

IN RESPONSE

CAN TWO + TWO EQUAL FIVE FOR GOD?

by Dennis Prutow

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Christian college students asked, "Can two plus two equal five for God?" Here is a similar question, "Can God make square circles?" A Bible text enlisted to "prove" two plus two can undoubtedly be five for God is Isaiah 55:8, "'For My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways My ways,' declares the Lord." There you have it. The way God thinks and the way we think are so different there is no reason two plus two cannot be five for God. Unfortunately, even Reformed Bible scholars agree with this position.

Wait just a minute! This text does not "prove" the point being made. Let's take it in context.

Seek the Lord while He may be found; call upon Him while He is near. Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts; and let him return to the Lord, and He will have compassion on him; and to our God, for He will abundantly pardon. "For My thoughts are not your thoughts, Neither are your ways My ways," declares the Lord. "For as the heavens are higher than the earth, So are My ways higher than your ways, and My thoughts than your thoughts (Isaiah 55:6-9).

What kind of thoughts does an unrighteous person have? Such a person thinks about things contrary to the Word and the Law of God. Such a person dwells on evil such as pornography. This person's mind is used to plot against others by cheating, stealing, abusing, and raping.

What are the ways of the wicked? The ways of the wicked follow hard upon their thoughts. They put their plans and plots into effect. The wicked readily pull the trigger in the classroom and blow away hated classmates. The wicked cheat on their taxes, undermine the reputations of others, engage in fornication, live in adulterous relationships, etc., etc.

Isaiah 55:7 therefore has to do with ethics and morals. Isaiah 55:7 centers on what wicked people think and do. Isaiah 55:8 sets forth the contrast. What are God's ways? God is utterly pure and righteous in all He does. God's ways are, in this sense, infinitely removed from the ways of the wicked. In like manner,

God's thoughts are altogether holy and just. His mind never sinks to the gutter. God's thoughts are, in this sense, infinitely higher than the thoughts of the wicked.

The point should be clear. Isaiah 55:8 has absolutely nothing to do with a supposed ability of God to conceive of square circles or the sum of two plus two being five.

Let's look at the question from another perspective. Suppose two plus two might be five for God. Suppose for the purpose of argument this is possible. Second Samuel 5:4 says, "David was thirty years old when he became king, and he reigned forty years." these are words from God in the Bible. What do they mean? Are we to take them literally? In other words, do we know beyond doubt David was thirty years old when he became king, that he was thirty years old from our perspective, earth years, and also from God's perspective.

Quantitatively, are thirty years the same in God's reckoning and in our reckoning. Or is it possible since two plus two is five for God, four years equal five years, the thirty years 2 Samuel 5:4 records are actually thirty-seven years plus one half year. Obviously this is ludicrous.

The main point however is not. If two plus two might be five for God, 2 Samuel 5:4 is not only problematic, the whole Bible is thrown into question.

We regard the Bible to be communication from God. The words of God, transmitted to us through human media, the words of the Bible, carry explicit meaning. This is true because the content of these words does not vary. The words of the Bible are the very words of God. We never have to wonder if there is another meaning behind these words in the mind of God.

What do we do with Psalm 139:6? "Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is too high, I cannot attain to it." Here David is speaking about God's omniscience. God knows all. We cannot possibly know all. We are not God. Psalm 139:6 does not apply to our question.

What about 2 Peter 3:8? "But do not let this one fact escape your notice, beloved, that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day." Two things must be said. First, Peter is using a simile. Peter does not say one day equals a thousand years for God; Peter says a thousand years is like one day for God. How so? With one sweep of cognition all eternity is before the almighty. He sees all, everything, and knows all, all at once. Second, Peter's point has to do with the promise of Christ's second coming. From our perspective, a seeming "delay" of two thousand years, is not a "delay" at all, from God's perspective. God's comprehensive knowledge of every event, past, present, and future, is always present to His view. This is far different than saying one day equals one thousand years for God or two plus two equals five for God.

To sum up, I quote from an editorial in the Topeka Capital Journal written some months ago by William Raspberry.

Clever mathematicians can show you a dozen ways that two plus two can add up to something other than four, and if you have a keen interest in how numbers work, you might find the alternative solutions intriguing.

But if you intend to use numbers--if you expect to rely on numbers as a way of negotiating your way through life--you'd do well to remember that in ordinary parlance, in the normal order of things, two and two do make four. Neglect of that simple truth is likely to result not in mathematical enlightenment but in the opposite: utter confusion. This is also true if we expect to function in God's world guided by God's Word.

