



B R O A D C A S T T A L K S

Richard Dawkins, Lady Gaga, Amazon.com and the Bible:

Why understanding these rival stories
is important for our present time

by Trevin Wax



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Trevin Wax is managing editor of “The Gospel Project”, a gospel-centered small group curriculum for all ages. An author of four books, and contributor to numerous publications, including *The Washington Post*, Religion News Service, *Christianity Today* and *World*, Trevin writes a regular blog hosted by The Gospel Coalition. A former missionary to Romania, he was recently named by *Christianity Today* as one of 33 millennials leading the next generation of evangelicalism. Trevin earned his Ph.D in Theology at Southeastern Seminary in Wake Forest, NC, and a Masters of Divinity at Southern Seminary in Louisville, KY. Trevin lives in middle Tennessee with his wife, Corina, and their three children.

In this address originally titled, “Understanding the Present Times”, Trevin Wax explores three different worldviews held by many non-Christians in today’s society and explains how Christianity better understands the world around us. This event took place on October 29, 2015 at the Hyatt Atlanta Perimeter in Atlanta, GA.

BROADCAST TALKS presents ideas to cultivate Christ-like thinking and living. Each issue features a transcription of a talk presented at an event of the C. S. Lewis Institute.



Have you ever heard someone complain, “They are so heavenly minded they are of no earthly good”? The popular saying pictures a believer whose head is “in the clouds,” isolated from the hustle and bustle and practical needs of everyday life. Most people who tout this phrase are downplaying the importance of eschatology. Eschatology refers to the doctrines about the “end times,” what will happen in the future. The saying suggests that looking too much to the future will undermine the effectiveness of our present obedience.

But this statement fails to do justice not only to Scripture, but also to church history—most notably, the accounts of Christian influence on society. In *Mere Christianity*, C.S. Lewis countered this notion and made an opposing claim:

If you read history you will find that the Christians who did most for the present world were just those who thought most of the next... It is since Christians have largely ceased to think of the other world that they have become so ineffective in this.

I think Lewis was right. In fact, I would go further to say that failure to engage our world properly is the result of too *little* eschatology, not too *much*. Without a firm grounding in eschatology (i.e., the Christian understanding of the world and

where it is going, not just the “end times”), Christians are left without the necessary tools to read the signs of our own times or navigate the darkness of the contemporary age. As cultural currents move faster and we see rapids and waterfalls ahead and wonder what the future holds, one question we must ask is this: *what kind of discipleship is necessary to fortify the faith of believers so that we understand what time it is, rightly interpret our cultural moment, and see through its false and damaging views of history and the future?* I believe the answer is, partly, in the rediscovery of eschatological discipleship—a type of spiritual formation that (1) seeks to instill wisdom regarding our contemporary setting and its rival conceptions of time and progress and (2) calls for contextualized obedience as a demonstration of the belief that the biblical account of the world’s past, present, and future is true. Only then will we have disciples who can articulate, defend, and live out their faith in Christ in a personal and public arena.

We see this kind of discipleship—this *understanding of the present time*—on display in the sons of Issachar found in I Chronicles 12:32. These were men who understood the times and, therefore, knew what Israel should do. What were the times they understood? From a political standpoint, the sons of Issachar knew the future was with David, the shepherd-boy-turned-warrior, who had already been anointed king of Israel, but who had yet to ascend to his throne. Because they understood the times, they sided with David, not Saul. Eschatological discipleship is seen in the way the sons of Issachar plotted their reality on the timeline of biblical history. They could use wisdom in leading others to discover the right course of action.

This kind of discipleship is also on display in the New Testament. According to the apostles, holiness is not a timeless moral code, but rather a timely moral witness grounded in the reality of Christ’s resurrection and return. In Romans 13:11–14 (HCSB), the apostle

Paul writes:

Besides this, knowing the time, it is already the hour for you to wake up from sleep, for now our salvation is nearer than when we first believed. The night is nearly over, and the daylight is near, so let us discard the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light. Let us walk with decency, as in the daylight: not in carousing and drunkenness; not in sexual impurity and promiscuity; not in quarreling and jealousy. But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no plans to satisfy the fleshly desires.

Paul *assumes* his readers know “what time it is.” He is saying, “You know where we are in the sweep of biblical history. You know that the light has dawned with the resurrection of Jesus Christ. And we are, every day, getting closer to the time when the King returns.” The application of this text is simple. We are to know “what time it is” (Rom. 13:11), urgently pursue holiness as we live “honorably” as people of the day (13:12-13), and display the glory of Jesus Christ, whom we represent (13:14).

