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C0548 – 12/21/2005 – Terms of Salvation
Special Issues in Salvation

We've concluded that salvation is by grace through one human condition: faith. But what of those who cannot respond to Christ in faith? What of infants and the mentally retarded? What is the "age of accountability"? What of those who have never heard the gospel? How can God desire all men to be saved and yet not all be saved? These questions trouble many Christians but the Bible is quite clear on these issues and does not need our depraved reason to answer them.

Let's begin with the question of the salvation of infants and children.

*Beneath this stone, four infants' ashes lie;
Say, are they lost or saved?
If death's by sin, they sinned;
because they're here;
If heaven's by works,
in heaven they can't appear.
Reason, ah! how depraved!
Revere the sacred page, the knot's untied;
They died, for Adam sinned—
they live, for Jesus died.*

- epitaph of four infants (circa 1830)ⁱ

This issue has been given several answers in Church History. Augustine (4th century AD) answered the problem by baptismal regeneration; those baptized...eternal bliss, those unbaptized...eternal hell. But there is no such doctrine in Scripture. Luther spoke of the faith of infants but there is no such doctrine in Scripture. Hyper-Calvinists believe in limited atonement, that Christ's intention in the cross was to purchase salvation only for the elect. Thus, if an infant was elect, he will be in heaven, if he is not elect then he will be damned. Some hyper-Calvinists argued that all infants were elect to avoid the

horribleness of such a thought! Moderates, including myself, believe the atonement was unlimitedⁱⁱ, that Christ's intention in the cross was to *provide* salvation for all and *apply* it only to those who believe. But what of those who cannot believe such as infants, small children, and the mentally retarded?

I. The Case of Children: Little Ricky, Elissa, Brooklyn, Joshua, Kaleb, Riven

The words *child* and *children* are used many times in Scripture (~520 times). Yet in all these verses there is not one bit of evidence that infants and small children ever spend eternity with the wicked separated from God. There are several places in Scripture when children are ordered to be slaughtered. Pharaoh ordered the death of all male babies born to the Hebrews (Exod. 1:15-22). Herod ordered the death of all male children two years old or younger in Bethlehem and its vicinity (Matt 2:16). Either context could have given us some indication as to their eternal destiny. Yet not once does the Bible speak of these children as being separated from God and assigned a place with the wicked. There is one passage in the OT where the inspired evidence points the other way. The context is David's firstborn of Bathsheba who was conceived because of David's sin...

2 Samuel 12:21 Then his servants said to him, "What is this thing that you have done? While the child was alive, you fasted and wept; but when the child died, you arose and ate food." ²² He said, "While the child was *still* alive, I fasted and wept; for I said, 'Who knows, the LORD may be gracious to me, that the child may live.' ²³ "But now he has died; why should I fast? Can I bring him back again? I will go to him, but he will not return to me."

"David's words **I will go to him**, scarcely can be interpreted any other way than that he was conscious of a life beyond the grave and that he, justified by faith, would go where the...child went, who had not yet reached the age of accountability."ⁱⁱⁱ This passage ought to bring comfort to any parent who has lost a child before they reached the age of accountability (which we will treat momentarily).

Jesus' response to children warns against adults hindering children from coming to Him.

Mark 10:13-16 And they were bringing children to Him so that He might touch them; but the disciples rebuked them. ¹⁴ But when Jesus saw this, He was indignant and said to them, "Permit the children to come to Me; do not hinder them; for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. ¹⁵ "Truly I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child will not enter it *at all*."

¹⁶ And He took them in His arms and *began* blessing them, laying His hands on them.

Grammatically and contextually these children ranged from infants to those under the age of puberty (*paidion*). Jesus was taking them in His arms and blessing them. Jesus' point was that we should never hinder people from coming to Christ. Christ's disciples were getting in the way of little children who wanted to come to Him. Jesus loved children and used them as an object lesson for the disciples. It is children "such as these" Jesus said, who demonstrate the simple faith necessary to enter the kingdom of God. Another passage is...