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IN RESPONSE - NATURAL LAW?

by Dennis Prutow

Charles Spurgeon asks, "What is law without a force at the back of it?"¹ Good question. It comes in the context of the exposition of Psalm 135:7, "He causes the vapors to ascend from the ends of the earth." "When we consider upon what an immense scale evaporation is continually going on, and how needful it is for the existence of all of life, we may well admire the wisdom and power which are displayed therein."² Referring to these vapors, Spurgeon goes on to say, "It is God who causes them to rise, not a mere law. What is law without a force at the back of it?"³

By definition, laws are "rules of conduct established and enforced by the authority, legislation, or custom of a given community or other group."⁴ Defining the so called law of nature, Webster's says it is "a sequence of events in nature or in human activities that has been observed to occur with unvarying uniformity under the same condition."⁵ Many place any so-called "inherent tendency; instinct: as the law of self-preservation"⁶ in this category. They maintain certain laws simply exist of themselves; these laws were never given, made, or stipulated. But does nature have the authority, even the ability, to promote laws. Being impersonal, nature has no such ability. By definition, laws of nature exist because God created and sustains the universe and everything in it. The Trinity is quite literally the community establishing and enforcing the laws of the created order. This is Spurgeon's point.

Looking at the same subject from a slightly different angle, we speak of natural law. During his confirmation hearings, Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas suggested he believes in natural law. Senator Joseph Biden, Chairman of the Senate Judiciary Committee, found this position reprehensible. Natural law points to an authority, the Law Giver. It also points in the direction of moral absolutes. Oddly, many Reformed theologians find themselves in agreement with Senator Biden in their aversion to natural law. This abhorrence of natural law makes strange bedfellows. It also plays into the hands of the radicals undermining our society and culture. Spurgeon's simple question must still be answered.

C. S. Lewis warned we were creating a society of "men without chests" because of our denial of natural law.

Until quite modern times all teachers and even all men believed the universe to be such that certain emotional reactions on our part could be either congruous or incongruous to it—believed in fact, that objects did not merely receive, but could merit, our approval or disapproval, our reverence, or our contempt.⁷

For Lewis, this is self evident. He boldly asserts, "If nothing is self evident, nothing can be proved. Similarly, if nothing is obligatory for its own sake, nothing is obligatory at all."⁸ Lewis points out, "This law was called the Law of Nature because people thought that everyone knew it by nature and did not need to be taught it."⁹

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, in that they show the work of the Law written in their hearts, their conscience bearing witness, and their thoughts alternately accusing or else defending them (Romans 2:14-15).

Natural law comports with the written moral law. It is the same. The one was given at Sinai. The other is mediated through conscience as a part of God's image, defaced but not effaced.

Lewis was deeply distressed over the attacks on traditional values in his era based upon disavowal of natural law. America is only slightly behind England in this. Columnist George Will directs our attention to the retired vice president of the European Parliament, Sir Fred Catherwood. Why has British society gone badly wrong? "The denial of moral absolutes is as politically correct here as in America," answers Catherwood. George Will then comments, "It would be a most welcome trend—in Britain and America—if people would begin to see . . . moral resuscitation of people as the honorable obligation of the churches and not primarily of the government."¹⁰

Surely our churches are abdicating their responsibility and aiding and abetting the enemy in their renunciation of natural law. A return to a biblical understanding of natural law could yield high dividends.

Charles Colson tells about having dinner with a media personality and trying to talk to him about Christianity. Colson told him how he had come to Christ. "Obviously Jesus worked for you," his friend replied but went on to tell about someone he knows who was turned around by New Age spirituality. . . Colson tried to explain the difference, but got nowhere. . . Colson explained what the Bible said, but his friend did not believe in the Bible or any other spiritual authority.

Finally Colson mentioned a Woody Allen movie, *Crimes and Misdemeanors*, about a killer who silences his conscience by concluding life is nothing more than survival of the fittest. The friend became thoughtful. Colson followed with examples from Tolstoy and C. S. Lewis on the reality of moral law. The friend was following him. Then Colson cited the epistle of Romans on human inability to keep the law. The friend then paid close attention to the message of Christ's atoning work on the cross.¹¹

By example, we have at least a partial answer to Spurgeon's question.

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¹ C. H. Spurgeon, *The Treasury of David* (Newark, DE: Cornerstone, n.d.) vol. vii, p. 139.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ *Webster's New World Dictionary of the American Language, College Edition* (New York: the World Publishing Company, 1957) p. 828.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ C. S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man* (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1947) p. 25.

