Jesus Heals Our Sin-Sickness

Evangelism in the Restorative, Healing Atonement Paradigm



THE ANÁSTASIS CENTER
FOR CHRISTIAN EDUCATION & MINISTRY

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Chapter 1: Why is Jesus Good News?

> *'This emphasis on Jesus as God's new humanity has made him so much more relatable… I never really understood how Jesus undid all the sins and evil within the nature of human beings. In many ways, Jesus' death had made me feel guilty, because I found that I was so unworthy to have Jesus suffer on behalf of my sins. However, understanding how Jesus conquered sin through healing humanity during his life and finally conquering the greatest evil of death, I now see his act on the cross as a moment of triumph.'*
>
> — Danielle Chung, Boston College, class of 2010

When I gave my life to Jesus late in high school, it was on a spring break trip to Mexico. When we were driving back from Mexicali, Mexico to Los Angeles, California, I sat in the van wondering, 'How am I going to explain this to my parents?'

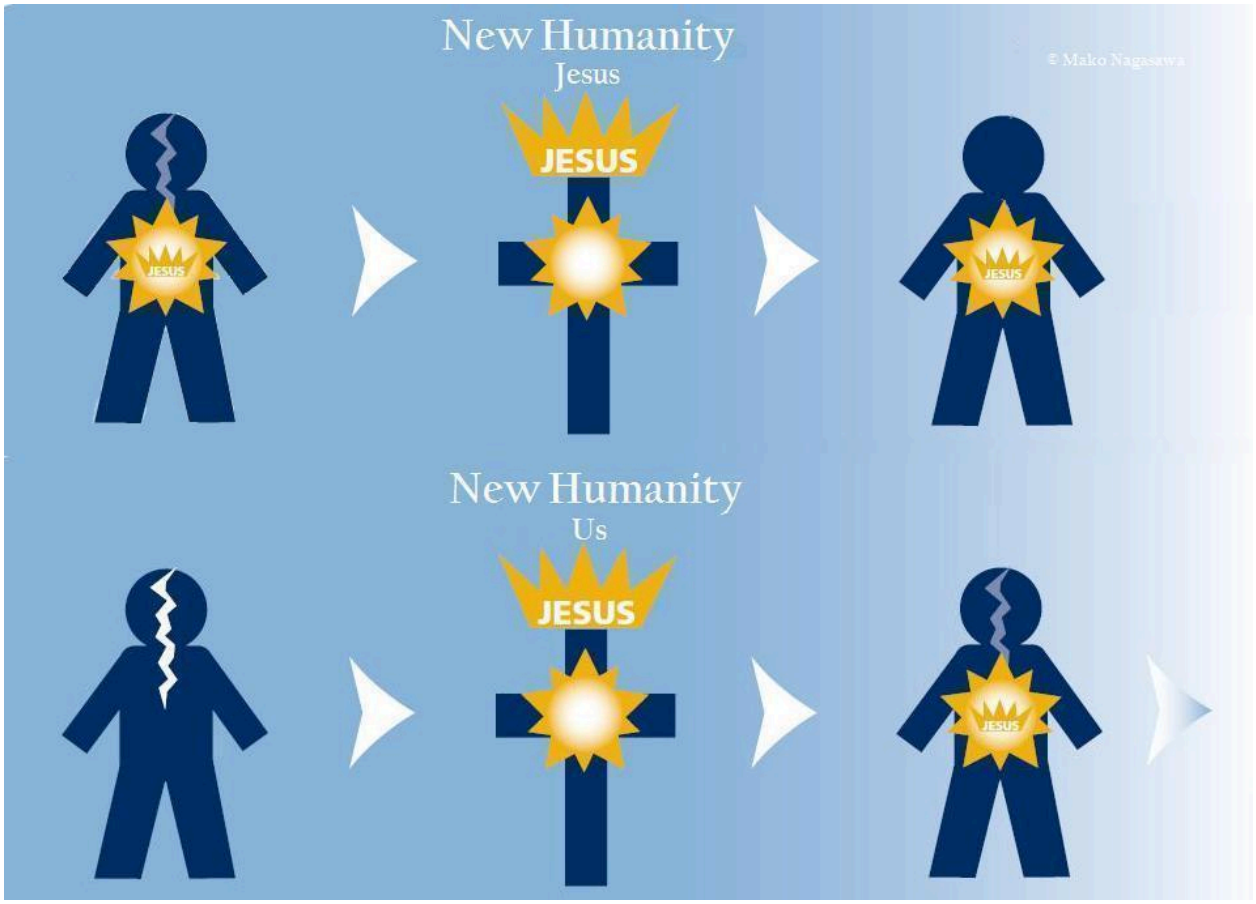
I had been learning about Jesus for about nine months prior to the trip, and my life had been changing bit by bit. Yet I still didn't know what to say, other than, 'So now I want to be a Christian, and that means…going to church?!' I knew following Jesus meant a lot more than *that*. But what?

Jesus entrusts us with something sacred, to share a part of our life with people that we may or may not already know well. But evangelism can be confusing and intimidating. When we think about the word 'evangelism,' what comes to mind? Quoting clichés that I don't really understand? Images of street preachers with bull horns standing on street corners? If I just quote the Bible, will God do something mysterious to impact the person who hears it? Do I expect the conversation to be long or short? Ultimately, what am I responsible for communicating to others?

This guidebook is designed to help us with that. Throughout it, you will find that I say that *Jesus is God's true humanity*. He shares himself with us to give us his new humanity. Not only is this a major theme in Scripture, but non-Christians have told me that Jesus is much more relevant and significant to them when they understand him this way. During one particular retreat where I presented Jesus this way, five people stood up to receive Jesus for the first time. What made that especially powerful is that the theme of the retreat was related to evil and social injustice! I had said that the corruption of sin within us is the deepest problem of evil, and God came in the person of Jesus to acquire the same humanity that you and I have, but defeat the corruption in his own humanity, and then share his healed humanity with us by the Spirit, through personal relationship with each one of us. So I want to share how you can speak of Jesus in a very thoughtful, meaningful, and respectful way, too. Here's how.

The New Humanity Diagrams

Diagrams can often help us communicate important things. The top line helps us tell *Jesus'* story. The bottom line helps us tell *our* story. Let me tell you how I use these diagrams.



Jesus' Story (The Top Sequence)

- Left (incarnation, life): The Son of God became human as Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus took to himself a broken human nature, symbolized by the crack running down the human figure. He did this to fight the corruption and brokenness in his own human nature. But he never sinned. Within himself, Jesus poured out the wrath of God upon that brokenness that was in him. He bent his human nature back into the love of the Father.

- Center (death, resurrection): Jesus died and rose again. Ultimately through his death on the cross, he judged the corruption and brokenness in himself, overcoming its final resistance. In his resurrection, Jesus now has a God-drenched, God-soaked, God-cleansed, God-healed, God-purified, and God-perfected new humanity. That's why there is no crack left in him. He has become what God always wanted for human beings: to bear God's glory from within himself.

- Right (resurrection, Spirit): He can share his new humanity with us by his Spirit if we just ask him. He can work in us without us knowing exactly how he does so, but I think it helps if we agree with him that we need him to heal our human nature.

- *Invitation: Do you want Jesus to heal and transform you?*

Tips for Telling Jesus' Story

- In the next chapter (and in Session 1 of the Course), we will study Matthew 3:13 – 4:11. That passage will really start to help you see how Jesus takes the same fallen human nature we have, and start to change it.

- Also, you may want to read Romans 2:28 – 29, 6:1 – 11, and 7:14 – 8:4 as another example of how Jesus saves us from *ourselves*. Or more precisely, Jesus saves us from *the corruption of sin within ourselves*.

- Think about helpful analogies and stories. Here are a few I often tell along the way:

    - Jesus is like a blood donor. All of us have a poison in our bodies, a disease called evil or self-centeredness. We need healing from it. The reason why God became a human being – why the Word became flesh – was to *acquire our disease*. That is the entire punishment Jesus took on. To have the disease that coursed through his veins, and fight it at every moment. In the physical body of Jesus, God resisted every shred of self-centeredness living in that body, pushing it all the way to its death. He *cleansed that humanity* and crucified the resistance. And by raising Jesus from the dead, God gave Jesus a fresh, new humanity perfectly fused with the divine. Jesus is our blood donor spiritually. When we entrust our lives to him, he joins himself to us by his Spirit.

    - Jesus is like *Harry Potter*. When Harry Potter was 1 year old, the most powerful evil wizard of all time, the Dark Lord Voldemort, killed Harry's mother and father. But when Voldemort cast a killing curse on Harry, it rebounded back onto Voldemort. The reason it didn't kill Harry was because Harry's mother had sacrificed herself first, and thus given a magical protection to Harry. The reason it didn't kill Voldemort was because Voldemort had already split his soul into objects outside his own body, and had achieved a kind of immortality in a very evil way. Voldemort becomes re-embodied, regathers his army, and starts to take over the wizarding world again. This time, Harry is commissioned to fight the Dark Lord. In book 7, Harry and his friends Ron and Hermione have to find the objects in which Voldemort put pieces of his soul, to destroy them. But Harry discovers that he has a piece of Voldemort's soul *in him*. It got implanted by mistake when Voldemort tried to kill him as a 1 year old. That piece of soul is what caused Harry great pain. And the only way for Harry to destroy that piece of Voldemort's soul is for Harry to die, at the hands of Voldemort himself. And so, Harry goes to face Voldemort, and to die. In order for Harry Potter to defeat the evil of his day, he had to die because there was a part of the evil in him. Similarly, in order for Jesus to defeat the evil in humanity, he had to die because there was a part of that evil in him. But he never gave into it; in fact he fought it every moment of his life, and it was a heroic struggle.

    - Jesus is like Frodo, in *The Lord of the Rings*: The moment Jesus entered into the womb of Mary is like the moment Frodo took hold of the Ring of Power. It

wasn't just this neutral thing. It tried to take him over. The same thing is true with Jesus when he took fallen human nature to himself. It fought with him. It tried to take him over. It tried to make him as self-centered as we are. But he never let it. And Jesus couldn't just put down some object like the Ring. It was part of him. He couldn't say, 'Hey, where's my Sam??? Can't I give this to someone else?' But he resisted the flesh, every moment, at the source, all the way to the end. He never sinned – in action, and further upstream in emotion, and further upstream in thought, at the very source of his will where he gave himself to the love of the Father. And unlike Frodo, who gave into temptation and kept the Ring, Jesus cast his struggling humanity 'into the fire,' so to speak.

- If you'd like others, I keep a list of illustrations on this page: https://www.anastasiscenter.org/evangelism-tools. Look for the file "Illustrations of the Atonement"

Our Story (The Bottom Sequence)

- Left (before Jesus): I was created by God to reflect Him. But I am corrupted and broken, symbolized by the crack running down the stick figure.

- Center (coming to Jesus): Jesus invited me to die and rise with him. Coming to Jesus was challenging, but good. Jesus said it would feel that way. He said that everyone who comes to him and follows him must take up their cross and deny themselves, but he who loses his life for Jesus' sake will find it in him (Mt.16:24 – 25).

- Right (with Jesus): Now, Jesus lives in me by his Spirit. He shares with me his new humanity. So he is healing me, retelling my story (see notes for Matthew 3:13 – 4:11), and shaping my life to look more like his. The crack is still there, but I'm not defined by it. Jesus defines me instead. And the arrow to the right of that represents the fact that my story is not over. Jesus will one day heal all things, including me.

Example: My Transformation Story

- Left (before Jesus): When Jesus came into my life, he began to re-tell my story and re-live my story to undo patterns of sin in my life. The most powerful instance of this was during the summer after my junior year of college. That was the time my parents finally decided to get their divorce. My dad's drinking had escalated to an alarming place. Now my way of dealing with my family, ever since 10th grade, was to leave. After I got my driver's license and my car keys, I was out of there. I'd go over to a park or to a friend's place to distract myself. I didn't even have a thought for my younger sister, who was four years younger than me, who I left at home to deal with the mess I didn't want to deal with.

- Center (coming to Jesus): But that summer, I felt Jesus say to me, 'I want you to stay.' I said to him, 'I don't have the strength to do that. If what you said is true, Jesus, then you need to be here in me, living your life out through me.' And he did. My parents couldn't afford a lawyer, so they had me arbitrate who gets what. I remember going into that time saying, 'I can't do this!'

- Right (with Jesus): But during that time, Jesus filled me with a sense of his love for me. And he gave me his love for my parents. I was able to listen sensitively to both of them. In fact, every other time before that, my response to them was, 'You have to stay together – for my sake' or 'You have to get a divorce – for my sake.' But I had never considered it for their sakes. Jesus helped me separate myself from my parents' marriage so they could make a decision that was best for them. Jesus gave me his love for my parents. He gave me his strength to stay at home. He gave me insights so I could counsel my sister with what she was feeling. At the end of that summer, I was talking to my friend Malcolm, whose family had gone through a similar thing earlier. I told him what I was experiencing and how I was meeting Jesus throughout it all, and he said these words to me that I'll never forget: 'Mako, how can you be so other-centered at a time like this?' I treasure those words as a reminder to me of the difference Jesus makes.

Tips for Telling Your Story

- Is this my conversion story or transformation story? *Transformation story.*

- I meet many who say, 'But I gave my life to Jesus at age 5, then 6, then 7, and every year until I was 15! How did I tell that story?' *But this isn't about your conversion story necessarily. It could be. It's about structuring your transformation story (or stories).*

- Personal note: Since I came to Jesus at age 17 from a non-Christian family, I have a clear conversion story that is also one of my transformation stories. But if you notice, I told a transformation story that spanned about 6 years of my life. My healing and transformation, while very real, was not instantaneous.

- So don't stress out if you are from a Christian family and grew up in the church. Your transformation story is about what it's like to bring a sin issue in your life (like your anger, your way of treating the opposite sex, your dislike for a certain kind of person, your impatience, your greed, or whatever your particular form of selfishness was) to Jesus. Talk about what you were like before you brought that issue to Jesus. Talk about what it was like to bring it to Jesus and surrender; that will feel both challenging (because it's a real letting go of something you want to control) and good (because Jesus will give you a new love, power, freedom, and direction). Talk about what you are like now with Jesus (hopefully you're changed in some way, even though you're not perfected yet!).

- If you are telling a non-Christian person your transformation story, be aware that this is what s/he needs to know about what giving their life to Jesus will feel like, and possibly look like.

- If you feel like you are still waiting for and longing for more change to happen in your life, that's okay too. Just say so.

Chapter 2: Jesus Retells Our Stories

When many people ask me where they should start to read the Bible, I typically reply with the story of the baptism and wilderness temptation of Jesus in Matthew 3:13 – 4:11. Whether the person is non-Christian or Christian, I think this passage is very helpful, and fundamental:

- To understanding Jesus as the one who heals human evil at its source: in human nature
- To learning how to articulate the evangelistic significance of Jesus to every person
- To understanding the Bible as a story with repeated patterns, and studying it well
- To understanding the basic nature of temptation and spiritual forces
- To giving you a chance to share your personal stories of being transformed by Jesus
- To fostering a context where we expect Jesus to transform us

So that's why I insert this particular passage here, and commend it to you! The passage comes first, with leader's notes and tips afterwards. I include some historical background notes with the passage that are important to understanding it well. If you are using it in an actual conversation with a non-Christian friend, print out the page so your friend can write on it and take notes.