Matthew 18:1-7 At that time the disciples came to Jesus and said, "Who then is greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" ² And He called a child to Himself and set him before them, ³ and said, "Truly I say to you, unless you are converted and become like children, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven. ⁴ "Whoever then humbles himself as this child, he is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. ⁵ "And whoever receives one such child in My name receives Me; ⁶ but whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in Me to stumble, it would be better for him to have a heavy millstone hung around his neck, and to be drowned in the depth of the sea. ⁷ "Woe to the world because of *its* stumbling blocks! For it is inevitable that stumbling blocks come; but woe to that man through whom the stumbling block comes!

A *childlike faith* is required to enter the kingdom of God but a *childlike humility* makes one great in the kingdom of God. We are not to be stumbling blocks to children either in our words or in our deeds. It is better to drown than to cause a child to stumble.^{iv}

These illustrations show that there was no subject of discussion that Jesus did not see as theological in essence. He constantly turned people's attention to the theological import of events. In this case he used children trying to get to Him as an object lesson to teach us about simple faith and humility. Jesus was a master at seeing all things in God's creation as objects through which lessons about God could be taught.^v

A. Age of Accountability

Because we are conceived in sin theologians have developed a doctrine of the age of accountability to account for other Scriptural indications that indicate that all children go to heaven. A wide range of ages has been proposed for this age but it is all just

guesswork. The Bible never lays down a specific age at which a person instantly becomes accountable (closest verse is James 4:17). However, there are biblical principles we can follow in developing a doctrine of the age of accountability.

1. Creation

The ability to recognize the creation as God's handiwork (Ps 19:1ff; Rom 1:20).

Romans 1:20 For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse.

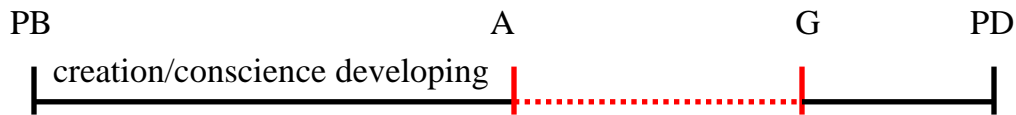
Those children who have developed to the point of seeing God through creation are said to be without excuse (*anapologetos* literally "without a defense"). But this says nothing of those children who have yet to develop to see God through creation and are unable to consciously make a defense.

2. Conscience

The development of the conscience to the point of judging between right and wrong on an issue which involves reasoning (Rom 2:14-15).

Romans 2:14-16 For when Gentiles who do not have the Law do instinctively the things of the Law, these, not having the Law, are a law to themselves, ¹⁵ in that they show the work of the Law written in their hearts, their conscience bearing witness and their thoughts (*logismos* – reasonings) alternately accusing or else defending them, ¹⁶ on the day when, according to my gospel, God will judge the secrets of men through Christ Jesus.

When the conscience has developed to the point of instinctively judging rightly when two choices are given then they are responsible to be judged by God. Coupled with the development of conscience, in verse 15, is "their thoughts". The Greek word is *logismos* and means "their reasonings". When a child is reasoning it is a good indication that the conscience has developed to the point of responsibility. Closely related to reasoning is language acquisition. A child who reasons or thinks in his mind is able to speak coherently putting words together in a string so that they form complete thoughts.



PB = Physical Birth

A = Accountable to God

G = Hears Gospel

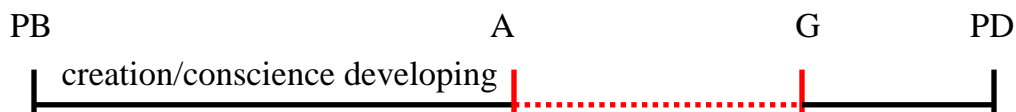
PD = Physical Death

Once a child sees God through *creation* and once his *conscience* instinctively chooses the right then the child becomes accountable to God. In a normal child's development this point is reached quite early (~4-10yrs old). Influences during childhood can greatly affect both of these.

B. Human Responsibility

1. Parent's Role in Creation

A parent can help their child see God in creation by taking their child out in *creation* and pointing out the things God made, tasting things, feeling things, listening to things, smelling things, etc., (if these things are safe). Parents ought to make a BIG deal out of God's wonderfully creative imagination. A parent can also hinder a child by leading them astray^{vi} or confusion may result if the parents are unequally yoked (2 Cor 6:14).