As we live out of the Christian story, we will come into conflict with people who live out of other stories. So here I would like to help us understand our present time in light of three rival stories—represented by Richard Dawkins (the story of Enlightenment “progress”), Lady Gaga (the story of the sexual revolution’s “emancipation”), and Amazon.com (the story of consumeristic “fulfillment”).

The Enlightenment “Progress”

Let’s begin with Richard Dawkins, perhaps the strongest proponent of the Enlightenment idea that religion will eventually be replaced by science. The Enlightenment Project as defined by

Alasdair MacIntyre was “the project of an independent rational justification of morality.” This project picked up steam in the seventeenth century with the “Age of Reason,” when philosophers moved toward human reasoning and away from divine revelation as the source of knowledge. According to thinkers like Dawkins, we are on a journey to greater and greater heights of reason.

The light came on, so to speak, in the 1600s, when we escaped the Dark Ages; we are now moving forward to the pinnacle of evolution and civilization. We move forward as we shed the silly superstitions of the past and embrace a scientific future that can help us resolve some of the most confounding dilemmas of our time.

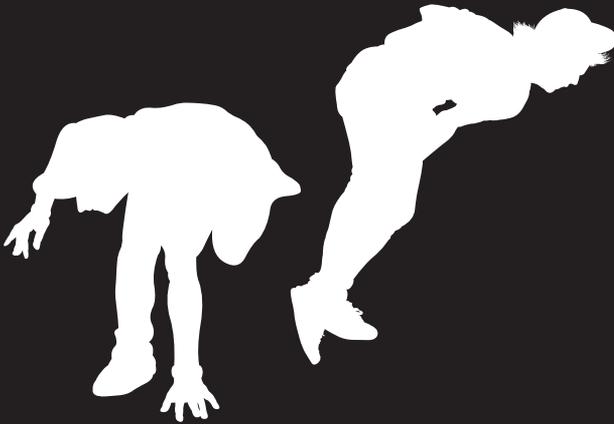
The gospel confronts the Enlightenment’s rival story by proclaiming a different view of history. Christians claim that the turning point of the ages was not the dawn of reason in the sixteenth century, but the dawning of new creation in the first.

We do not believe the world is heading toward a secularist utopia in which naturalism reigns supreme; we believe the world is heading toward a restored cosmos in which every knee bows to King Jesus.

And so Christians must challenge the myth of progress by exposing the mythical assumption that religion is on a journey of steady and inevitable decline, and that secular identity will continue to grow. John Gray, an atheistic philosopher, believes the new atheists (Dawkins, Sam Harris, and the like) have gotten louder in recent years, because they are worried that religion is flourishing instead of declining.

Similarly, sociologist Rodney Stark says: “It is a very religious world, far more religious than it was 50 years ago.” He goes on to say that of the world population, 81 percent claim to belong to an organized religious faith; 74 percent say religion is an important part of their daily lives; and 50 percent have attended a place of

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worship in the past seven days. Russia has more occult healers than medical doctors; 38 percent of the French believe in astrology; and 35 percent of the Swiss agree that “some fortune tellers can foresee the future. Nearly everyone in Japan has their new car blessed by a Shinto priest.” The idea that religion is fading away in favor of a secularist paradise of reason and rationalism is demonstrably false.

There are, sadly, some Christians who have embraced the Enlightenment’s eschatology of progress, who treat the past as something to evolve from, not something from which they could learn. Protestant liberalism’s emphasis on reason and the human ability to progress beyond certain moral standards has led to schism in multiple denominations. “Traditionalists” are embattled with “progressives” over the significance of the Christian tradition and the consensus of the church on teachings that challenge the Enlightenment eschatology (belief in miracles, for example, or traditional sexual ethics). The good news, however, is that while the media paints the picture that the church needs to be dragged, kicking and screaming, into the twenty-first century (in the words of Piers Morgan), the on-the-ground reality is that the churches *least likely* to be married to twenty-first-century ideas and values are the ones most *likely* to be growing! The churches that accommodate themselves to the spirit of the age—by downplaying the miracles of Christianity or the morality of traditional sexual ethics—are the ones that make themselves irrelevant. Many in our society are longing for something other than the echo of our times.

Other Christians, feeling the pressure of increasing alienation from the modern age, adopt a narrative of decline and then pine for the “good old days” when belief in God was assumed, not challenged, when the burden of proof was on the shoulders of the irreligious, not the devout. When cultural shifts take us by surprise, Christians may be tempted to replace hope with something else: either fear of the future or nostalgia for the past. But the Christian

must ask, “What time is it?”—firmly rejecting the Enlightenment’s false eschatology on the one hand, while holding fast to biblical eschatology on the other.