You can do two shorter Bible studies in Matthew 3:13 – 4:11, as I have done, and as I have written the notes below. Or you can combine them into one Bible study if you have the time and if the other person/people can engage for that long!

If you are considering leading the Bible study in Matthew 3:13 – 4:11, please do read this entire booklet. The example conversations that I provide will be helpful for you as a leader.

Matthew 3:13 – 4:11

3:13 Then Jesus arrived from Galilee at the Jordan coming to John, to be baptized by him. 14 But John tried to prevent him, saying, 'I have need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?' 15 But Jesus answering said to him, 'Permit it at this time; for in this way it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness.' Then he permitted him. 16 After being baptized, Jesus came up immediately from the water; and behold, the heavens were opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending as a dove and lighting on him, 17 and behold, a voice out of the heavens said, 'This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well-pleased.' 4:1 Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. 2 And after he had fasted forty days and forty nights, he then became hungry. 3 And the tempter came and said to him, 'If you are the Son of God, command that these stones become bread.' 4 But he answered and said, 'It is written, 'Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God.'' 5 Then the devil took him into the holy city and had him stand on the pinnacle of the temple, 6 and said to him, 'If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written, 'He will command his angels concerning you'; and 'on their hand they will bear you up, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.'' 7 Jesus said to him, 'On the other hand, it is written, 'You shall not put the LORD your God to the test.'' 8 Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory; 9 and he said to him, 'All these things I will give you, if you fall down and worship me.' 10 Then Jesus said to him, 'Go, Satan! For it is written, 'You shall worship the LORD your God, and serve Him only.'' 11 Then the devil left him; and behold, angels came and began to minister to him.

Cultural Background

- Baptism was a rite of passage for Gentile converts into Judaism. It represented God cleansing a person from sin through that person's repentance, and new birth as a new person into Israel, the community of God's people. Baptism was based on an Old Testament pattern. Notice:

Adam and Eve	Noah & family	Israel
Gen.1:2 the Spirit of God was moving over the surface of the **waters**… 27 God created **man** in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them. (God then placed humanity in a **garden land**.)	Gen.7:24 The **water** prevailed upon the earth one hundred and fifty days. 8:1 But God remembered **Noah** and all the beasts and all the cattle that were with him in the ark; and God caused a wind to pass over the earth, and the **water** subsided. (Noah then planted a **garden**.)	Ex.14:29 But the sons of Israel walked on dry land through the midst of the sea, and the **waters** were like a wall to them on their right hand and on their left. 30 Thus the LORD saved **Israel** that day from the hand of the Egyptians… (Israel was in the wilderness for 40 years until God placed them in the **garden land**.)

- Therefore, John the Baptist was making a fairly radical statement by calling for *Jews* to be baptized.

Session #1: Jesus Retells Our Story

Questions

1. What do you think this whole experience was like for Jesus? Gather ideas, impressions.
2. What is Jesus communicating through the symbol of baptism?
    a. He's becoming God's true human being. Everyone else before him failed.
    b. First, the surprising thing is that John the Baptist is baptizing Jews. Why? He was supposed to be baptizing Gentiles only! To say that Jews needed to be baptized, too, was radical. The second surprising thing is that Jesus gets baptized. Why did Jesus get baptized? What did it mean to 'fulfill all righteousness' (3:15)? Did he have sin to confess and repent of?
    c. Jesus did not have sinful actions or thoughts of his own, but Jesus took on the same human nature we have, which was a corrupted human nature. Jesus needed to confess the sinfulness of that human nature.
    d. Jesus was cleansing his human nature and transforming it all the way through his life, death, and resurrection, so he could share his new human nature to be shared with us for our sakes.
    e. Jesus is symbolizing his own death and resurrection. He is looking ahead to that, and being prepared for it. He is going to offer us salvation from ourselves by giving us himself!
3. Why does the Spirit lead Jesus into *the wilderness*?
    a. What happened in the wilderness before? Israel had been there, too, for 40 years, after being 'baptized' in the Red Sea. So the wilderness was part of Israel's foundational story. Notice that Jesus quotes *exclusively* from Deuteronomy [8:3; 6:16; 6:13], so we know he's thinking about that part of Israel's story. (Moses gave Deuteronomy to Israel while they were all wandering in the wilderness.)
    b. What is the U.S. foundational story? What if Jesus sailed from England to Plymouth, MA on a ship called the Mayflower and started to deal kindly with the Native Americans (who are still there today)? If he intended to redo the U.S. but undo its sin, that's what he would do.
    c. MAJOR POINT: So Jesus is redoing Israel's foundational story but undoing its sin. Jesus is the 'new Israel' who was going to succeed where Israel failed.
        i. Illus: When Jesus came into my life, he began to re-tell my story and re-live my story to undo patterns of sin in my life. The most powerful instance of this was during the summer after my junior year of college. That was the time my parents finally decided to get their divorce. My dad's drinking had escalated to an alarming place. Now my way of dealing with my family, ever since 10th grade, was to leave. After I got my driver's license and my car keys, I was out of there. I'd go over to a park or to a friend's place to distract myself. I didn't even have a thought for my younger sister, who was four years younger than me, who I left at home to deal with the mess I didn't want to deal with. But that summer, I felt Jesus say to me, 'I want you to stay.' I said to him, 'I don't have the strength to do that. If what you said is true, Jesus, then you need to be here in me, living your life out through me.' And he did. My parents couldn't afford a lawyer, so they had me arbitrate who gets what. I remember going into that time saying, 'I can't do this!' But during that time, Jesus filled me with a sense of his love for me. And he gave me his love for my parents. I was able to listen sensitively to both of them. In fact, every other time before that, my response to them was, 'You have to stay together – for my sake' or 'You have to get a divorce – for my sake.' But I had never considered it for their sakes. Jesus helped me separate myself from my parents' marriage so they could make a decision that was best for them. Jesus gave me his love for my parents. He gave me his strength to stay at home. He gave me insights so I could counsel my sister with what she was feeling. At the end of that summer, I was talking to my friend Malcolm, whose family had gone through a similar thing earlier. I told him what I was experiencing and how I was meeting Jesus throughout it all, and he said these words to me that I'll never forget: 'Mako, how can you be so other-centered at a time like this?' I treasure those words as a reminder to me of the difference Jesus makes.
        ii. Illus: Somehow, we know that in all good stories, the happy ending doesn't just come out of nowhere. It replays the mess ups people had done before. Like with Anakin and Luke Skywalker. How many of you are Star Wars fans? Do you notice that Luke repeats motifs from his father Anakin's life. In Anakin's duel with Count Dooku, Anakin loses his green lightsaber, but he also has Obi-Wan Kenobi's blue lightsaber. During the fight,

a power cord is cut, which turns the lights off. So Anakim and Dooku fight in a blue and red lightsaber duel, with blue and red lights reflected in their faces. In that duel, young Anakin loses his right hand. Of course, Anakin later chooses the dark side and becomes Darth Vader. Luke Skywalker replays his father Anakin's story, but redeems it. He has a blue lightsaber, and with it fights Darth Vader, who now has a red lightsaber. So Luke and Darth Vader fight in a blue and red lightsaber duel, with blue and red lights reflected on their faces. They are in a dark room, and replay the same moves that Anakin and Dooku did. In that duel, young Luke Skywalker loses his right hand. So the stories parallel each other. But Luke later does not choose the dark side. He stays on the good side of the force and redeems his father, yes, but also his father's story. The victory echoed the defeats of the past, but reversed them.

iii. Illus: In *The Lord of the Rings*, there are a number of retellings of its own story. Bilbo gives Frodo the Ring on his birthday (they share a birthday). He does this freely, so Frodo does not become haunted by some memory of desiring the Ring. This is a reversal of Smeagol/Gollum killing Deagol to get the Ring from him, on the pretense that Deagol should have given him the Ring, since it was his birthday. Then, Aragorn retells his ancestor Isildur's story. He is the heir of Isildur, and has the same weakness common to all men, but refuses to take the Ring when Frodo offers it to him. Then, Gandalf retells Saruman's story. He stays faithful to his task as one of the Istari. And when he returns, he wears the white robes of the leader of the Council, because Saruman had betrayed that role. Gandalf says, 'I am Saruman. Saruman as he should have been.' All of these reversals happen because the defeats of the past must be overcome. The victories reverse the defeats.

iv. Illus: The Red Sox have a lot of history like that. The Red Sox won the World Series in 1916 and 1918, and then traded Babe Ruth to the NY Yankees in 1920. They didn't win another championship for 86 years. It was called 'the curse of the Bambino', i.e. Babe Ruth, and it seemed true. How many of you know that sad story? Whenever the Red Sox went to either the American League championship or the World Series, they lost through some weird fluke, each time. In 1975, the Sox lost to the Cincinnati Reds in game 7, in the 9th inning, after being ahead 3-0. In 1986, the Sox lost the American League playoff to the Mets. In game 6, Bill Buckner just had to catch the ball and throw it to home, but he let the ball go through his legs, and the Mets scored the winning run. They lost that game, then lost the next game and lost the World Series. In 2003, in the American League championship, the Sox were beating the Yankees in the 8th inning of game 7. They were up 5-2. But the Yankees won in the 9th 6 – 5. It did seem like the Red Sox were just cursed. No matter how well they did, something tragic always happened. But in 2004, as we all know, the Red Sox won the World Series. But they didn't just win, they won in such a way that they replayed many of the past events but redeemed them. They beat the Yankees, their arch-rivals, for the American League Championship after the Yankees had already won 3 games. And the amazing thing is that NO ONE has ever come back to win 4 straight games after losing the first 3. Curt Schilling pitched on a bleeding ankle because he had torn sutures because he had torn tendons. And in the World Series, the Red Sox beat the St. Louis Cardinals in 4 straight games. To add a surreal touch to the World Series victory, there was a total lunar eclipse that colored the moon a deep red color. The moon was red when the Red Sox won the World Series at last. The victory echoed the defeats of the past, but reversed them.

v. Happy endings don't come out of nowhere – they repair the failures of the past. Adam's race brought evil into the world. Adam's race will help to heal it. Why does it work that way? – Because God is committed to working inside the story. Not from outside it, because He would then overrule humanity's place in the story. He is so committed to us, in love and justice, that this is the way He brings it about. PRACTICAL APPLICATION: How do you think Jesus would re-live your life story with you, and heal you and transform you?

4. Possible Applications: Jesus in your story
    a. How has Jesus been retelling your story?
    b. From what you know of Jesus, how do you think he might want to retell your story?

c. (for non-Christians) How else do you think the corruption in human nature can be dealt with, except through Jesus? Here's a comparison of ways that different belief systems have of dealing with human evil
    i. Change external circumstances, make better laws, let each person work off the evil (through good deeds): (Rabbinic Judaism, Islam, Mormonism)
    ii. Get used to the evil out there, suppress your desires (Hinduism, Zen Buddhism)
    iii. Transform human nature itself and then offer people a new, fresh, purified humanity. Only with Jesus do we see God someone actually transforming human nature itself. Let's see how God does this.
d. (for training Christians in mission) For homework, sometime in the next 24 hours, please read through the five example conversations about 'Deeper Conversations: The Human Nature Question' in this booklet. And see if you can start a conversation about human nature, and whether we need healing, with someone who doesn't know Jesus.

Session #2: Jesus' Struggle to Receive the Father's Word into His Human Nature

Questions

1. Do you think Jesus struggled here? Gather ideas, impressions.
2. What happens to Jesus when he gets baptized?
    a. Jesus was receiving the Holy Spirit for us! He was adjusting his humanity to make it fit for the Spirit to dwell in, so he could share his new humanity with us.
    b. The Father affirms Jesus' identity as his Son.
    c. Who else do we allow to tell us who we are? Dwell on this.
        i. People trying to flatter us
        ii. People trying to control us (e.g. controlling parents, controlling boyfriend or girlfriend)
        iii. People trying to get us to buy things (e.g. the fashion industry tries to make you feel out of style all the time)
    d. Why is it important to receive our identity from the Father by being in Jesus?
    e. What else could the Father have said to Jesus? I mean, if you're seeing your kids off to school, you give them a pep talk or some advice. This was the start of Jesus' ministry, and he would immediately go through a really big challenge. Why does the Father say this??? This will be answered later.
    f. Notice that the prophet Jeremiah, in the Old Testament, said that the human heart has stuff written on it that God wants to write over:
        i. The problem: 'The sin of Judah is written down with an iron stylus; with a diamond point it is *engraved upon the tablet of their heart* and on the horns of their altars…The heart is more deceitful than all else and is desperately sick; who can understand it?' (Jeremiah 17:1, 9)
        ii. God's solution: 'I will put My law within them and *on their heart I will write it*; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people.' (Jeremiah 31:33)
3. Is there really a devil? A personal incarnation of evil? Well, although it's hard for skeptical people in the West to believe that, the rest of the world believes in a spiritual realm and definitely evil spiritual beings. Adam and Eve, as the original rulers of creation, allowed the serpent (the devil) to be influential in the world through their own sin.
4. What is each temptation about?
    a. Stones to bread
        i. What would have been wrong with this?
        ii. Jesus never did a miracle for his own sake. He always did it for others – for their needs, their healing, their understanding. To use power selfishly was totally against what Jesus came to do.
        iii. Jesus knew he would not always have bread to give, but would always have a word to speak. We as his followers would also find ourselves in that position. And while we are not to ignore people's physical needs, at the same time our mission is most fundamentally to declare a message and give our lives for others, as Jesus did, and we are not to be embarrassed when we have words but no bread (e.g. Jn.6:22 – 51). Jesus was not embarrassed by this. He did not take this as a sign of God's absence.

b. Getting attention by jumping off the temple.
    i. Second, Jesus refused to lead men and women out of an ego-boosting posture. If you use power, celebrity, and fame to gain people's trust, you will become ever more dependent on power, celebrity, and fame.
    ii. Even efficiency was not the most important criterion for Jesus, because efficiency tends to enshrine power, celebrity, and wealth to accomplish an end supposedly superior to those means. But in the process, efficiency always becomes its own god, even when it promises to point to another.
    iii. For example, someone might argue that we should first evangelize powerful, attractive, rich people because they will have more influence over other people than do disenfranchised, lowly, and poor people. Put so bluntly, the elitism and enshrining of power, celebrity, and wealth become obvious. Yet most of the time, we only think such things quietly to ourselves, afraid to face the absurdity of our own thinking. However, Jesus' effectiveness and that of his people does not ultimately depend on power, celebrity, and wealth.

c. Serving Satan
    i. If Jesus had done this, he would have become a 'son of Satan.'
    ii. Jesus came to rescue people from Satan, not to rule people under Satan.
    iii. Third, Jesus knew that his mission was radically different from what Satan suggested. Jesus came to liberate humanity out of Satan's dominion and place them rightly under the Father's good reign. To allow humanity to continue in subjection to Satan or some other principle was contrary to God, even if it meant suffering. Jesus would indeed go to the cross to accomplish God's unswerving purpose. Jesus would not deviate from the course set out for him. We must not deviate either. Before we are students, or employees, or citizens of a country, we are missionaries. Before we are anything else at all, we are missionaries sent by Jesus, continuing his mission to the nations.