- Parent's role in creation

2. Parent's Role in Developing Conscience

A parent can help the *conscience* develop by teaching them language. Language acquisition is crucial to the development of the conscience and reasoning. Parents can read Bible verses to their children, talk to their children, answer their questions (what's that?), teach them new words even if they're BIG words. They will want to try to say them. Make sure you tell them that God is the author of language and that creation and language go together because God used language to create (Gen 1:3, 6, 9, 11, 14, 20, 24).



creation/conscience developing



- Parent's role in creation
- Parent's role in developing conscience

Both of these parenting skills require time and energy but it gives your child the ability to recognize the creation as God's handiwork and it helps develop their conscience so that they can understand the gospel and believe in Christ^{vii} (I was amazed that the first time I asked Riven where God was, she somehow knew and she was just over a year old. I had never told her this information but she just pointed up and said "God" as if she knew all along. Did she learn this from seeing Robin or I looking up when we spoke of God? I don't know. The first time I shared the gospel with her (at 20 months) I asked her "what do you think about that" and she said "YEAH!" and clapped her hands). Children have been known to believe in Christ as early 3 or 4 years old. Many seriously doubt such conversions are genuine. But all one has to do to find out is ask them. If they truly understood they can tell you. Some child prodigies have learned to speak in sentences before they were 1 year old.

Believing in Christ is the biggest step in child-rearing because it results in a new nature that is able to be controlled by the Spirit rather than by fleshly impulses. So, when is a child responsible? It is different for every child because every child is unique. When they recognize that creation is God's handiwork (Rom 1:20) and when the conscience has developed to the point of reasoning to make decisions between right and wrong (Rom 2:14-15) they are responsible. We have the responsibility of helping develop this in children.

C. The Case of the Mentally Retarded

The same standards apply to the mentally retarded as to those of children mentioned above. If they are never able to make a responsible choice then they are covered by the gracious *provision* and *application* of Christ's atonement.

However, those who had a normal development and reached accountability at some time and then lost mental ability to believe are lost forever unless they believed during the time which they were accountable.

D. Conclusion

Children are not rejecters of God's grace because they are unable to consciously reject Him. They cannot believe and are neither told to believe nor expected to do so. Since Christ died for all men and God was satisfied by this payment God is perfectly just in applying the benefits of Christ's death to all children who have not reached accountability. The Scriptural evidence is that, like David's child, they will be with those justified by faith. We can conclude that they are "safe in the arms of Jesus".

Safe in the arms of Jesus,
Safe on His gentle breast,
There by His love o'ershaded,
Sweetly my child shall rest.
- Hymn by Fannie Crosby

II. WHAT ABOUT THOSE WHO NEVER HEARD?^{viii}

There have been many answers to this question. *First*, some have said, "we can't say whether those who never heard are damned or saved. Rather we must simply trust God's character, that He is good." This does not face up to Scriptural reality. God is good but He is also just and truthful and will never contradict His word. During the present age the Bible states that if a person does not believe in Christ then he is judged.

John 3:18 "He who believes in Him is not judged; he who does not believe has been judged already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God.

The standard is belief. We've already dealt with those who can't meet that standard but for those who can they have been judged already for not believing, even if they've never heard the gospel.

A *second* and recent answer from so-called evangelicals^{ix} is that "some who have never heard will be saved and others will be lost. If they responded positively to the light of God in creation and conscience then they will be saved. If they respond negatively to the light of God in creation and conscience then they will be lost." This is the New Wider Hope Theory; that more than those who believe in Christ will go to heaven. The essence of this answer is that a person can be saved through *general revelation*. Special revelation from the Bible about Jesus Christ is not necessary. This solution does not face up to

Scriptural reality either. The Bible never says that a person can be saved through *general revelation*. It always states that, at present, a person must believe in the *special revelation* of God in Jesus Christ. General revelation is not enough to save. It is only enough to make a person accountable to God (Rev 1:20).

A *third* answer people have given is that ultimately “everyone” will get a chance to hear the gospel before Christ returns. There is a bit of truth in this. The Bible does teach that during the latter half of the Tribulation an angel will preach the gospel to the whole world.