⁸ Ibid., p. 53.

⁹ C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: MacMillan Publishing Company, 1943) p. 18.

¹⁰ 10 George Will, "England and America: Separated at birth," *The Hutchinson News*, Jan. 7, 1995, p. 4.

¹¹ Gene Edward Veith, Jr., *Post Modern Times* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1994) p. 15.

IN RESPONSE - CELEBRATION VERSUS WORSHIP: A CLARIFICATION

by Dennis Prutow

My thesis is Old Testament celebration differs from worship and understanding this distinction gives us a proper grasp of contemporary worship. One correspondent wrote in reply, "Is all celebration borrowed from the world? I think of Christ's triumphal entrance into Jerusalem. Was it borrowed from the world? Christ said the children would cry out if the children had not praised Him. . . I do not agree that celebration is borrowed from the world. That is an overstatement in my judgment."

I deeply appreciate this criticism and I want to respond because it hits at the root of the current crisis in worship. As stated in my previous articles, the emphasis in contemporary worship is upon satisfying the customer. However, the thoroughgoing emphasis in worship should be upon satisfying God, the object of our adoration.

In this discussion, the effort is to use terms in a restrictive sense. For example, I attempted to carefully define world in my first article, *Celebration versus Worship, Defining Terms*.

Another term you will meet in the following pages is the world. In the New Testament, the term world (Gk. *kosmos*) has three basic meanings: (1) the earth, the created order; (2) the nations, the human community; (3) the ways of fallen humanity, alienated from God and his truth. I generally use the term world in the second sense. . . . When I speak of celebration borrowing from the world, I mean celebration borrows from the human community. It is the way of men and women to celebrate. Celebration in and of itself is not sinful. It becomes sinful when utilized for the gratification of self in radical self-centered, self-congratulatory, self-glorifying festivals. But as we will see from our examination of Old Testament texts, celebration in and of itself is not sinful or evil.

When I say celebration is borrowed from the world I do not mean celebration is sinful, opposed to God, or in essence worldly. I simply mean Old Testament celebration used the forms of the culture.

This is the case today. Celebration and Worship, *Defining Terms*, used Christian rock to explain my point.

For example, rock and roll is a form of music common within our world. Many argue that as a musical form it is not innately evil. Musical notes placed on a page and then played with an instrument are not evil. It is common to take the same form and bring it into the church. We then call it Christian rock because the form is used with songs having words associated with the Christian faith. As I see it, when a Christian rock band performs, there is an air of celebration. The desire is to have a convivial good time. There is nothing wrong with Christian young people gathering for this type of celebration.

My respondent notes, "I think of Christ's triumphal entrance into Jerusalem." Then he asks, "Was it borrowed from the world?" My answer is Yes. To the extent the form of celebration exalting Christ at the triumphal entry was similar to the way the people might have celebrated the entrance of any conquering hero, that celebration borrowed from the world. "Christ said that the stones would cry out if the children had not praised Him." Exactly. That the celebration was proper in no way changes the fact it had a form taken from the local culture.

Another example is enlisted. "I think that David was pursuing holiness in dancing before the ark." I agree. Oddly enough, when you compare this celebration with others in the Old Testament, see for example Job 21:7-12, we witness unbelievers celebrating in the same way without giving thanks to God. Old Testament celebration, like David dancing before the ark, is very much like secular celebration in its form. To this extent, it borrows from the world.

To this extent I am quite interested in the distinction between celebration and worship. While celebration borrows forms from the surrounding culture, worship is directed, in its forms, by heaven. This is particularly clear in the Old Testament.

In addition, and beyond doubt, there are celebratory elements to worship. However, we are using the term in a slightly different way when we say this. Here we refer to our exultation and joy before God. Using the term in another way, we speak of celebrating Communion. That is, we perform the rite.

At the risk of muddying the waters further, let me illustrate my point. There has been controversy over the chapel services at Geneva College. As should be well known, Geneva College is the denominational school of the Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America. The Reformed Presbyterian Church maintains a style of worship foreign to contemporary Christians, the singing of only psalms from the Old Testament Psalter without instrumental accompaniment. When either instrumental music is played or popular hymns are sung, this violates the standards of the church for worship.

I would argue college chapel is more akin to celebration than worship. I know this is true as I observe the chapels of Sterling College. I would also argue there is a place for celebration. College youth should not be discouraged in breaking out their guitars, drums, and brass to sing and give praise before God. College chapels offer opportunities for such celebration.