5. What is the devil's overall strategy? To get Jesus to doubt his identity.
    a. MAJOR POINT: Why does Jesus struggle? Is he really tempted? By what? His own humanity, the self-centered humanity that he was wearing, wanted to be self-centered. But Jesus refused it.
        i. I've often wondered what that was like for him. We have very little idea what it means to resist the evil and self-centeredness within ourselves, because we give into that self-centeredness fairly early on. Like how many of you guys are virgins not because you've resisted temptation, or is it just because you've not had the opportunity? That's the difference here. Like how many of you choose not to go shopping when it's offered you, and instead, give that money to children in poverty'? The only way we know how strong our own evil is, is to resist it. And the longer we resist it, the more we feel it. If you read the saints of the past, they were really aware of their self-centeredness because they were pushing so hard against it. We're not really aware of our self-centeredness because we pamper ourselves so quickly. We eat when we want, change the channel when we want, customize our play list and our shopping list to our comfort. We have no idea how evil we can be because we protect ourselves from it.
        ii. Do you believe that Jesus' human nature craved sin? Sex? Physical comfort? Bitter anger against the Romans for oppressing his people? Revenge? Do you believe that Jesus had a mind like ours, which wanted to think private thoughts apart from God? But he always, always did one thing. When his own human nature wanted to just have an easy life, Jesus said, 'No, my life belongs to God.' When his own humanity wanted to lash out at his enemies, Jesus said, 'No, my life belongs to God.' When his own humanity wanted to sin, Jesus said, 'No. I belong to God.' He constantly took his own humanity and redirected it to God, to receive the love of God to the fullest, to love God absolutely. Jesus was healing human nature, the human nature he had taken on.
        iii. Here's an analogy: The closer the Ring got to Mordor, the stronger it became. It became heavier on Frodo. It put fear and hate in his mind. It poisoned him. We don't know the real power of selfishness, because we give into it fairly early on. And the only way to know the power of our own selfishness is to resist it. Jesus resisted it, every moment, all the way to the end. And Jesus couldn't just put it down. It was part of him.

b. How does the devil taunt Jesus to prove his identity? The 1st and 2nd times. On the 3rd time, he just makes a naked power offer. Of course, if Jesus accepted that, he would have become a 'son of Satan.'
c. DISCUSS: Where do you find your sense of identity? Accomplishments? Relationships? It's easy to feel like the Father's voice is not very affirming ('isn't He mean?!'), so we look around for other affirmation. *We want words to tell us who we are. We want words to write on our hearts.* If we don't receive our identity from God by relying on Jesus do that for us, we will basically run around asking other people to tell us who we are. *This is what leads to us making the same mistakes over and over.*

6. Possible Applications: Identity and Trusting Jesus
   a. When we are tempted, it is usually because we are listening to other voices than the Father's. What other voices are very influential to us? How can we let the Father define us more?
   b. If we are in Jesus, then Jesus makes the affirmation the Father gives him to us, so that the Father says, 'This is My daughter' or 'This is My Son' 'in whom I am well-pleased. But we must believe Jesus did this for us, and understand our identity *in Christ*!
   c. When it comes to life with Jesus, which is something to consider, it's really important to have your identity in Jesus. Because you'll confront failure, disappointment, success, etc. and you'll be tempted to find your identity in your strengths, or weaknesses, or effectiveness (or lack thereof) instead of your identity in Christ. But to be steady and strong, you've got to know your identity in Christ above all else. Notice Jesus said in Luke 10:20, 'Nevertheless do not rejoice in this [ministry success], that the spirits are subject to you, but rejoice that your names are recorded in heaven.'

Chapter 3: Deeper Conversations: Comparing Big Stories

Other Belief Systems Compared with Christian Faith

With this 'new humanity' framework, you can also understand how other religions or worldviews would compare. A helpful framework that I've used is to look at the implicit or explicit 'story' told by each belief. We all understand stories because we watch movies, read books, and tell stories. Belief systems also tell a story. So this is an easy way to talk about belief systems.

The first question is: Is there a happy ending or not? By this, I mean not just for the individual person, but for the whole world. If there is, that means good triumphs over evil. If there is not a happy ending, then it means that good and evil exist in some sort of balance. Let's practice on movies, just to get our juices flowing. The following movies do not have a happy ending:

Up in the Air	Boys Don't Cry
The Social Network	Gangs of New York
Romeo and Juliet	Scarface
The Butterfly Effect	Atonement
The Departed	Moulin Rouge
Blood Diamond	Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon
Pay It Forward	My Sister's Keeper

What do you feel when you watch movies like this? You may feel mad, like when my wife and I watched Clive Owen in *The International*, and the evil banks win in the end, despite all the efforts the heroes make to uncover the corruption. You may feel, 'Well, that was realistic.' You may also feel, 'How sad. That's depressing.' You may feel the same way when you listen to these songs:

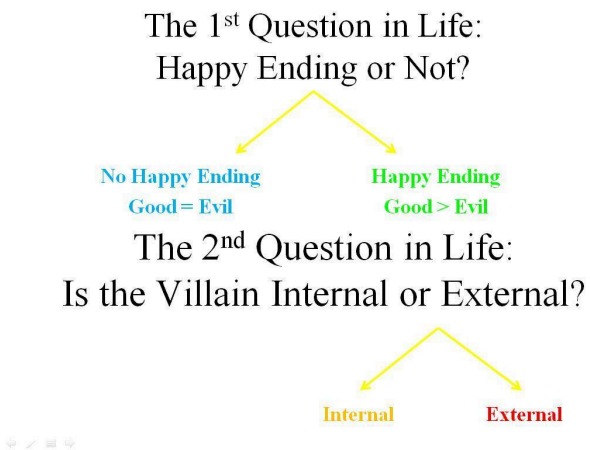
Don't Stop Believing, by Journey
Changes, by Tupac
The Way It Is, by Bruce Hornsby
The End of the Innocence, by Don Henley
Fast Car, by Tracy Chapman

In high school, two of the books I read that really touched me were William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* and John Knowles' *A Separate Peace*. Both of those books have a not-happy ending. They are poignant reflections on the state of the human heart and how they led to broken friendships, and even war. A story without a happy ending is one that seems to go on and on in the same way.

Movies with a happy ending, by contrast, make you feel hopeful, optimistic, and generally happy. Every Disney movie has a happy ending. If you have a plot line with the superhero who defeats the villain; the kids who stop the robbers; the guy and girl who hold out for each other and wind up together; the family that stays together through adversity; the natives who beat the invaders; the lawyer who persuades the jury of the truth; the scientist who beats the disease; the

teacher who gets through to the kids and helps them pass the test. Those are all happy ending stories.

The second question is for those who believe in some kind of larger happy ending story. If good defeats evil, you have to know who or what is the villain. The villain in *Cinderella* is the Queen. The villain in *The Transformers* is Megatron and the Decepticons. These villains are external to the hero(es). Those kinds of stories are rather simple. However, in *Star Wars*, there are villains both external and internal to the hero, Luke Skywalker. The external villain is Darth Vader and Emperor Palpatine. The internal villain is Luke's own anger. He has to resist both. In the epic *The Lord of the Rings*, the villains are also both external and internal. The external villain is Sauron. The internal villain is that part of every person that is tempted to grasp the Ring and make it their own. These kinds of stories are more complex, because the battles take place both inside and outside the hero.



Maybe the better question is: *Where* is the villain? Is the villain *external* or *internal*? You can put that question to each worldview. By definition, happy ending stories must have a powerful villain that is defeated somehow. That's the plot twist, the high point of the story, the resounding climax.

Now it may interest you to know that most stories in most cultures in most times did not believe in a happy ending. If you could talk to those people, they would ask you, 'Why would you think there is a happy ending for you?' Just look out at the world. The sun rises, and then sets. The seasons come, and then go. People are born, and then they die. There is good, and there is evil. We do good, and we do evil. The most natural conclusion people can make about the world is that good will never triumph over evil; they will just always be there in a circular story without a happy ending.

Let's get very specific, and look at one faith in particular: Hinduism. On Wikipedia (granted, it's Wikipedia, but I cite this website because I actually show it to other people – as you will see, it does a lot of evangelism for me), there is an article called the *Problem of Evil in Hinduism*. It says:

> 'This shows the existence of earlier cycles of creation, and hence the number of creation cycles is beginningless. Thus Sankara's [a Hindu commentator on the Vedas] resolution

> to the problem of injustice is that the existence of injustice in the world is only apparent, for one merely reaps the results of one's moral actions sown in a past life…On the higher level of existence, however, *there is no evil or good*, since these are dependent mainly on temporal circumstances. Hence a jnani, one who has realized his true nature, *is beyond such dualistic notions*.'[1]

Here's the problem: If everything comes from the supreme Hindu god behind all the other gods, then that god is both good and evil, or more properly, neither. And if that is true, then there is no victory of good over evil because there is *no difference between good and evil* in the deepest reality of all; that difference is just our opinion. The sooner you get used to that challenging truth, according to Hinduism, the sooner you will understand reality. Reality cannot be changed. Then, you can one day individually escape the cycles of reincarnation and escape to nirvana. This universe will continue, but you as a person will basically cease to exist because you will become one with reality.

And here's the deeper problem: A spirituality like that leads to an 'accept-the-world-as-it-is' posture. That is partly why the Hindu caste system resists change. You would not naturally have a 'change-the-world' posture towards evil, injustice, poverty, and so on if you were 'beyond' the dualistic notion that some things are good and some things are evil.

You might be surprised to know that in ancient times, everyone except the Jews believed in this kind of circular story. Historian Thomas Cahill, who writes to make history very accessible, puts it simply:

> 'All evidence points to there having been, in the earliest religious thought, a vision of the cosmos that was profoundly cyclical. The assumptions that early man made about the world were, in all their essentials, little different from the assumptions that later and more sophisticated societies, like Greece and India, would make in a more elaborate manner. As Henri-Charles Puech says of Greek thought in his seminal *Man and Time*: 'No event is unique, nothing is enacted but once…; every event has been enacted, is enacted, and will be enacted perpetually; the same individuals have appeared, appear, and will appear at every turn of the circle.' The Jews were the first people to break out of this circle, to find a new way of thinking and experiencing, a new way of understanding and feeling the world, so much that it may be said with some justice that theirs is the only new idea that human beings have ever had.'[2]

The Hebrew Bible (Old Testament) was the first literature to expect a happy ending. Everyone else – the Hindu Vedas from India, Homer's Iliad from Greece, the Atrahasis Epic from Babylon, the Avesta story from Persia – were all circular. All the modifications of Hinduism, like Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism, are circular. If you could plot the story visually, it would be a circle. The Greek tragedies were based on this circular plot arc. You're born, you die. Empires are born, and they also die. Everything goes back to where it came from. The way things were –

[1] The Wikipedia page has been updated since I wrote this, but I took a screenshot and saved it
[2] Thomas Cahill, *The Gifts of the Jews: How a Tribe of Desert Nomads Changed the Way Everyone Thinks and Feels* (Thorndike, ME: G.K. Hall & Co., 1998), p.13 – 14

the way things are – the way things will always be. Life is circular. There is no ultimate victory of good over evil.

Israel was different. The Jewish people alone had a linear perception of life. There are two reasons for this. First, they experienced their God as someone who made a promise, and then fulfilled it. That gave rise to a linear sense of history. You could mark things in time. All times are not the same. *God* makes things different. Second, they believed that their God was 100% good, and that He would ultimately triumph over evil. Good and evil were not equal entities or equal principles in the world. Therefore, they would not keep going around each other, cycling through forever in a yin and yang kind of pendulum. No, God would actually triumph over evil one day. And that period of history that all Jews hoped for, longed for, was called the Messianic period. It was the happy ending. Jewish monotheism, belief in one good God, created the idea of the happy ending.

But in every linear story, or hero story, or happy ending story, there is a problem that is overcome. What was the problem in the Jewish story?

- Every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually (Gen.6:5)
- The intent of man's heart is evil from his youth (Gen.8:21)
- Moreover the LORD your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your descendants, to love the LORD your God with all your heart (Dt.30:6)
- Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me. (Ps.51:10)
- Circumcise yourselves to the LORD and remove the foreskins of your heart (Jer.4:4)… The sin of Judah is written down with an iron stylus; with a diamond point it is engraved upon the tablet of their heart (Jer.17:1)… The heart is more deceitful than all else and is desperately sick (Jer.17:9)… I will put My law within them and on their heart I will write it (Jer.31:33)
- I will give them one heart, and put a new spirit within them. And I will take the heart of stone out of their flesh and give them a heart of flesh, 20 that they may walk in My statutes and keep My ordinances and do them (Ezk.11:19)… I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you (Ezk.36:26)

Israel documented the problem: a corrupted human nature. It was an internal problem. The evil is in us. How did they discover that? Partly because they just looked around and asked, 'Why do we keep screwing up?' Jeremiah and Ezekiel, for example, were social critics. They looked at urban injustice, corruption, and oppression of the poor. They asked, 'Why do we sin?' Not because we need better circumstances: We're in the promised land and it doesn't get much better than this. Plus, it's mostly the rich who commit these crimes, and do they need *better circumstances*? No, we can't blame that external factor. Can we blame our laws? Do we have bad laws? No, we have God's laws through Moses, and they're pretty good. So we can't blame that external factor either. The problem is not *external* to us – it's *internal*. So Jeremiah and Ezekiel understood that the God of Israel would have to one day change their hearts. He would write His laws on their heart (Jer.31:33) and give them a new heart and a new Spirit (Ezk.36:26 – 36). In the view of this God, human nature had to be changed. The evil was in each human being.

Jesus inherited this diagnosis. He said, for instance, 'Out of the heart comes evil…' (Mt.15:18 – 20). In the Christian story, Jesus was God come in human form, meaning that he took human nature to himself. And he fought it from within, never giving into the self-centeredness and rebellion from God that we give into all the time. He crushed the corruption that was in his fallen human nature, and killed it and purged it out of his own body by crucifying it. If Frodo had succeeded in throwing the Ring of Power into the fires of Mount Doom on his own, we would have an analogy to Jesus throwing the fallen human nature into the judgment of God. Then Jesus rose again as a new kind of human being, a fresh, God-drenched, God-soaked human being that had transformed his own human nature. And he can share his Spirit – the Spirit of his new humanity – with anyone who asked, so they could be transformed in a relationship with him.

The old Jewish prophecies said that 'out of Zion would come a message of salvation.' Zion – or Jerusalem – would be the epicenter of a renewal that would ripple from Jesus across the whole world. God's happy ending was dawning. Evil was defeated in the body of Jesus by Jesus' moment by moment choices to never break his relationship with the Father by the Spirit, and he was sharing his new humanity with all who asked. Jesus sent his people into the whole world to proclaim a message that they were joined with him spiritually, and that anyone who wanted to be joined to him could be, by believing in him. And one day God will triumph over all evil (human and supernatural) when Jesus returns.