Revelation 14:6 And I saw another angel flying in midheaven, having an eternal gospel to preach to those who live on the earth, and to every nation and tribe and tongue and people;

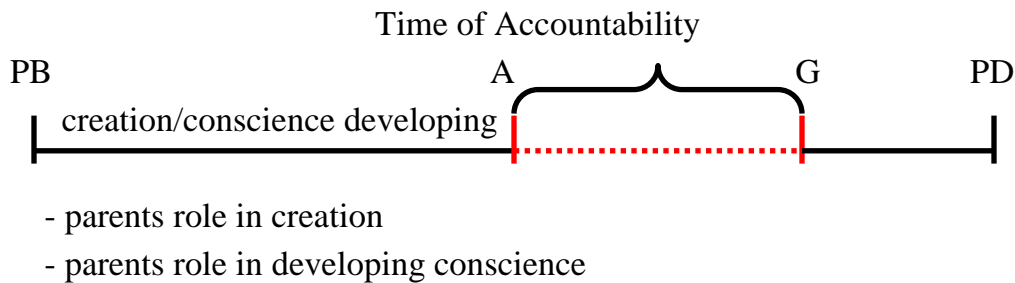
But this passage does not apply to everyone of every age. It strictly applies to those alive at this time during the Tribulation. Besides, it is obvious that millions and millions of people have been born into the world and died without hearing the gospel. To deal with this troubling thought, some have said that when a person dies, he or she is then given the gospel and a chance to accept or reject it. But this is contrary to the entire tenor of Scripture.

John 11:25-26 Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in Me will live even if he dies, ²⁶ and everyone who lives and believes in Me will never die. Do you believe this?"

There is no chance to believe the gospel after one has died. One must believe while still alive in order to live forever.

The *fourth* and biblical answer to the question “what about those who never heard?” is that the same standards that apply to infants and the mentally retarded apply to those who have never heard the gospel. The standard is that once a person sees God in creation and once a person’s conscience has developed to the point of reasoning and choosing the right then they are accountable. It is not hearing the gospel that makes a person accountable. If it were then the thing to do would be to not share the gospel with anyone ever so that they would all go to heaven. Such would undermine God’s word, prayer, and missions. All normal people reach accountability at some time, usually early in life (Rom 1:20; 2:14-15). The timing is unique for each person and only God knows exactly when that moment is. But at that point, the person is accountable; and if he were to die, he would have gone

straight to hell (because of his sin) and God would remain just in judging him. What I consider to be a remarkable and stunning observation is that there has probably never been a person who heard the gospel at the moment he became accountable. *Therefore, if you think about it, probably all people have spent a portion of their life being responsible to believe in Christ but having not heard the gospel.*



In other words, we have all been one of those “WHO HAVEN’T HEARD”. It’s not just the hot-n-tot in Africa! If you died and had not heard you would have died in your sins and gone to hell. It is not hearing the gospel that makes a person responsible. If it was, the whole missionary enterprise would be undermined, because they would be condemning them as they preached the gospel. Whereas, if they hadn’t, they would have gone to heaven! If an accountable person could go to heaven without having heard the gospel you have introduced another way of salvation. Can a person be saved by simply believing that God created everything?^x No! Can a person be saved by simply doing what his conscience says? No! That is enough to condemn but not enough to save. One must believe in Christ, the only begotten Son of God (John 3:18; 5:24; 6:47; et. al.). The remarkable thing, and I believe a unique contribution to this problem, is that you, me, and everyone else have been a part of those “WHO HAVEN’T HEARD” at some point. Had we not heard the gospel we would have died and gone to hell! This brings to light many remarkable Scriptural observations and it places huge responsibilities on us!

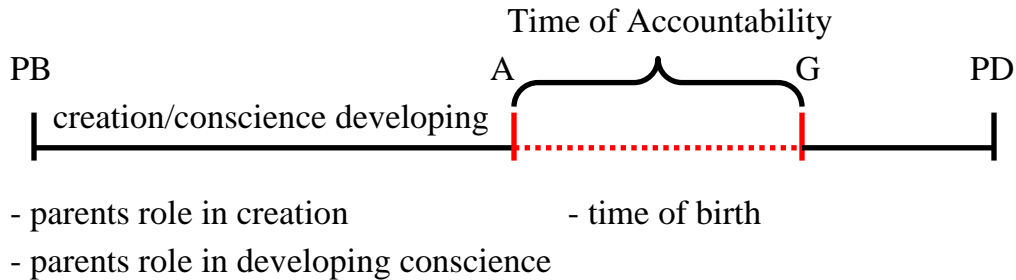
A. Scriptural Observations

The first observation is that God determined *the time you were born into history*.

