@cslewisinstitute.org to order the canvas.

The C.S. Lewis Institute is recognized by the IRS as a 501(c)3 organization. All gifts to the Institute are tax-deductible to the extent provided under law.
The C.S. Lewis Institute in Dallas is currently in the development stages and is seeking like-minded and like-hearted men and women called to help establish a Fellows Program in the Dallas area by 2016. We are organizing an Advisory Board and are conducting a search for mentors. If you feel called to be a part of this discipleship movement, please contact us using the information below.

Fred Durham has been a pastor for over 40 years serving in the North Texas Conference of the United Methodist Church. During those years he has served as a District Superintendent, supervising over 60 churches and as the Assistant to the Bishop. Always active in community affairs, Fred has served as mayor of two of the cities where he has pastored, Winnsboro, TX and Trenton, TX. He is also the founder and president of Alighieri Press, a ministry of publishing, speaking, and event sponsorship. Fred is a graduate of Southern Methodist University (B.A., 1970; MTS, 1973). He has been married for 48 years to his beautiful wife, Teresa. They have three wonderful grown children, one wonderful daughter-in-law, and seven even more wonderful grandchildren.

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Fred Durham
City Director

C.S. Lewis Institute is now in Dallas!