Being a faithful people of hope is far more difficult than taking the easy path of the Nietzschean concept of *ressentiment*. James Davison Hunter warned that *ressentiment* is “grounded in a narrative of injury or, at least, perceived injury; a strong belief that one has been or is being wronged. The root of this is the sense of entitlement a group holds.” Hunter continues, “Over time, the perceived injustice becomes central to the person’s and the group’s identity.”

Christian hope is a sword that cuts through the marrow of *ressentiment*. Hope challenges Christians’ fear that injustice will go unnoticed by reminding us of the future when God will right all wrongs. Hope does not lead to a quiet endurance of abuse, without speaking for the truth; it does, however, keep before us the truth that any loss experienced is only temporary. Further, hope challenges *ressentiment* with cheerful courage. Christians betray our faith when we are united more by bitterness and grievances than by cheerful confidence in God’s good purposes for the world and our love for the people who injure us.

The Sexual Revolution’s “Emancipation”

We turn our attention now to Lady Gaga, perhaps the best example of the “emancipation” story of the sexual revolution. The eschatology at work in this story is one that places the autonomous individual at the center of an epic battle. The “dark ages” are not the medieval times of ignorance, but the centuries full of arcane and inexplicable restrictions placed on human sexuality. “Progress” is made as sexual restrictions are loosened and criticism over sexual expression diminishes. Science and technology are the “drivers” of



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the Enlightenment eschatology; entertainment takes on the role of propelling society “forward” in matters related to sexuality.

The calendar associated with the sexual revolution is obvious when you see an athlete like Jason Collins lauded for expressing his homosexual desires, and an athlete like Tim Tebow mocked for pledging to be a virgin until marriage. Jason Collins is pulling us “forward”; Tebow is “holding us back.” The calendar says that the light came on in the 1960s, and we are moving away from the dark ages of repression. So fifty years ago, people would have thought, “There must be something wrong with Jason Collins.” Today people think, “There must be something wrong with Tim Tebow.”

Of course, the sexual revolution is fairly inconsistent in how it applies sexual liberation. Lady Gaga can make “Baby, you were born this way” the anthem of our generation, and yet the recent rise of sex-change operations rejects the idea that one is “born” male or female. So sexual attractions and feelings are immutable and unchangeable, something you’re born with. But sexuality in your biology or your reproductive parts is fluid. How does that make sense? If you were to tell a person seeking a sex-change operation, “Baby, you were born this way,” just accept your sex, you’d be called a bigot and a heartless individual. But if you say anything other than “Baby, you were born this way” to a young student struggling with unwanted same-sex desires, you are harming them psychologically.

How do Christians engage in a missionary encounter with people who believe in the progress offered by the sexual revolution? We are called to live at the crossroads of commitment to the biblical story and the world’s idolatry, both affirming God’s good intentions for sex and disavowing its human distortions. This means Christians will need to take sexual sin *more* seriously than does our culture, and take sexuality, in general, *less* seriously

than does our culture. Concerning the first angle—taking sexual sin more seriously—one temptation for Christians confronted with sexual immorality is to relegate any discussion to the realm of privacy, thus adopting a Victorian-era silence about sexual matters. But this privatization of sexuality exacerbates the problem. When churches fail to discuss matters related to marriage, family, sexuality, and divorce, we reinforce the idea that these are personal institutions and private troubles—not something that is the church’s business at all. If the church does not take sexual sin among its members seriously, how can it speak prophetically to the world about God’s good design for sexuality?

Concerning the second angle—taking sexuality in general *less* seriously than does the culture—Christians must counter the prevailing ideology that bases identity on sexual attraction. The Christian view of the person is one of dignity. Believers must not reduce one’s human self-understanding and self-expression to sexual urges. Neither should we consent to the assumption of society that human flourishing is, in some way, dependent upon sexual relationships. The culture makes sexual pleasure an idol and “casual sex” a right. The church has the paradoxical task of undercutting society’s exalted hope in sex while also heightening the significance of sex’s spiritual reality.

There’s a challenge for the church: Christians occupy a cultural moment in time in which the sexual revolution promotes the freedom to express oneself sexually as a major aspect of human flourishing. The Christian virtues of chastity or purity are seen not merely as old-fashioned or dated, but as repressive and harmful to the human psyche. To tell someone not to act on certain sexual desires is to tell that person not to be authentic, to deny who that person is deep down. To respond to this critique, Christians must be equipped to do more than simply stand against the sexual revolution; we must cultivate a different kind of culture, with

different assumptions, different expectations, and a deeper vision of “authenticity.”