Several caveats are in order. First, the distinction between celebration and worship I am urging should be taught. Young people need to know and understand the distinction. Second, if my thesis is correct, and celebration does borrow from the world as I've described, the process of maturation and sanctification would involve movement from a love for celebration to a love for worship. Third, failure to make the distinction for which I argue plays into the hands of church growth advocates who equate worship and celebration and then insist only in the latter.

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IN RESPONSE - CONVERSION OF PAUL, A SUGGESTED TIME LINE

by Dennis Prutow

Scripture devotes more space to the conversion of the apostle Paul than any other subject outside of the passion of Christ. For this reason alone, Paul's conversion to faith in Christ merits study. In this brief review, I suggest a specific time line which has implications for other portions of Scripture.

In general, when we speak of Paul's conversion, we look at the Damascus road experience. He was converted on that road, we say without hesitation. I suggest actual conversion took place three days later. Let's take a look at it. Acts 9:1-2,

Now Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest, and asked for letters from him to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any belonging to the Way, both men and women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem.

At this point Paul is an unbelieving murderer. He knows many of the facts about Christ including the story of the resurrection. He rejects it all and desires to eradicate the Christian sect. He travels to Damascus under the auspices of the high priest.

Acts 9:3-8 then says,

And it came about that as he journeyed, he was approaching Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him; and he fell to the ground, and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?" And he said, "Who art Thou, Lord?" And He said, "I am Jesus whom you are persecuting, but rise, and enter the city, and it shall be told you what you must do." And the men who traveled with him stood speechless, hearing the voice, but seeing no one. And Saul got up from the ground, and though his eyes were open, he could see nothing; and

leading him by the hand, they brought him into Damascus.

The drama of this scene cannot be overstated. Christ reveals Himself to Paul. On the ground, Paul cries out for an explanation. It is Jesus. It is the One He hates. This Jesus is alive as his followers proclaim.

The light of Christ blinds Paul. He cannot see. He is plunged into darkness. All he has stood for is now brought into question and doubt. The man who was convinced He was on the path to heaven based on his own righteousness is now blind. He knows he was wrong. His whole life is ripped out from under him like an oriental rug. Nothing, absolutely nothing is left. Shaken and blind, Paul is led off to Damascus. He began the journey as a self-confident, proud, Pharisee on a mission for God. He completes his journey as a devastated humiliated blind man.

Acts 9:9 accentuates the point. "And he was three days without sight, and neither ate nor drank." What did Paul do during those three days? There was no celebration. There was only agony of heart and anguish of soul. This man who thought he had it all put together and was certainly on the path to heaven realized he was all wrong. He realized he was not on the path to heaven but that he was doomed. The road he was on went to hell. How could he be so mistaken?

For three days Paul must have agonized over the Scriptures. For three days Paul must have been on his face before God in prayer. For three days Paul must have sought the face of God concerning all his past life and this encounter with the living Christ.

Enter Ananias. Ananias went to Paul at the direction of God. He was one of the disciples Paul sought to kill. Ananias reiterated the commission Christ had for Paul. Then he made an astounding

statement, "And now why do you delay? Arise, and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on His name" (Acts 22:16). Here was the need of the moment. The very Christ whom Paul had despised was the One upon whom he had to call to receive forgiveness and righteousness. "Why do you delay Paul?" We hear the echo of those wonderful words later penned by the apostle in Romans 10:13, "Whoever will call upon the Name of the Lord will be saved." Paul knew those words spoken by the prophet Joel so well. Now he knew Jesus Christ was that Lord. He realized "that if you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord and believe in your heart God raised Him from the dead, you shall be saved" (Romans 10:9).

Paul called on the Lord Jesus. Paul was also baptized. He became a vital part of the body of Christ, the very body he determined to eradicate. This was his conversion. It came after Christ smote him, after three days of turmoil and darkness, after hearing wonderful words from Ananias, "Brother Saul, receive your sight!" (Acts 22:13). At that moment everything made sense. Why do you delay, Paul? He waited no longer. He called upon Christ.

The suggested time line is given below. Is it correct? You be the judge. If so, what do we do with the mysterious three days of struggle and blindness? My suggestion is that Romans 7 expounds those dark hours. I suggest the man of Romans 7 is Paul in darkness under conviction in Damascus.

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SUGGESTED TIME LINE FOR THE CONVERSION OF PAUL