As evidence that Jesus really did change people, we can point to the fact that the early Christians were radicals for Jesus. They rescued babies left out on Roman doorsteps.[3] They went into plague infested cities and cared for the sick and buried the dead.[4] And whenever a Roman army official waging war on someone else wanted to become a Christian, they would say, 'That's great, but you're going to have to find a new job because Jesus commanded us to love our enemies, and we don't think you can do that while you're killing them.'[5] All this was unheard of in the classical world, and it started what David Bentley Hart called 'a revolution of the human.'[6] When people realized that the Christian happy ending story was true, it unlocked a burst of courageous, loving energy. Aside from the supernatural power of the Spirit of Jesus indwelling people, the *story* was important. When you believe that there will be a happy ending, and that there is a way to jump on the hero's side and not be the villain, you ask a whole set of new questions: What can I do to participate in that victory? How can I side more and more with the true hero? How can I battle my own inner weaknesses faithfully?

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[3] Vinoth Ramachandra, *Subverting Global Myths: Theology and the Public Issues Shaping Our World* (Downers' Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008), p.99 writes, 'Medical historians have pointed out, for instance, that the care of defective newborns simply was not a medical concern in classical antiquity. The morality of the killing of sickly or deformed newborns appears not to have been questioned until the birth of the Christian church. No pagan writer – whether Greek, Roman, Indian or Chinese – appears to have raised the question whether human beings have inherent value ontologically, irrespective of social value, legal status, age, sex and so forth. The first espousal of an idea of inherent human value in Western civilization depended on a belief that every human being was formed in the image of God.'

[4] William Hendrickson, *New Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1962), p.144 – 5

[5] Dale W. Brown, "Pacifism" in *New Dictionary of Christian Ethics & Pastoral Theology*, p. 645

[6] David Bentley Hart, *Atheist Delusions: The Christian Revolution and its Fashionable Enemies* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009), ch.10 – 15 provides ample historical information on how Christian faith stressed our common humanity and thus invented the human. See also my argument that human dignity has no other foundation, in Mako A. Nagasawa, *Human Dignity: Does Every Human Being Matter?* under "Jesus 401" at https://www.anastasiscenter.org/why-jesus.

So to back up, the Messianic story was a story of two basic elements: (1) a suffering hero who (2) brings salvation to the whole world. From Jesus to the rest of humanity. From Jerusalem to the rest of the world. I want you to keep those two basic elements in mind, because we are now going to see what happened to that story.

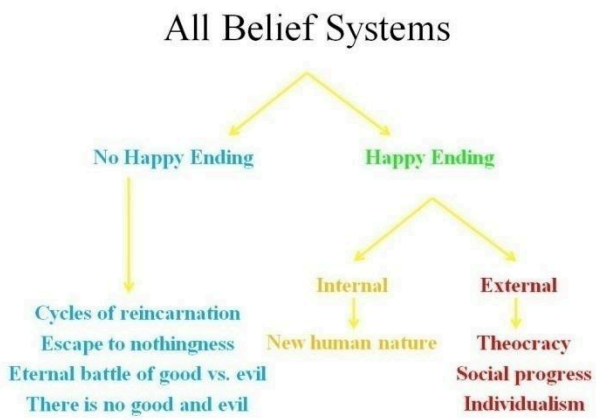
Two movements started that were parodies of the Christian story: Islam and the European Enlightenment. The Islamic view of God is that God is too pure to touch humanity, which is corrupt. How this problem can be fundamentally resolved is inconsistent in the Qur'an. The Qur'an in Surah 94 says that God had to purify the prophet Mohammed's heart before he could receive the revelation of the Qur'an. Two hadiths also say this (Sahih Muslim, Sahih al-Bukhari). But why does Mohammed get a free ticket to cleansing, while the rest of us need to work pretty hard to be cleansed, through reading the Qur'an, fasting, and all the other Muslim spiritual practices? And even Mohammed called himself a sinner, later in life (Qur'an 40:55; 48:2; 47:19; Bukhari's Hadith 8:335, 379, 407, 408).[7] Did this affect his ability to speak truth? Was he cleansed again? Meanwhile, the Muslim God keeps an infinite distance from us. This means that the problem being dealt with is external to humanity: we don't have the right laws. The Muslim God's role is to give his divine law. We need to be informed and submit to Islam, and those laws are important because this is what human beings have to do. One day, the Muslim God will judge everyone and bring in the new age. Meanwhile, our role, in the Muslim story, is to receive the Muslim law and spread it.

The European Enlightenment also externalized the problem. Essentially, when the West started to reject Jesus himself, Western philosophers wanted to hold on to the happy ending, but without Jesus. After all, who wants to go back to a circular story? That's boring, fatalistic, depressing, and repetitious. They didn't want to go back there. So they kept a linear story, but changed the plot. The Enlightenment philosophers became story-tellers. Hegel told a story about conflicting ideas that merged with each other and culminated in his philosophy, which would spread to the whole world. Adam Smith told a story of how capitalism can and will produce wealth for all nations, starting in England and spreading to the rest of the world. Marx told a story of revolution and socialism, starting in England and spreading to the rest of the world. Social Darwinism told the story of European civilization becoming more and more complex, like life apparently, over time. So it became the 'white man's burden' to 'civilize' the rest of the world. Freud and Nietzsche told the story of people in Europe realizing that God is dead, an idea which would then spread over the rest of the world, a world that was only primitive and superstitious. We protest those stories today, we argue with them, and yet we still live in them.

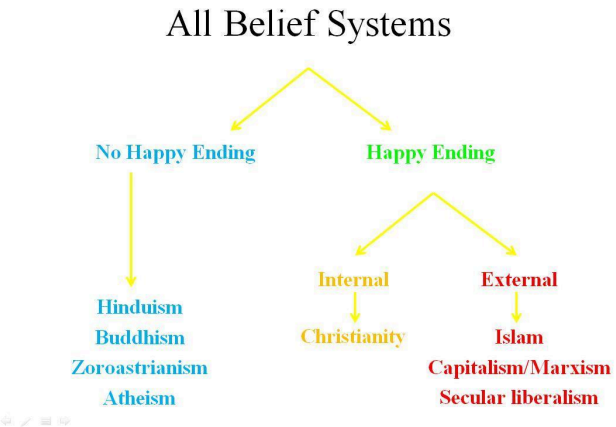
The poet T.S. Eliot wrestled with that. In 1922, after the devastation of World War I, people started to realize that the story that Europe told wasn't true. The story of European civilization bringing the world to a better place was shown to be a false story. So T.S. Eliot, for example, wrote *The Wasteland*, which many believe to be the greatest poem produced during the 20th century. No longer could people cling to this optimistic Enlightenment story that said evil is located in non-European styles of government and culture, and that the world just needed a little help from Europe…not when Europe itself lay in ashes. This is why I include political beliefs as having a religious quality, below, and why we will have to argue with them as well.

[7] For more information, see http://www.answering-islam.org/Silas/mo-sinner.htm

When you break it down this way, the choices become more clear. I break it down this way.



In belief systems without a happy ending, what happens through the course of time? Either the 'god' is both good and evil, and there are endless cycles of reincarnation with some kind of theoretical escape to nothingness for each person (Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism), or there are two 'gods' – one good and one evil – who eternally battle each other without resolution (Zoroastrianism), or there is no god and therefore neither good nor evil but just the chaos of a universe running out of thermodynamic energy (atheism). Meanwhile, the stories with a happy ending can be divided into the one with an internal villain, primarily (Christianity) compared with those that define an external enemy, primarily: lack of divine law in the nation (Islam), lack of the right laws that will make for social progress (capitalism or Marxism), or antiquated religious dogma stifling individual rights (secular liberalism).



If you can understand the significance of those two questions, belief systems will become much clearer to you. And you'll understand a good deal of history and theology, too. Remember: the first question is, 'Is there a happy ending?' and the second question is, 'If there is a happy ending, then is the villain internal or external to us?'

I find that if you articulate Christian faith in its basic story form like this, people have a much easier time understanding it. If you compare it to other stories, they really get it. I think there is

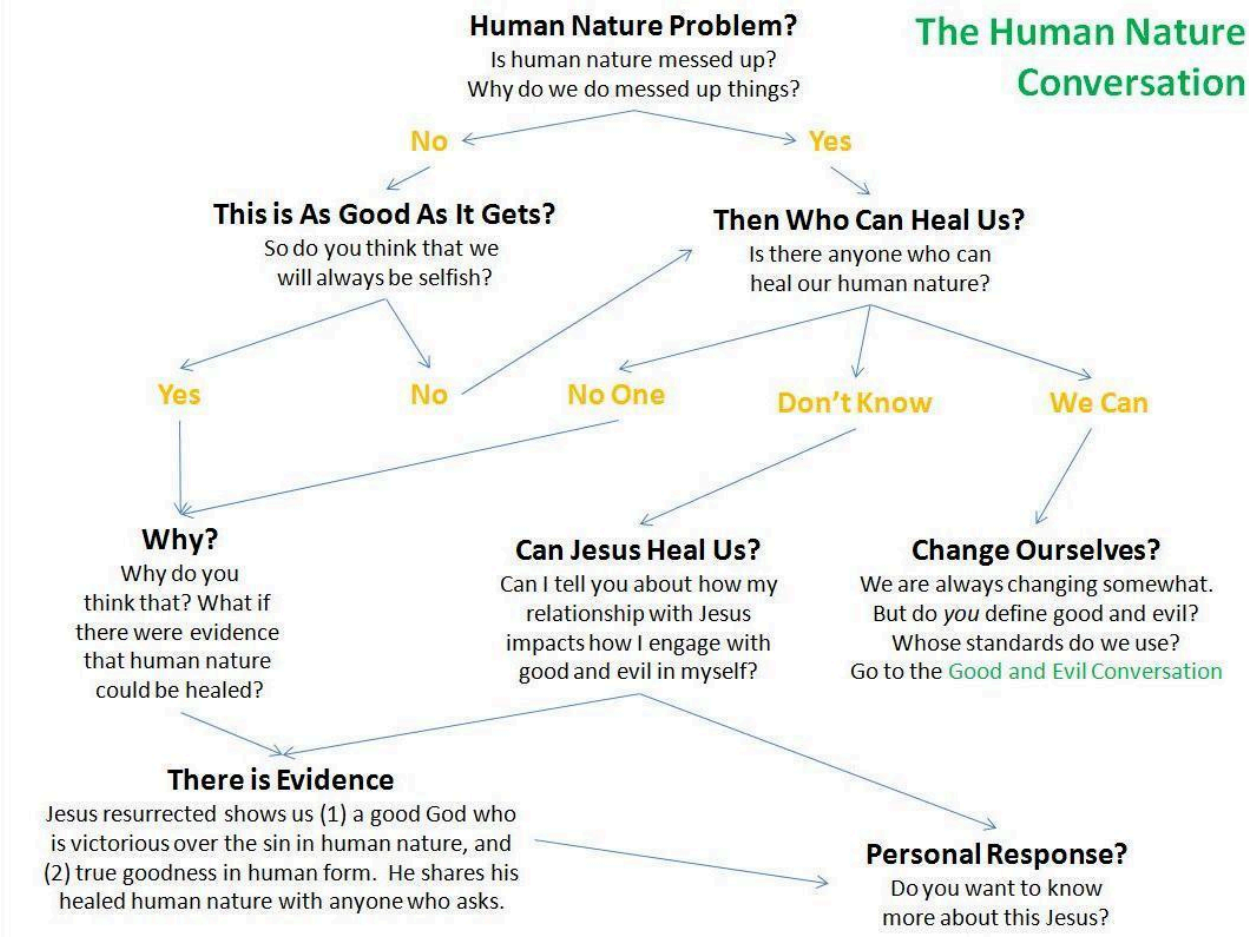
something in our hearts that yearns for a happy ending. But sometimes we resist owning up to the fact that we have an internal problem: sin, the corruption of our originally good human nature.

A good number of people have come to faith in Jesus this way. One young man was trying to explain these stories to another non-Christian, and he found himself wanting to believe the Christian story. A few days later, he gave his life to Jesus!

Chapter 4: Deeper Conversations: The Human Nature Question

I want to help you go a little deeper with certain conversation areas. My most effective discussions with non-Christians have explored three topics: human nature, good and evil, and the character of God. I've drawn up a 'conversation tree' for each topic. They are interrelated, though. So it helps to be familiar with all three topics.

Be mindful that I'm really just giving you a bare bones outline here. Be more personal than this in actual conversation. Use humor. Tell personal stories. But watch for how I keep pressing other people to have a coherent story of good and evil, a clear location for the evil, and whether they can really live in the story they're telling me. I think that I can find big problems with other people's beliefs. If they come to realize those problems, sometimes they will question themselves or their current stance, and start being open to Jesus. Sometimes this is what we have to do before we explain Jesus to a person.



Here are abbreviated examples of real conversations I've had. See if you can follow the conversational path I followed. At times, I bring up a side argument or use some connection point with the other person. But then I try to come back into the main argument.

Conversation #1

Postmodern Skeptic: Even if Jesus was raised from the dead, so what? You think I need him…why?
Me: Because the only person who can offer us a healed human nature is Jesus. Why do you think we're messed up as people?
Postmodern Skeptic: Well, what makes you say we're messed up? There you go, like other Christians, saying that we are evil. I think we're good.
Me: Why do you think we do so much evil?
Postmodern Skeptic: Some people have been through trauma, and they take it out on others.
Me: Do you lock your doors at night? Do you keep a password on your email account, or bank ATM? Would you flat out *encourage* your younger sister to go to a frat party and get drunk?
Postmodern Skeptic: So what? We're holding each other in check.
Me: Why did we have to make locks and passwords and rape laws in the first place?
Postmodern Skeptic: Ok, I guess we do kind of suck.
Me: Well, so doesn't that include you and me? I can tell you my epiphany story if you like.
Postmodern Skeptic: Sure, let's hear it.
Me: [testimony of transformation story]
Postmodern Skeptic: So you've told me your story. Do you think we're only evil? What about all the good that people already do?
Me: How do you define good?
Postmodern Skeptic: Not being selfish. It's realizing that we are all connected. I don't think we need religion or God to realize that.
Me: I think we do good because we were made in the image of a good God, and because He keeps stirring up goodness in us to remind us of Him. The question is: Why do we do evil? And then the question is: Can Jesus heal our human nature?
Postmodern Skeptic: How do you know it was Jesus? Why not just connect with a 'force' like 'the force' in Star Wars?
Me: If the problem is cancer in the body, the solution must be antibodies that fight the cancer in the body. In the same way, if human nature really has a disease, the only solution for it must be a healed human nature. Some 'force' that floats out there can't be the solution to human nature. An actual human being in actual human history must perfect the antibodies to evil in his own body. We have to be able to see true goodness in human form and human life. Then he has to be able to spiritually connect with us. The only person able to do that is a God who is 100% good. That is why he came in the person of Jesus. Do you want to compare what you currently believe with Christian belief?