In the meantime, part of the compassionate response required of the church is to cultivate a haven of human flourishing, where God’s design for sexuality, marriage, and the family can be implemented. This creation of a counterculture must not only be a prophetic word against the sexual revolution in society; it must also welcome in the “refugees,” those who have been wounded and betrayed by the failed promises of the revolution.

Consumerism’s “Fulfillment”

Finally, we turn to Amazon.com, the best representative of the story of consumerism. How do we proclaim the gospel in an age when virtually anything can be delivered to our doorstep through a simple click? An age where even our time is oriented toward purchasing? The medieval times were filled with holy days and feasts commemorating saints and festivals. Today our calendar is structured around consumerism. We go from Christmas to all sorts of exercise and dieting offers in January (which is a purge of consumeristic excess, but even the purge is sold to us in consumer terms) to Valentine’s Day candy and flowers to Easter treats, Mother’s Day, Father’s Day, Memorial Day, and Labor Day. Note how most of these “holidays” aren’t “holy days” in the old sense, but “shopping days” in the new sense. And why should we be surprised? When the purpose of life is consumption, then time is refigured to help us consume more and better. You are a self-made, self-sufficient human being. You work your way up the ladder, take steps in your career, and wind up in the end with a big house, nice car, and expensive clothes. Your journey is toward wealth and security.

If consumerist eschatology tells the story of the self-made individual moving from a place of financial poverty to wealth

and status and success, then the church must tell the story of an individual moving from spiritual death to new life in Christ, from immaturity in Christ to representing Him well before the world. Growth in holiness, from one's conversion until one's death or Christ's return, must become the dominant narrative by which Christians live. The goal of discipleship is Christlikeness; Christians must not judge growth or success by the world's standards, but rather by God's. The question must never be "are we keeping up with the Joneses?" but "are we looking more like Jesus?"

Individuals alone will not be able to reclaim this goal of discipleship. It will require the alternative story of the community of faith, believers who see both the danger of consumerism and the opportunity. The danger is to recast Christianity in self-focused terms; the opportunity is to reclaim Christianity's truly transformative vision for human flourishing.

To make disciples who can articulate, defend, and live out their faith in Christ in a personal and public life, we must avoid speaking of the gospel in ways that focus on therapeutic results to the exclusion or minimization of the gospel's public nature. To be clear, the gospel as public truth does not exclude therapeutic benefits to believers. But it is only because the gospel is public truth that those therapeutic benefits are available. In other words, present the gospel as true, and people will find it helpful. Present the gospel as merely helpful, and people will consider it to be neither true nor helpful.

What Time Is It?

The apostle Paul said we should "know the time," so I will conclude by answering the question "what time is it?" from a Christian perspective.

We believe in God, the Father Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth. We believe He had a purpose and plan when He created the world and human beings in His image. We believe He ordained marriage at the beginning of time as one way of reflecting His glory. We were made to glorify Him and enjoy Him forever.

The dark ages began— not in medieval times, but in the ancient Garden. We fell into sin by choosing our way over God’s, by rebelling against His law, and supplanting His rule with our own. Yet God in His goodness did not abandon His creation. He chose Abraham to father a people who would reflect His love and grace. He rescued His people from slavery, gave them His law, set up His kingly rule in their midst. When His people continued to disobey Him, He sent them into exile.

And that’s when the story takes a turn. You see, we believe in Jesus Christ, the Son of God, and our Lord. Two thousand years ago, He was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary. He lived the life we could not live, bringing God’s kingdom to earth through His Person and work, His miracles, His teaching. He suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died for our sins, and was buried. But, on the third day, He rose again! We believe that the turning point of history was not the discovery of science in the seventeenth century but the discovery of an empty tomb in the first! Jesus Christ ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father. He will come again to judge the living and the dead.

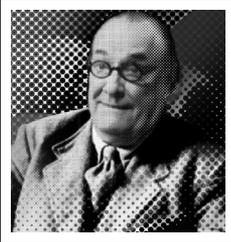
Now we live on earth as citizens of heaven, as people who believe in Jesus Christ but have never seen Him with our eyes. We believe in resurrection power in a world where people deny miracles. We believe in His vision for humanity in a world where people want to discover themselves and define their own destiny. We are a people who know what time it is. We live between the times— the time

when Jesus was raised from the dead and the time He will return. We long for Him, weeping at the lostness and brokenness of our world, and we cry out for Christ to return to make all things right.

While we wait, we believe in the Holy Spirit, the church in all the world, the communion of God's people, the forgiveness of sins, the future resurrection of our bodies, and the life everlasting. That's our calendar. We came from God. We turned away from God. God came to us. God will come again.

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David Payne as C.S. Lewis

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