Acts 17:26 He made from one *man* every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined *their* appointed times

You can’t control this at all and neither could your parents. Would it make a difference if you were born in Egypt in 700BC when God was working primarily with the nation of Israel and Israel was not witnessing to the nations? Would it make a difference in terms

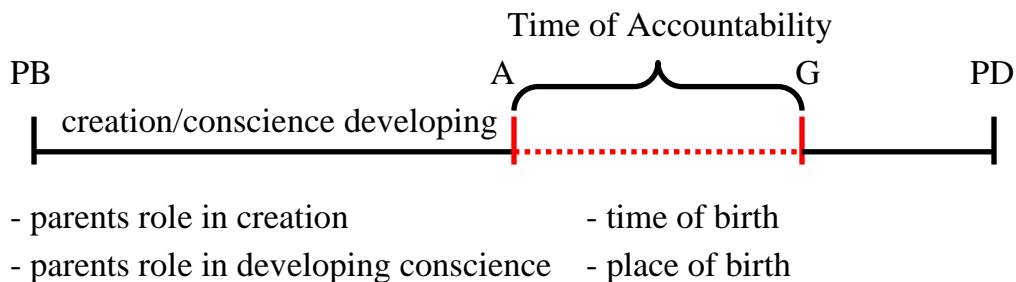
of whether you would have heard the gospel or not? Absolutely, there is no question about it. God appointed the exact time when you would be born.



The second observation is that God determined *the place you were born on this earth*.

Acts 17:26 having determined...the boundaries of their habitation,

If you were born in an atheist nation (e.g., Communist Russia) do you think odds were the same that you would hear the gospel? or would you have a better opportunity of hearing the gospel if you were born in 19th century colonial America? Absolutely, there is no question about it. God appointed the boundaries of your habitation and the time you were born. There is nothing you can do about it. God did it this way so that we “would seek God, if perhaps” we “might grope for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us” (Acts 17:24).

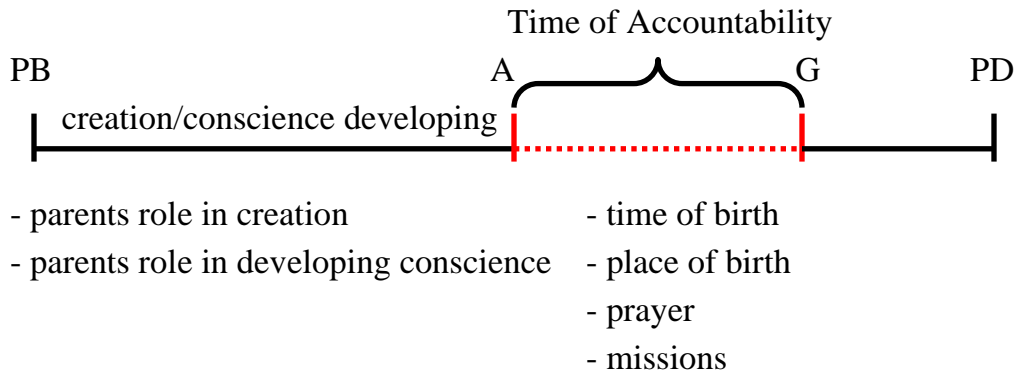


B. Human Responsibilities

The first responsibility on the human side is *prayer*.

Matthew 9:37-38 Then He said to His disciples, "The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few. ³⁸ "Therefore beseech the Lord of the harvest to send out workers into His harvest."

These verses say it all! Someone has to be sent out to preach the gospel so that those who haven't heard can believe in Christ and be justified! Look, let's remember our diagram. If people do not become accountable to God until they hear the gospel then should we be sending out missionaries? Logically, no!



If this were true all we would be doing by sending out missionaries to preach is condemning the hearers to hell forever! Anyone who knows anything about foreign missions knows that you may spend years in a Muslim or Buddhist culture and not have a single convert to Christianity! If we wanted all those people to go to heaven and you could get to heaven some other way than believing the gospel then sending missionaries is the last thing we should do!