Conversation #2

Social Activist: So this sounds different than what I was taught when I grew up in church. I was taught that Jesus saves us from *God*, who is about to throw us into hell because He's pissed off. I thought Jesus was our 'get out of hell' card, our afterlife insurance.
Me: I'm aware of that kind of thing. What's your response to that?
Social Activist: Well it makes God seem more focused on the next world, and less on this one.
Me: Yeah, that never made much sense to me, either. I think God is focused on healing this world, and healing our human nature. He is wrathful, but against the spiritual cancer in us, the corruption and brokenness *in us*. He loves *us* and wants to heal *us* so that we can reflect His image again.
Social Activist: Well, I think Christians waste a lot of time in church, just singing and getting their shout out. Why can't people just get out there and do some good?
Me: Great question. On the one hand, I totally agree that Christians can be more effective. On the other hand, some of the greatest social movements were because of the church and Jesus: the Civil Rights Movement led by the Black church, the Filipino People Power Movement led by Catholics, and so on. I think that our emotional needs and spiritual needs are also important, along with our physical needs, and that Jesus calls us into relationships in which we get to practice being other-centered like he is.
Social Activist: I think we've just got to change laws, schools, structures, and systems. We have to empower poor people. That's going to be more effective anyway.
Me: I'm with you when it comes to changing those things. I'm part of [a group of people giving to microfinance]. And I'm glad you're doing your part, too. But I think what you're doing is assuming that things external to us are the source of the problem. I think you're missing the biggest problem, the internal factor: human nature.
Social Activist: So what's the big deal there?
Me: Well, it's not like poor people are only victims and not perpetrators. Look at alcoholism and domestic violence and stuff. Jesus makes a big difference in the lives of poor families and poor kids. Plus, it's not like making people rich means that they'll do the right thing. Rich people cheat on their spouse just like they'll cheat on the financial system. Like Bernie Madoff or Tiger Woods. And there are plenty of students who *will* take that job with Goldman Sachs because of the money.
Social Activist: I see what you mean. So, do you think that Christians are better than other people?
Me: Well, I would say two things. (1) Christians have a stronger foundation for good and evil because Jesus is good and not evil. I would ask you, 'Do you have a foundation for defining good and evil?' And (2) we have more power to live it out because Jesus empowers us. I would ask you, 'Are you on your own?'
Social Activist: You mean to say that atheists can't be moral?
Me: I mean to say that a Christian can be held up against Jesus. If an atheist does something, what objective standard can you hold that person up to?
Social Activist: Hmmm. So that's why we need a foundation for good and evil?
Me: Yes. But it's not enough to 'know' what is good and what is evil. We need the power to live it out because we run out of love, because our humanness is bent into selfishness. I know that if I had not given my life to Jesus, I would not be [living in a high-crime, inner city neighborhood; personalize for yourself]. But because he is in my life, I do it. And there are a lot

of other ways in which there is this difference that Jesus makes in my life, to make me less selfish and more loving. I've got a long way to go. But I do think every Christian would say the same thing. So one answer to your question is: Jesus makes a big difference. The first comparison has to be between who we are with him vs. who we would be without him.
Social Activist: So you think that Christians are better than who they would be without Jesus. I guess if you add up that difference across lots of people, it becomes a lot.
Me: Yeah, but also this radically loving God is making us a fit for Himself.
Social Activist: So why do you think God is good? There's a lot of evil in the world.
Me: God is still good, even though there is evil, because He gives all of who He is to deal with the evil in each one of us. Evil is not just out there. It's in here. And God loves us while He wants to surgically remove the evil. The question for each of us is the same: Will I let Him remove the evil in me? Will you let Him remove the evil in you? Do you want to talk more about that?

Conversation #3

Recovery Community Member: I know about a god of my understanding from the AA group I attend.
Me: That's awesome.
RC Member: So that god is enough, right?
Me: Enough for what?
RC Member: Enough to get me into heaven? Isn't that the goal?
Me: If it is, then I think there has to be a goal before that goal. The real goal has to be to heal our human nature and get rid of *all* of our addictions so we can grow in the healthy desires. Otherwise, we might not want "heaven" in the first place, if we're addicted to something else.
RC Member: Whoa, whoa, whoa. I thought I'll just be rewarded for living a clean life.
Me: We will be rewarded, but for growing in our wanting an even cleaner life, the kind of life Jesus has in himself.
RC Member: Are you saying I need Jesus? Why is the god of my understanding not enough?
Me: Look, I want you to know I really respect you. Your struggle at AA to be clean is something I really admire. You know that, right?
RC Member: Sure. But it's nice to hear you say that.
Me: Good, because it's real. So when I say this, I say this because I think you've already experienced something about Jesus. What if Jesus *is actually* the God behind "the god of your understanding," even though you didn't know it?
RC Member: Why do you say that?
Me: Because your story of beating back your substance dependency is a lot like my story of beating back my sin-sickness, and trying to stay spiritually healthy.
RC Member: How so?
Me: [testimony of transformation story]
RC Member: So you're saying that my substance abuse story is a lot like your spiritual story?
Me: Exactly. There are three elements of your story that make me think Jesus is the "god of your understanding" who helped you.
RC Member: What are those?

Me: First, you had good, healthy desires. You had a desire to love others in your life, enough so that you didn't want them to worry about you or hate your choices. You had a desire to live in reality – a desire for truth, because you can live with others in the space of truth and reality. You had a desire for beauty and goodness, because you became a [carpenter, plumber, teacher, etc.] and you make beautiful, good stuff happen for people. And, I know in the AA program, you make a choice to tell people about the AA program, and encourage them to be clean, also. You had a desire for justice, so that other people would have a better set of options than you did. Where did all those desires come from?
RC Member: You think Jesus gave me those desires?
Me: Absolutely. Jesus made us. And he made us to be like him (Col.1:15 – 17; Jn.1:3, 9). Jesus has this great relationship with his Father (and then there's the Holy Spirit, and we can talk later about God). So Jesus' whole being is love, truth, beauty, goodness, justice. That's why we, in our humanness, want those things. We don't always connect it to Jesus, and that's why we don't always know what exactly we want, or where to find these things…
RC Member: Isn't that the truth?!?
Me: Yes, and we take those good desires and use them in selfish ways.
RC Member: Hmmm…
Me: But Jesus originally made us to be like him, and to grow in the things he experiences all the time, with his Father. You tapped into those good desires, and that's part of how you beat back the addiction.
RC Member: I can see that.
Me: The second element of your story is the bad desires. I feel those bad desires. The desire to love myself before everyone else. The desire to live in my own fantasy world – a world of lies, and untruth, and escape – but ultimately, you wind up alone.
RC Member: Exactly.
Me: The third element of your story is the divine healer.
RC Member: For you, that's Jesus. For me, that's the "god of my understanding."
Me: But what if we were all born with a kind of "fetal alcohol syndrome," in a sense?
RC Member: Oh no. What are you talking about?
Me: What if we have a much bigger problem that we've inherited? What if Jesus made human nature to be good, and to grow with God, but our humanness got damaged along the way, and we do things individually to make it worse? So what if everyone is addicted to something: control, money, getting "likes" on Facebook, wanting someone else to put us at the center of their life?
RC Member: Being part of a recovery community, I can totally see that. So how is Jesus a healer for all that?
Me: Because he shared in our broken humanity, so we could share in his healed humanity. And Jesus shares the power of his new, healed humanity with us – the power of his real love, truth, beauty, goodness, justice that is now embedded into his human nature. And he did it for us, so he can share himself with us.
RC Member: So you're saying I have more problems than I thought, huh?!
Me: But you also have a bigger God than you thought, a closer God, and a more human God, who knows what it's like to be one of us.

Conversation #4

Evolutionist: So you're just saying that we need God to become better people. I think we are just moving on to the next stage of human evolution. We are becoming better people, just because of globalization, and because our survival depends on caring for all humanity. It's not just about raw competition anymore.
Me: So, within your own framework, you believe we can overcome our genetic inheritance of survival of the fittest?
Evolutionist: Definitely
Me: What makes you think we're capable of doing that?
Evolutionist: We're becoming better people. We have human rights. There are fewer deaths from wars. More people are trying to alleviate poverty, and more money is going there. Look at the Gates Foundation, for instance.
Me: Isn't that Western people and Western civilization you're describing there?
Evolutionist: Well, the West has more resources today, and we're realizing that we're all interconnected, and that we can't be colonialists.
Me: So you're saying that the West is at a higher stage in human evolution than the rest of the world? That's an interesting claim. Seems Euro-centric and U.S.-centric and neo-colonialist to me.
Evolutionist: Well, maybe a higher state of consciousness because of our technology.
Me: I could also argue that Western culture is more predatory than other cultures of the world, for example, fueling the rebirth of child sex trafficking and internet porn. But regardless, I'm talking about a change in human nature. Have we brought about a change in human nature?
Evolutionist: Maybe it's possible to think that. Or aim for that.
Me: I don't think the West has changed anyone's human nature. Did you read William Golding's *The Lord of the Flies* in high school?
Evolutionist: Yes.
Me: I did, too. The main idea is that human nature contains 'the beast.' So these 'civilized' British schoolboys shipwrecked on an island become what we call 'savages.' And they are rescued from the island by 'civilized' British sailors on warships, whom we no longer call 'savages.' The boys longed for salvation. But who will save the adults? That's the question.
Evolutionist: You're saying we need saving from ourselves?
Me: Yes, exactly. Because our technology is neutral in itself. It only enables us to do more good or bad. It's not going to 'save' us. So unless we talk about human nature, and why we do good and bad, you and I are going to keep being surprised at how destructive people can actually be.
Evolutionist: How do you define good and bad? According to what 'God' tells you?
Me: Actually yes. How do *you* define it?
…(on to the Good and Evil Conversation, below!)

Conversation #5

Muslim: Do you think there's a real difference between the Christian God and the Muslim God?
Me: Isn't it said in Islam that the Muslim God would never become incarnate in human flesh and personally touch human nature?

Muslim: Yes.
Me: Why is that?
Muslim: Because He is too pure, and we are too impure.
Me: And that's one reason why Muslims deny that God could become incarnate as Jesus of Nazareth. Maybe he was a prophet, but he could not be God Himself. Right?
Muslim: Yes, that is what is taught.
Me: So then how does the Muslim God ever resolve the problem of human nature?
Muslim: We only have free choices to make. There isn't a problem with human nature.
Me: But the Qur'an Surah 94 says that God had to purify the prophet Mohammed's heart before he could receive the revelation of the Qur'an. Two hadiths also say this (Sahih Muslim, Sahih al-Bukhari).
Muslim: Yes, that is said. Ibn Ishaq states that two men clothed in white had seized him and opened his chest.
Me: What did he need to be cleansed of?
Muslim: Just something in his humanness.
Me: So then, there's something wrong with human nature. It's somehow impure, right?
Muslim: I suppose.
Me: And then why does Mohammed get a free ticket for cleansing, but the rest of us need to work pretty hard to be cleansed, through reading the Qur'an, fasting, and all the other things?
Muslim: Well, he was the prophet. He had to receive the Qur'an for the rest of us.
Me: And if nothing is wrong with human nature, then how do you explain why we're so messed up?
Muslim: It's just our bad choices.
Me: I agree that we make bad choices, but *why* do we all seem to make bad choices? Even Mohammed called himself a sinner, later in life (Qur'an 40:55; 48:2; 47:19; Bukhari's Hadith 8:335, 379, 407, 408[8]). Realistically, if we were just neutral, and made our choices neutrally, then wouldn't half of all human beings be pure? Why are we all sinners? Isn't it more realistic to say that we are damaged, corrupted from an originally good design?
Muslim: I follow you. I'll have to think about it.
Me: The idea in Christianity is that God grabs hold of human nature in one person, Jesus, fixes the problem, and then shares Jesus' healed new humanity with anyone who asks. This is why it's important that Jesus *never* sinned. God wants to saturate human nature and be in us and with us, drawing us into His very life, His radically loving, other-centered life.
Muslim: So right there, the Muslim faith disagrees. First because of the idea of *tawhid*, or God's oneness. So God cannot be in a human, because that would also mean that God is broken up into two places: He is in Jesus and yet He is not only in Jesus. That's a contradiction for Christianity because the infinite cannot become finite without running into these logical problems. Second, God in Islam is too pure to touch human beings directly.
Me: And yet, in Qur'an Surah 28:10, God spoke to Moses from the burning bush, right? So even in Islam, God is able to localize Himself and still be infinite. So the only way to know the transcendent God is through the localized God, and the link between them.
Muslim: That makes a binitarian God, not a Trinitarian God.
Me: No, there's three. We can just call the transcendent God 'the Father,' the localized God 'the Son,' and the link between them 'the Spirit.' How else do you explain the burning bush?
Muslim: Maybe it was actually an angel?

[8] See http://www.answering-islam.org/Silas/mo-sinner.htm

Me: But even for an angel like Gabriel (who brought the Qur'an to Mohammed) to know God, or hear God, God has to localize Himself to that angel. Angels are not infinite, and they do not share their consciousness with God. So you need the same thing. In order for God to even give His teaching to an angel, God has to be a Trinity. So can I go back to the burning bush?
Muslim: Sure.
Me: Christians explain this by actually saying that since God *is* a kind of divine fire. So then He comes into Jesus to burn away what is impure in human nature, to share himself with us. We believe God is one in essence and nature and character, but three persons, so that God can be *one with us* in the Spirit, because He became *one of us* in the Son, while remaining wholly *other than us* in the Father. That's what makes it possible for God to communicate with us, and for God to heal us personally. If your God did for Mohammed something that He could do for everyone else but isn't, then by definition He is not doing everything He could to undo human evil. Wouldn't that make Him partly evil? So it's not just that our Gods are different. Do you think Islam is more consistent, and more realistic, than Christianity?

<u>Conversation #6</u>

Apathetic Dawdler: I actually like what you're saying here, because I feel like there's not a rush for me to come to Jesus!
Me: What do you mean?
Apathetic Dawdler: I mean that you're not threatening me with hell. Other Christians would try to make me feel scared that I could die on my car ride home, and then I'd be in hell because I didn't accept Jesus right here, right now. So you make it sound like I have a lot of time.
Me: Well, I think there is still a real urgency to looking into Jesus now. Do you think you can live a self-centered life, and then when you're old and on your deathbed, you can accept Jesus?
Apathetic Dawdler: Exactly!
Me: But what makes you think you will become the type of person who will want to give your life to Jesus later, if all you want now is more time to yourself?
Apathetic Dawdler: What? Why? Won't it be easy?
Me: No. Because self-centeredness is addicting. Your human nature has a brokenness in it. And you'll make it worse. You'll become more and more self-centered, self-flattering, self-justifying, self-indulgent, and on and on.
Apathetic Dawdler: So what's wrong with that? Didn't your 'Saint' Augustine say somewhere in his book *Confessions*, 'Lord, make me pure, but not yet?'
Me: He said that to show how self-deceived you can be. If that is how you are training your human nature to respond to Jesus, when you meet him, you will probably look at all eternity stretched out in front of you and say, 'Jesus, what's the rush? You've got lots of time in this eternity. How about 10,000 more years of freedom for me, and then I'll accept you?'
Apathetic Dawdler: Say, that's right! I'm going to use that with him. See, there is no rush. [smiles]
Me: There *is* a rush, actually. Not because you might die in a car crash, but because you are shaping your own human nature and your own desires to become more and more sinful.
Apathetic Dawdler: Why is that?
Me: Imagine that you're an alcoholic. And that one day you stand before Jesus and say, 'I'd like alcohol.' Jesus will say, 'I don't have alcohol here for you. But because I love you, I am

offering you a human nature that is healed of alcoholism and responsive instead to God the Father. Do you want to receive it?' If you're addicted to alcohol, what will you answer?
Apathetic Dawdler: That's a good question. If I'm an addict, I would probably say, 'I don't want what *you* have. Give me what *I* want.'
Me: Absolutely. So what's *your* addiction?
Apathetic Dawdler: Huh?
Me: I think you are already pretty addicted to your own self-centeredness. And Jesus will say, 'I'm not here to let you be self-centered. Because I love you, I am offering you a human nature that is healed of self-centeredness and responsive to God the Father. Do you want to receive it?'
Apathetic Dawdler: Wait a minute. You're saying Jesus only gives us a healed human nature? I thought he gives us a reward for just believing in him.
Me: As if heaven is a place you can eat ice cream and not get fat? Or a place where you'll get whatever you want right now?
Apathetic Dawdler: Right!
Me: That's not it at all. That would make Jesus just a middleman to something else people really want, which is not him, but ice cream instead. The problem is that we don't desire the right things, or the right Person. So heaven cannot be what we currently want, raised to the nth degree. Neither is hell what we currently hate, raised to the nth degree. Heaven and hell are not defined by *us*. They are defined by *Jesus*. Heaven is the state of receiving him for those of us who want him. Hell is the state of being around him when you don't want to be, of him denying what you want, and then chasing you when you want him to stop.
Apathetic Dawdler: What if *we* don't want what *he* wants?
Me: Well, then for all eternity, he will never give up on calling you out, calling you to give up your addictions and your very self, and calling you to him. He'll be a stalker to you, saying, 'Hey, I love you. You were made for me. Give up whatever else you want. I am here for you.'
Apathetic Dawdler: Yeah, that does sound stalker-ish.
Me: Exactly. Hell is being chased around forever by this Jesus who loves you, and can change you, but you don't want him because you're addicted to something else. Then, every step he takes towards you will just push you further and further away. Except that you can't hide. You can't escape from him.
Apathetic Dawdler: Dude, that sounds terrible. How is that really love?
Me: It's love because Jesus refuses to let us live in lies. He loves us in the truth, because he is the truth, and determines the truth about all reality. And, it would be terrible if you believe that you are fine, and that you can define reality for yourself.
Apathetic Dawdler: This is complicated. So you're saying that I actually can't trust myself completely.
Me: That's right. You can't trust yourself completely because you're not okay. The longer you let your desires go on your own, the harder it might be for you to give your life to Jesus. And one day, it might be too late. We are all not just human beings, but human *becomings*.
Apathetic Dawdler: So you think I'm headed for hell, too?
Me: I think you are *becoming* someone who would experience the love of Jesus as hell, because you're so apathetic, and Jesus wants you to be as loving as he is.
Apathetic Dawdler: [silence]
Me: We can all look back on our lives and see how apathy, *lack of love*, has hurt other people in your life. It's probably hurt you, too. The question is whether you want to be in touch with the

God of love. Maybe you'd like to read a short and surprisingly fun book by C.S. Lewis about why people in hell want to stay there (it's called *The Great Divorce*), and talk about it with me?

Conversation #7

Academic Activist: There's no way I would go for any religion that tells me what to do with my body.
Me: Why not?
Academic Activist: Because my body is who I am. Religions are all patriarchal. Men use religion to control women's bodies.
Me: I think you'd be surprised at how that's not true with Jesus. So you object to Jesus because he makes a claim on our bodies – and really, all our bodies and not just women's bodies. But let me ask you this: Isn't your body connected to other bodies?
Academic Activist: Not in a way that other people can tell me what to do with my body.
Me: But other people *do* have a claim on what we do with our bodies.
Academic Activist: Like who?
Me: Like our future children. If your mom or dad used drugs or carried lots of stress or ate junk food, then that would impact *you*. And you might have something to say to them, a moral claim. It's epigenetics. Then, when a child is an actual person, it gets even more serious.
Academic Activist: Here it comes. You're talking about abortion, like all evangelical Christians do. And then you're going to tell women what to do with their bodies.
Me: Hold on. No, I'm not. I'm talking about how a child's brain develops. It develops through touch, eye contact, love, nutrition, and a whole bunch of things. So parents are morally obligated to do those things, don't you think? If they don't, we call it neglect.
Academic Activist: Sure, but that's based on science and not religion.
Me: If you want to talk science, then I have to say that science is not in favor of you saying that our bodies are just our own.
Academic Activist: Yes, it does. Science shows when a fetus can actually feel pain, and it's not at conception. What are *you* talking about?
Me: What does science tell us about children who experience their parents getting divorced?
Academic Activist: Oh see, there you go again, trying to make a moral case, this time for monogamy. Science shows us that monogamy is not actually part of nature. It's a construct. So it's not part of human nature either. You're trying to tell people what to do with their bodies, their sex lives, and their family choices.
Me: You didn't answer my question about children suffering because of divorce, which is really a problem. I want to come back to science telling us about our bodies. Science tells us that we are like a waterfall. We keep a similar shape but change in substance. Every 16 days, 72% of you is replaced, because it's water. The lining in your stomach and intestines is replaced every 4 days; your gums every 2 weeks; your entire skin every 4 weeks; your liver every 6 weeks; your heart and the lining of your blood vessels every 6 months.[9] Says one science article, 'There is a 100% chance that 1000s of other humans through history held some of the same atoms that you currently hold in your body.'
Academic Activist: So what?

[9] See http://www.quora.com/How-long-does-it-take-for-most-of-the-atoms-in-your-body-to-be-replaced-by-others

Me: So your body is not your own. Science says so. We might even be exchanging molecules right now through the air. That's why caring for the environment is caring for each other.
Academic Activist: I'm surprised that you're a Christian and an environmentalist! Don't meet at lot of those where I'm from. But okay.
Me: Which is why I agree with some of your concerns about our bodies but I don't think it's because 'my body is just my own.' I think Jesus is a better foundation for honoring human bodies than some individualistic philosophy.
Academic Activist: But if you go with science, then what do you do about science telling us that monogamy is not necessarily part of human nature? You Christians say that monogamy is part of human nature, don't you?
Me: Maybe, but there's more to it than that. I think ultimately our arguments do come down to some idea of what 'human nature' is. You think science tells us what a normative human nature is? And that makes casual divorce okay?
Academic Activist: Yeah, it does. And yeah, it is. If there is such a thing as human nature.
Me: What if human nature is damaged in everyone, so we're getting an imperfect picture of who we are meant to be even as we look at ourselves?
Academic Activist: Give me a break. What evidence is there for that?
Me: Oh, easy. If male human nature is to have sex and make babies, then it's okay for men to treat women like objects. You think that's okay? Isn't that where some 'science' might lead you?
Academic Activist: We have to move past that. Definitely.
Me: I agree, but your framework isn't giving you that. Here's another example of human nature being messed up: Our brains will lie to us to keep up a good self-image. Two books: *Mistakes Were Made But Not By Me*; and *A Mind of Its Own: How Your Brain Distorts and Deceives*. It's pride. Our minds are geared for survival, not truth. That includes psychological and social survival.
Academic Activist: Okay, so human nature kind of sucks! Ha ha.
Me: So face it. *You* want to define what human nature is.
Academic Activist: What's the matter with that?
Me: The problem is that Jesus already healed human nature in his own body. He joined it to a loving God. That's why Jesus can tell us what a normative human nature is.
Academic Activist: That is the most dangerous claim I've ever heard. Now you're going to tell me that Jesus is the reason why monogamy is normative, why we should be sexual prudes, and why women's bodies aren't really their own.
Me: Jesus makes a claim on men's bodies just as much as women's. But the bigger point is that, yes, Jesus is the reason we believe we are connected to each other and connected to him.
Academic Activist: That's really dangerous. We are *individuals* first and foremost.
Me: Sorry, we are *relational* first and foremost. Individual*ism* came from Western Enlightenment political thought. But where were people ever born 'free' into 'the state of nature'? We are born into families, and communities. And we have obligations and benefits in *relationships*. Western Enlightenment individualism doesn't fit with other academic disciplines: anthropology, sociology, neuroscience, and psychology. Sorry, it just doesn't work. You're really using a Western philosophy of individualism that is not supported by other fields.
Academic Activist: Are you for science or religion? You're kind of dancing between the two when it suits you.

Me: And you're dancing between pseudo-science and pseudo-philosophy. I'm taking Jesus first, and science second. Jesus gives human relationships, human persons, and human nature special meaning, because in science, humans might just be another part of the universe. When I use science, I'm arguing *on the basis of science* with certain things you're saying which are not rooted in science as you think they are. But I don't think we can only use science because science can't tell us what human nature really is, and is meant to be. Jesus can.
Academic Activist: That's a big claim. Can Jesus give us a DNA sample so we know what his human nature is like???
Me: Ha! I don't think we can do that. But he shows us how to live in God's presence, and he explains to us how. Maybe we can talk about how Jesus has actually limited the cultural power of men. Because I think you're trying to use individualism and pseudo-science to protect women's bodies. I think Jesus does it better, and more holistically. So if that's really part of your objection to Jesus, take a look at that with me.

Conversation #8

Gay Friend: So it sounds like you're one of those conservative Christians. You must be against gay marriage.
Me: Actually, I'm for civil unions for everyone, gay or straight.
Gay Friend: Really? That's not the usual thing I hear from Christians.
Me: I wish it were. But this is a First Amendment issue. Every religion actually has different definitions of marriage. And divorce and remarriage, for that matter. In fact, 'freedom of religion' comes from Christian faith. Politically, I believe the New Testament envisions a Christian political pluralism, not a theocracy.
Gay Friend: So you'd be for same-sex civil unions?
Me: Yes. Benefits, recognition, the whole bit. But I'm also concerned about the militant wing of the gay community trying to set up a secular version of a theocracy. I'd like for people of different faiths to be able to say what their definition of 'marriage' is. If the word 'marriage' necessarily means 'any two consenting adults,' then would a public school teacher who is a conservative Christian, Muslim, or Jew – for example – be able to talk about her personal views? As a public employee, she should have to uphold what is legal, teach a tolerant curriculum, and of course call for inclusion and no bullying and all that. But she shouldn't have to hide her faith commitments from students or parents or principals.
Gay Friend: Ok, I get it. But *why* does the Bible not endorse same-sex marriage? Is there an actual *reason* it gives? I say this having majored in history in college. I know that Christianity had a pretty strict sexual ethic from the get-go. And as much as I appreciate the open and affirming churches that hang up the rainbow flag outside their doors, I know that these are very new and recent trends. So what's the *reason* for the Bible's criticism?
Me: The basic idea is that human beings are meant to be like God, not just individually but also in relationships. God is a life-bearing and life-creating relationship. There is a Father and Son in the Holy Spirit. That's why God's vision for human marriage is a life-bearing and life-creating union of male and female that resembles the original human marriage. Even if a couple is too old to have children, for example. So in Genesis 1, God made humanity 'in His image, male and female He created them.'

Gay Friend: Don't you think gender is a performance? Biological sex is one thing. Gender is a social construct. So how can the Bible make this requirement that marriage be heterosexual only?
Me: There's a lot going on there by separating biological sex and social 'gender.' If gender *is* a performance, then from a Christian perspective, it's a performance of our confession and witness to a life-giving God.
Gay Friend: But isn't science telling us that human sexuality can vary by person, and that human nature is a fluid thing? So how can anyone hold to 'norms' about these things? Even monogamy is probably a social construct, not a fact of nature. One scientist argued that we are a 'pair-bonding species.' But then another scientist argues that we are not. And then we see animals having same-sex sex, too. Pretty advanced species: bonobos and monkeys are bisexual; so are dolphins; and elephants. Why not humans? I point this out because homosexuality and bisexuality in animals poses a problem for the biblical account of creation. If this is what we see in nature among the animals, then there was no pristine world from which humans 'fell.' And there's no normative behavior for people.
Me: That's a really good point, although you're assuming that animals can serve as a model for humans, and I don't think you want to ride that train to the end of the line. Primates fight each other, and the praying mantis female kills the male she mates with. Also, you're assuming that the world of nature was 'complete.' It wasn't. God made the world good but incomplete, because God wanted our partnership. In both nature and human nature. In nature, we were meant to spread the 'garden of Eden' across the world. And in human nature, we were meant to grow with God: to receive God's divine life further into our human nature. That's why what science might tell us about the world and ourselves is interesting. How we *started* is important. But how we *finish* is even more important, and where God meant for us to finish is not just obvious from science. We aren't just human beings. We are human *becomings*.
Gay Friend: Science tells us that there is no normative sexual orientation. It's just part of each person's biochemistry.
Me: Really? Isn't anatomy part of science? Anatomy tells us that anal sex is really different than vaginal sex. Anal tissues are really thin and tear easily; vaginal tissues are really thick and don't. So gay men having anal sex struggle regularly with over a dozen bacterial and viral diseases related to bacteria that live nowhere else on the body. There's also anal fissures that sometimes don't heal and require surgery. There's the weakening of the sphincter, which is meant to be a one-way valve…
Gay Friend: Okay. I get your point.
Me: And isn't ecology also a part of science? We know that the chemicals in plastic we put out there are estrogens. Phthalates and BPA's. They change the sexual organs of animals.[10] Why not us?