The very fact that the NT is totally pro-missionary (Paul being the foremost theologian and missionary) proves the entire scheme I have taught you. Children are born at the net rate of 200,000/day. The majority are in boundaries that are anti-Christian. They grow up, and as they grow, they at some point see God in creation and their consciences develop to the point of accountability. The whole missionary endeavor is built on this premise. If they are not really lost and going to hell why are we sending missionaries to them to preach the gospel?! The fact is they are lost and going to hell and that is why we are responsible to pray that God would send out missionaries and to support missionaries, even being missionaries ourselves if God calls us! The bottom line is that people that have become accountable must hear the gospel in order to believe the gospel and be saved. We have all been one of those people who was accountable but hadn't heard the gospel yet. If someone hadn't shared the gospel with us, we would have died and gone to hell! What should your response be to such marvelous truths?

III. HOW CAN GOD DESIRE ALL TO BE SAVED AND NOT ALL BE SAVED?

1 Timothy 2:3-4 This is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, ⁴ who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.

The answer to this is really quite simple. What God has *decided* will take place is not identical to what He *desires* to take place. God is an optimist and His optimism toward humanity bleeds through the pages of Scripture (e.g., Matt 25:41). Even though God *desires* that we, as His children, would obey His every commandment (of which there are over 1,000 in the NT) He nevertheless does not force us to obey. Neither does God force or coerce anyone to believe in Christ. God did not create a fatalistic universe but a personal one run by a Personal God.

IV. CONCLUSION

Those who can't believe go to heaven. Those who can believe but never hear are condemned. All people were in this boat at some time. If someone hadn't preached the gospel to us, we would not have heard and believed and been saved. There is only one way of salvation and attempts to say people can be saved through general revelation completely undermine the importance of prayer, missions, and the importance of God's special revelation in His word.

ⁱ Robert Lightner, *Safe in the Arms of Jesus*, 30, quoting John Bruce, *A Cypress Wreath for an Infant's Grave* (London: Hamilton Adams, 1830), 141.

ⁱⁱ I prefer to say "general redemption" rather than the unscriptural terminology "unlimited atonement".

ⁱⁱⁱ Merrill F. Unger, *Unger's Commentary on the Old Testament*, 428.

^{iv} "Woe to the world because of *its* stumbling blocks! For it is inevitable that stumbling blocks come; but woe to that man through whom the stumbling block comes!" This verse is very interesting for its value in resolving the sovereignty of God and the responsibility of man. Stumbling blocks will come but the men through whom they come are held responsible. The reason stumbling blocks will come is because the world is evil. Because men are evil stumbling blocks will manifest themselves through men, but these men are completely responsible for their actions.

^v Theology was a very concrete thing to Jesus, not abstract as the western mind has made it!

^{vi} Jesus said it was better for a person to have a millstone hung about his neck and drowned in the sea than to cause a little believing child to stumble (Matt 18:6)!

^{vii} Someone might say, "then it is best to delay the child's seeing God in creation and delay their development of conscience so that they remain unaccountable longer and if they died would go to heaven." I can only say that such a remark is totally contrary to the whole tenor of parental responsibility (Eph 6:1-4). It is also a terribly morbid thought. What Christian should think or hopes that their child would die early so they can go to heaven. God's provision is not to be abused by sinful thinking.

^{viii} Some say that there are none who have never heard because all peoples got off Noah's Ark. The evidence of this is that many cultures and tribes and peoples have traditions that contain echoes of the truth. The problem with this is that those echoes of truth do not contain the gospel message

required for a person to be saved in the present age (John 3:18). So, they still haven't heard what they need to hear in order to be saved. The traditions of these cultures also evidence the depraved nature of these men because they have warped the truth.

^{ix} This view is held by Process Theology and Open Theism (e.g., Pinnock, Boyd, Sanders, et. al.)

^x There are implications for this in the popular Design/Designer argument (a form of the teleological argument; e.g., Michael Behe, *Darwin's Black Box*). Those who argue from design that there must be a Designer do not win their audience to Christ! All they have done is won them to a Designer. That Designer may be Allah or some other deity or even the God of the Bible but that does not make one a Christian. One must have faith in the person and work of Jesus Christ in order to be saved.

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