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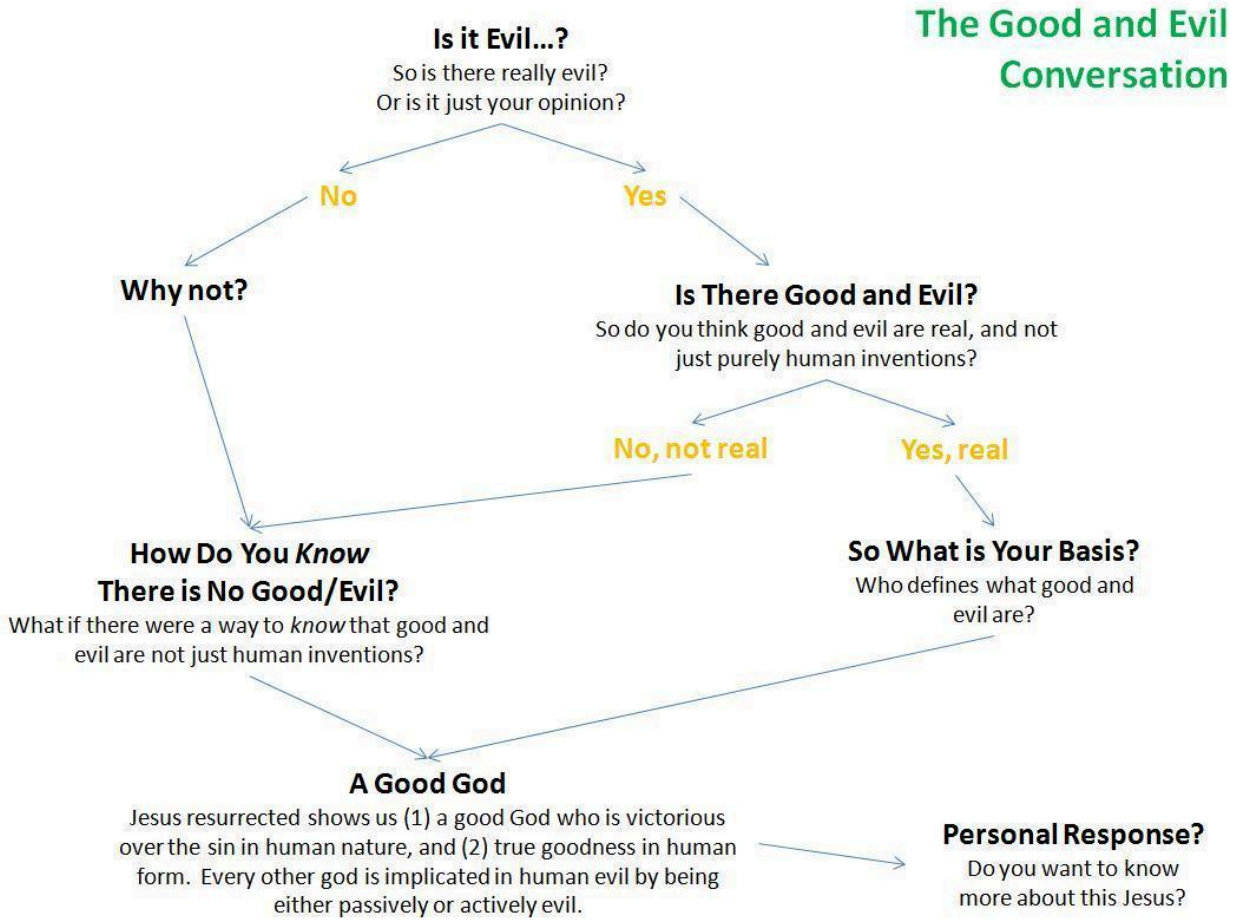
[10] Juan Gonzales and Amy Goodman, 'Silencing the Scientist: Tyrone Hayes on Being Targeted by Herbicide Firm Syngenta,' *Democracy Now*, February 21, 2014. See also Tyrone Hayes and Penelope Jagessar Chaffer, "The Toxic Baby," *TED Talks*, December 2010; https://www.ted.com/talks/tyrone_hayes_penelope_jagessar_chaffer_the_toxic_baby. See also A.M. Vajda, L.B. Barber, J.L. Gray, E.M. Lopez, J.D. Woodling, D.O. Norris, "Reproductive disruption in fish downstream from an estrogenic wastewater effluent," *Environmental Science Technology* (May 2008), p.3407 –14. See also C. Jeandrel, F. Paris, B. Terouane et C. Sultan, "Environmental Chemicals and Disorders of Sex Differentiation in Male Newborn," *Les Journees de Techniques Avancees an Gynecologie et Obstetrique PMA Perinatologie et Pediatrie* (2002); http://www.lesjta.com/article.php?ar_id=419

Gay Friend: So you think same-sex attraction is a dysfunction caused by environmental pollution?
Me: No, but I am saying that chemicals seem to be one influence. I'm just responding to your claim that science – as a whole – supports your position. I'm not so sure. One question is: If we cleaned up our environment knowing that it would lead to a smaller LGBTQ community, how would you feel about that?
Gay Friend: We should clean the environment no matter what. The issue is how *you* look at same-sex attraction, and how you think sex is *your* business, or *God's* business. Why do you think that? Just because God says so? It sounds like in Christianity, God wants to make little copies of Himself and what He's doing everywhere. You say that God is a life-giving union of something within God's self.
Me: That's a good way of putting it.
Gay Friend: Isn't that narcissistic on God's part?
Me: Good question. When parents have children, it's usually not because they're narcissistic. If I married someone I think is awesome, I want to share in making a little person like the bigger person, kids who have the best qualities of my wife. For the Good to want more of what is Good isn't narcissistic. It's good. So for God to want people to be more faithful in representing Him, is good.
Gay Friend: So you don't accept what science tells us about animals' sexual behavior?
Me: Science tells us about our animal nature, yes. But can science tell us why human nature is different from animal nature? Or why we have a higher calling than other animals? And higher desires?
Gay Friend: What calling is that?
Me: What if we are made in the image of God? And called to something higher through love, because God is infinite love? Science can only tell us what currently *is*. Science can't differentiate between what originally *was*, and what *is now* damaged by the fall. And science can't tell us where we're headed. We have to consider Jesus and what Jesus tells us about human nature, because he's the only one who conquered the corruption in himself. He's drawn human nature fully into God's divine nature of divine love. He *is* who we are *meant to become*. And the deepest, truest, most real thing about us will be our choices in relation to him. Things like our sexual orientation, or other accidents of our birth, even our genetics, will be seen as a temporary context for each of us to get to Jesus and love him. [That thought comes from the New Testament, if you're interested: 'Beloved, now we are children of God, and it has not appeared as yet what we will be. We know that when He appears, we will be like Him, because we will see Him just as He is' (1 Jn.3:2). 'For you have died and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is our life, is revealed, then you also will be revealed with him in glory' (Col.3:3 – 4).]
Gay Friend: You don't feel badly that you're calling for me to live a celibate life? To put all of my desires aside?
Me: All your desires? On the one hand, I hear your point. I'm sure I only understand a part of why that's challenging for you and many others. I only know personally that many aspects of Christian faith are challenging to me, too. But I'd say this: I don't think sexuality is identical to having sex. Our sexual desires don't stay the same. As we get older, they get weaker. We start our lives with desires that are deeper than a desire for sex. If we reach a certain age, we finish our lives with desires that are deeper than a desire for sex. I think Jesus develops *other* desires in us: desires for him and desires related to his mission in the world to heal it. I'm not saying that

we can 'pray the gay away.' But the more we experience Jesus, the more we desire him. What if your desire for him can grow to the point where he's worth it to you? What if your humanness is meant for him?
Gay Friend: That's like looking down a dark tunnel. Like putting a lot of hope in someone else's hopes for the future.
Me: Or someone else's actual experience of the future. Jesus experienced the future – the future of humanity – and that's why he can tell us about it. When my kids were small, they had no idea what it would feel like to have bigger and stronger bodies. They had to trust me when I told them that one day, they'd be as strong as mommy and daddy.
Gay Friend: Trusting someone else to tell you about your future.
Me: Exactly.
Gay Friend: In this case, you're trusting Jesus to tell you about the future?
Me: Yes. He's perfected his human nature in the love of God and into God. That's what his death and resurrection mean. He cleansed human nature of the brokenness of sin, by fighting it in his life, defeating it in his death, and rising in his resurrection drenched in a God-soaked human nature. That's the most profound union of any two things we can imagine.
Gay Friend: That's interesting. You're saying that Jesus lived with a broken human nature?
Me: Yes. And that he struggled with it throughout his whole life.
Gay Friend: That could mean something.
Me: It means a lot to me.
Gay Friend: Do you think something was genetically wrong with Jesus' humanity?
Me: In the sense that something has gone wrong with all humanity, yes. But he trusted God the Father for his new humanity, too. So my trust is based on his trust. And just as my children had bits of the strength and beauty they'd have in their adulthood, we can glimpse in our own selves bits of the strength, and beauty and love, and yes, purity, that God extends to us. That's because Jesus comes to live in us by his Spirit, to give us glimpses of himself. I am not saying that a person's same-sex attraction will necessarily go away because of Jesus, if you choose to struggle with it. But I am saying that Jesus will make that struggle worth it.

Chapter 5: Deeper Conversations: The Good and Evil Question

At times, either I ask, or the non-Christian asks, whether good and evil is real or just in our heads. There is a helpful quote from J.K. Rowling that I like to start off with. In the first Harry Potter book, Professor Quirrell, speaking about what Lord Voldemort taught him, says, 'There is no good and evil, only power, and those too weak to seek it.'[11] Do they agree with that?



Here are examples of conversations that I've had.

<u>Conversation #1</u>

Been Hurt: What kind of God would allow all the evil in the world? What's your explanation for that?
Me: You mean you think that evil in the world is an argument against the existence of God, right?
Been Hurt: Yeah.
Me: Has someone done something to you that you think was evil?

[11] J.K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* (New York, NY: Scholastic, 1999), p.291

Been Hurt: Well, yes. It's a personal thing, but yes.
Me: Well, if there was no God at all, then we'd just be chemicals wrapped in skin, competing for survival with other chemicals wrapped in skin. There wouldn't be any such thing as good or evil.
Been Hurt: Well, isn't that easier to believe?
Me: Except that you believe someone did *evil* to you. Something in you tells you that there is evil, which means there is good. And if there is good, there is Someone higher than us who defines it as good. So your belief in evil is an argument that God exists.
Been Hurt: That's ridiculous. You're just playing games.
Me: No, I'm not. Have you read the first Harry Potter book? Where Professor Quirrell, speaking about what Lord Voldemort taught him, says, 'There is no good and evil, only power, and those too weak to seek it.'[12]
Been Hurt: Sure.
Me: Well, do you agree with that, or not? 'There is no good and evil, only power, and those too weak to seek it'? That would mean: 'Whatever was done to you wasn't really *evil*. It was just someone using power. And you were too weak to resist it.' Do you think that's reality?
Been Hurt: Well…
Me: Look, I can tell that something in you doesn't believe that. I don't believe it either. I believe there is good and evil. I believe Jesus is offering to heal our human nature, which is still good, even though evil has come to infect it in each one of us. Whatever was done to you, he wants to heal that but also destroy whatever it was in the other person which influenced that person to do that. Because he destroyed something in himself, like Harry Potter did to Voldemort's soul, so he can share his new humanity with each of us. That's the only way evil can really be tackled. It can't just be tolerated or made normative. It has to be destroyed, and people need to be healed. Have you ever heard of that explanation of Jesus before?

<u>Conversation #2</u>

Cultural Relativist: Do we really need an objective standard for good and evil? Why can't we just define it for ourselves?
Me: Has that ever worked?
Cultural Relativist: What do you mean? What's so hard about it?
Me: Let's take one issue as an example. Have you heard of Amy Chua's book *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother*?
Cultural Relativist: Sure.
Me: One of the good discussions that book encouraged was this: Can white parents tell Asian parents that they are too controlling, and to be less demanding? Can Asian parents tell white parents that they are too lazy as parents, and to be more directive?
Cultural Relativist: On one level, sure: Everyone is entitled to their opinion. So people should be able to say that. But I see what you mean. I've seen both extremes in my friends' families. Is there a real right and wrong? Good and evil? How do we know where to draw the line?
Me: And why do we draw the line there in your camp? Why not in my camp? Or closer to my camp? We don't even agree about whether we should spank our kids.

[12] J.K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* (New York, NY: Scholastic, 1999), p.291

Cultural Relativist: And to make things more complicated, we're taught to respect other peoples' cultures, and that we shouldn't judge other peoples' cultures.
Me: And if it's all relative, then anyone can hide behind 'culture.' Men can treat women horribly and say, 'It's my culture.'
Cultural Relativist: How would we know that the Christian definition of good and evil is the right one, then? Isn't that just one opinion against other opinions?
Me: The big question is: What if God had a way of revealing Himself to us personally? Like in a human life? As in the Jesus of history. And especially in his resurrection? If Jesus alone healed human nature in himself, then his vision of being human pretty much wins.
Cultural Relativist: Don't we have to use science here? A resurrection is impossible.
Me: We can use science, but not in the sense of lab science. Have you ever served in jury duty?
Cultural Relativist: No, why?
Me: Because when someone is on trial, you can't repeat the crime in a lab. It's unrepeatable, so you can't use lab science. Instead, you have an unrepeatable event. So you have to use evidence, witnesses, forensic science, and other tools like logic, what we understand about human motivation, and so on.
Cultural Relativist: So what does that wind up telling us?
Me: Well, when Dr. Simon Greenleaf, one of the founders of Harvard Law School, and an expert in the use of evidence in court, looked at the New Testament, he first set out to disprove it. But he found that the more he examined the evidence, the more it held up. So he became a Christian.
Cultural Relativist: No way. One of the founders of Harvard Law School became a Christian because he looked at the evidence?
Me: Yup. Do you want to look at the evidence for Jesus?

<u>Conversation #3</u>

Strong Critic: Look, I don't see how Christians can claim to know what good and evil are. You guys came down on the wrong side of slavery, women, and now homosexuality. Your definition of good and evil is totally crazy.
Me: You raise a good point, and I could explain what was going on if you want. But yes, I do think that the Christian definition of good and evil is the only one that makes sense. I'd like to compare it with yours.
Strong Critic: You have a quick explanation for all that? I find that hard to believe.
Me: Sure. The earliest Christians freed slaves. The first kingdoms to abolish slavery did so because of Christian influence: France, Hungary, England, Iceland, the Netherlands, and the Scandanavian countries.[13] Western Europe got back into the slavery game because they took over Muslim slave ports in West Africa. Christians then re-abolished slavery (like Wilberforce in Britain), and it took longer in the U.S. because American Christians were simple-minded.
Strong Critic: I've not heard that history before. But what about all those Bible references about slavery? It's right there in the Ten Commandments: 'Do not covet your neighbor's slave…'?
Me: The kind of slavery that was practiced in the Old Testament was self-indentured servitude to either make money through a contract of labor or pay off debts for a very limited time. That is

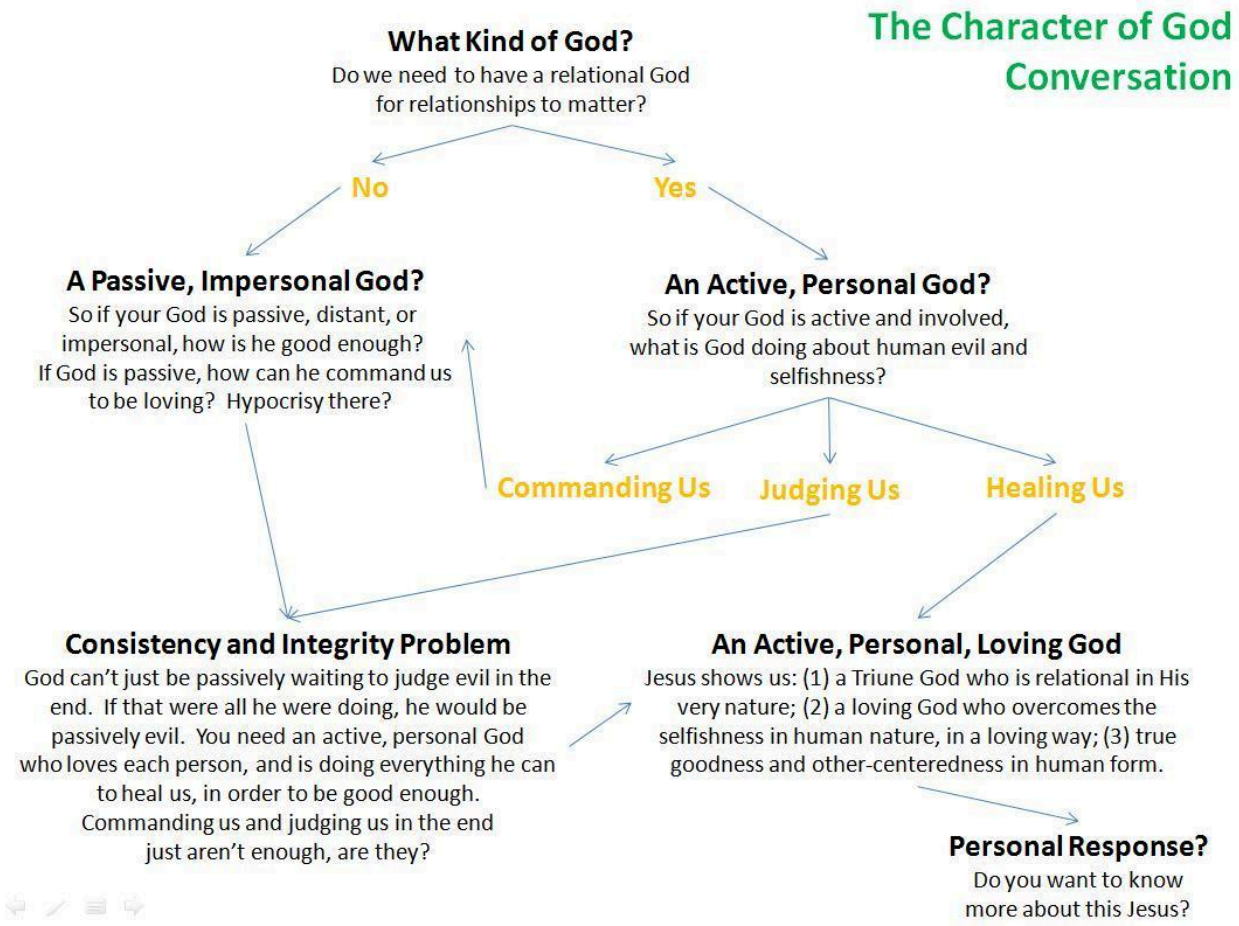
[13] For a more extensive summary of how Christians dealt with slavery in the first millennium and a half, primarily in Europe, see Mako A. Nagasawa, *Slavery in Christianity: First to Fifteenth Centuries* found here: www.anastasiscenter.org/race-slavery-belief-systems.

obvious when you look at two verses. In Exodus 21:16, people could not be kidnapped into slavery or forced into it. And in Deuteronomy 23:15 – 16, slaves can run away at any time and the Israelites were commanded by God to help the runaway run away and settle anywhere he likes. If 'slaves' can run away at any time, then that means this type of 'slavery' was voluntary. So I understand why Americans would have strong feelings about slavery, but you've really been misinformed about what the Bible says about it.[14] Slavery in the Bible didn't mean the same thing as slavery in the U.S. Just because you know a *word* doesn't mean you know the *meaning*. Do you know what the phrase, 'I'm mad about my flat' means?
Strong Critic: Doesn't it mean you're upset about a flat tire?
Me: If I'm an American, yes. But if I'm a Brit, in London, it could mean that I'm happy about my apartment.
Strong Critic: I get it. The word 'slavery' here doesn't mean the same thing as the word 'slavery' there. Otherwise we fall into the word-thing fallacy. Look, I just think that what is 'good' has to start from the individual, not from some God or some book.
Me: So the more freedom you have, the better?
Strong Critic: Yes.
Me: So when my dad was an alcoholic, was he doing what was 'good' for him?
Strong Critic: No, he was destroying himself.
Me: You're right, and not just himself. So you're actually saying that you have to be good before you can be properly free. Goodness is different from freedom and more important than freedom and comes before freedom. So the question is still where does your definition of good and evil come from?
Strong Critic: Can't we just say that it's just obvious?
Me: No, it's not obvious. My mom really does not like the fact that I live in a lower income, black neighborhood. She's basically an atheist, so she thinks that by living in not the best school district, that I'm doing something *morally wrong* to my children. But my wife and I do this because we believe in Jesus, and are trying to live out his care for the vulnerable, and teaching our kids something *morally valuable*. My point is that you actually can't start with your own definition of good and evil, and evaluate someone else by it, because that's just intellectually lazy. You want to lob arrows at the Christian sense of good and evil from within your own castle of good and evil, but you actually don't know what good and evil are. You have no foundation for it.
Strong Critic: I see what you mean.
Me: So if you're going to say no to Christian faith, you have to explore why it might be true, regardless of what your prior commitments to a 'good' and an 'evil' are. You have to look at the historical evidence for Jesus, and his resurrection to give us a new humanity.

[14] For more information and a treatment of every Scripture related to biblical slavery, see Mako A. Nagasawa, *Slavery in the Bible and Slavery Today* found here: www.anastasiscenter.org/race-slavery-belief-systems.

Chapter 6: Deeper Conversations: The Character of God Question

Then there is the question of the character of God. In other words, what is God like? In my experience, many people feel that 'god' is evil, either actively or passively. I like to stress that the God revealed by Jesus is 100% good, is opposed to all human evil, and wants to actively heal humanity by sharing the new humanity of Jesus with them.



Read the examples of conversations that I've had. Then do the exercise below.

<u>Conversation #1</u>

Stopped Caring: I know I was coming to church before, but I just lost interest.
Me: I did notice. Why did you lose interest?
Stopped Caring: [lots of reasons]
Me: [lots of questions]
Stopped Caring: So it's just a lot of work, and I guess I want other things now. I think God is passive. So if God wants to find me, God can come find me.
Me: But if you take a passive attitude towards God, you're just going to get either apathetic or mad at him.
Stopped Caring: Why do you say that?

Me: Because your dad is passive.
Stopped Caring: So?
Me: So?? Does that make you want to pursue a relationship with your dad?
Stopped Caring: Of course not. If I do it, I do it because I have to.
Me: So if you think God is passive, do you think you're going to want to get to know Him?
Stopped Caring: Nope.
Me: So you just set yourself up to fail, didn't you?
Stopped Caring: I thought you were going to say I set God up to fail.
Me: That too. But you're setting *yourself* up to fail because when you find a relationship challenging, or not what you expected, with your dad or even with God, you don't look more deeply. You could look for God in your anger towards your dad.
Stopped Caring: What?!?
Me: You're angry with your dad because God is angry about your dad. It doesn't mean that your anger and God's anger are exactly the same. They're not. But it does mean that God is reaching out to you already. He is helping you understand something about how He wishes things could have been better between you and your dad.
Stopped Caring: So I should let my dad have it? Because God would let him have it, too?
Me: No. We have to look at how Jesus handled anger. God became human in Jesus to show us what He gets upset about, and sad about, and happy about. And how He diagnoses the problem. And how He keeps working with us, in us, and through us. Including anger. Ephesians 4:26 says, "Be angry, but do not sin." So there is something about even our angry feelings that are rooted in something good, something from God. But we cannot go it alone. We need Jesus to guide us, shape us, inform us, and interpret us. We need to be active with Jesus, not passive, because Jesus is active towards us.
Stopped Caring: You're challenging me in my relationship with my dad, and my relationship with God.
Me: I am. Because otherwise, you'll use your own anger *against* Jesus, as if he were doing nothing in your life. But your anger is something Jesus is *giving to you*. It's his gift. It's one of the ways he is doing something in you, calling you to himself, calling you to be a blessing to others. If you use it against him, you'll keep locking yourself up in a little room, like you locked yourself in your bedroom at home. And if you keep making that choice to be passive, that room will keep getting smaller and smaller.

<u>Conversation #2</u>

Deist: I just believe in a god. He made everything. That seems reasonable. It's hard to imagine all this coming from nothing.
Me: So what is this 'God' doing now?
Deist: Well, nothing. I think He's just sitting back and watching.
Me: And why do you believe in this 'God'?
Deist: Seems consistent with the Big Bang.
Me: Does this 'God' care about us? Like want a personal relationship with us?
Deist: I don't think so.
Me: Is this 'God' doing anything?

Deist: No. But I think he does serve to give us human dignity, so that we're not just random cells.
Me: But if this 'God' doing anything to undo human evil? Or is he just passive?
Deist: Just passive. This is a god who doesn't intervene. So he doesn't get my hopes up. I used to go to a church, you know. And we'd talk about miracles. I prayed for one. When it didn't happen, over and over, I got tired of praying. What's the use? It seemed like God was passive, and didn't do anything. I think I'm in good company. A lot of the American founding fathers were deists. 'Endowed by our creator with certain inalienable rights,' and stuff.
Me: If your parents said to you, 'Do as I say, not as I do,' do you think they would have moral integrity?
Deist: Well, no.
Me: So a god who is passive can't be the source of a human morality that calls us to be active.
Deist: You're telling me that the Christian 'god' is active? What's this 'god' doing?
Me: The Christian God isn't passive, and especially not about human evil.
Deist: You've got to be kidding me. What is that 'god' doing about it?
Me: At least two things. He speaks to us through our conscience, and that's why we have some notion of goodness, love, justice, beauty, order, and so on. But he also is actively undoing the corruption in human nature. First in Jesus and then in anyone who says 'yes' to Jesus. God acquired a human body, acquired the same disease that we all have – sin. He fought against the disease throughout his entire human life, and then died and rose again so he could kill the corruption in himself and raise his humanity new and fresh. So he empowers his followers with love, courage, and strength.
Deist: And you think that makes a difference?
Me: Yes. I think everyone who follows Jesus would say that Jesus helps them be more loving than they ordinarily would. So the net total is quite big.
Deist: You think that makes your 'god' real? And really good?
Me: Yes. The Christian God is 100% good, and giving 100% of himself to undo the damage to human nature that we have inflicted on ourselves. Your deist 'god' is passive, is doing nothing about human evil in any way. But to do nothing in the face of human evil is to be… evil! Aren't we agreed on that?
Deist: I suppose so.
Me: So, the passive deist 'god' that you speak of actually cannot anchor human dignity and value, because he does nothing to uphold it. Only the Christian God, who is 100% good, 100% loving, and actively doing stuff, who will do more stuff, can anchor human dignity and value.
Deist: So our concept of 'god' matters, is what you're saying?

<u>Conversation #3</u>

Wandering Ex-Churchgoer: I believe that there is a 'God,' but I think Jesus was just a man. I think the church just kind of deified Jesus over time, and raised him up higher and higher until they thought of him as God. So I can still sit through my church services and stuff, and appreciate it, because Jesus was a great teacher. Whether or not I think of him as God really doesn't affect anything. Does it?
Me: Well, I think it actually does. If Jesus is not God in the flesh, then how is God fixing the evil in human nature?

Wandering Ex-Churchgoer: Huh? I don't follow you.
Me: The earliest understanding of Jesus being God was that God wanted to solve the problem of evil in human nature. We had corrupted ourselves. So God took a human body, and along with that body inherited the human disease of sin. He fought against the sin and never committed a sin. So in his death and resurrection, he killed the sin and raised his humanity new, cleansed, and God-soaked.
Wandering Ex-Churchgoer: So you don't think the church deified Jesus over time?
Me: From a historical standpoint, no. The church didn't actually deify Jesus over time. They started out that way. New Testament historian N.T. Wright points out that the Old Testament longed for the hope that YHWH would return to Mount Zion, and Jesus personally embodied YHWH. In John's Gospel, one of the first disciples, Thomas, says to Jesus, 'My Lord and my God.'
Wandering Ex-Churchgoer: Maybe Thomas was saying that Jesus could represent God without actually being God?
Me: Well, just for a moment, imagine if you separate Jesus from God. What are you left with?
Wandering Ex-Churchgoer: You're left with a God that can still serve as the Creator, and Jesus can serve as a teacher.
Me: But then they both become hypocrites.
Wandering Ex-Churchgoer: What? Why?
Me: God becomes a hypocrite, because He claims to be a good Creator, but doesn't do anything about human evil. And to do nothing about human evil is to be evil. Wouldn't you agree?
Wandering Ex-Churchgoer: I'll think about that.
Me: And Jesus becomes a hypocrite, too, because he taught that we could become joined to God, and share in God's goodness and life and love. He wouldn't give us forgiveness from God, because he couldn't really speak for God. He wouldn't be the fulfillment of the Old Testament, because the Old Testament hoped for God to heal the problem of human nature and defeat human evil and change us from villains back to heroes. Jesus might still seem like a cool guy, but only if you compartmentalize him. He would really fail in some key ways.

Chapter 7: Other Resources to Help, and Discipling a New Believer

I hope this 'new humanity paradigm' gives you a thoughtful and intelligent way to have conversations about Jesus. For me, it has been a great way to understand Jesus, experience my own faith, and speak about Jesus with others. I hope it serves that way for you.

But it's just the beginning! Here is a list of some resources that might be helpful for you as you keep sharing your faith with people:

- *The Gospel of Matthew*: If someone gives their life to Jesus, I would suggest continuing on with the Gospel of Matthew. I've written some material to help people study Matthew, including a workbook, here: www.anastasiscenter.org/bible-matthew.

- *Arts and Theology*: These are fun explorations of popular stories: J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, Marvel's *Black Panther*, J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter*, C.S. Lewis' *Chronicles of Narnia*, and more. These help people understand Jesus in the framework of the hero's journey, and Christian faith in relation to other popular stories. See www.anastasiscenter.org/arts-and-theology.

- *The Historical Case for Jesus' Resurrection: Evaluating the New Testament Documents*: I've written a paper about how we got the New Testament, whether we can trust it, and whether the four Gospels are consistent with each other especially regarding Jesus' resurrection. I consider the possibility that Jesus' resurrection was just a legend that developed over time, which is the most fashionable theory out there now. I've posted those resources to: www.anastasiscenter.org/bible-messiah-resurrection.

- *The Question of Proof and the Christian Response: Four Types of Knowledge*: I've found that there are four main ways we know things: science, philosophy, history, and personal experience. Christian faith is consistent with all four areas. But how people approach Christian faith from these subject areas does matter. Science is compatible with Christian faith but by itself cannot prove or disprove God's existence or Jesus' resurrection. Philosophy provides us with a logic that leads to some kind of God, but cannot tell us which kind. Personal experience is also important but by itself cannot tell us enough. History is the realm where we know about Jesus. See: www.anastasiscenter.org/proof.

- *Hell as the Love of God*: This is a talk that addresses one of the toughest questions. How can a loving God have a hell? How is that consistent or not with the claim that God loves every person, and is love Himself? The talk is on this page: www.anastasiscenter.org/gods-goodness-fire.