



WESTMINSTER  
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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**You Are Loved**  
Dr. Jim Gilchrist

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Dr. Jim Gilchrist

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*For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life (John 3:16).*

Dr. Eben Alexander was here last week to kick off the new season of Town Hall South before a sellout crowd at the Upper St. Clair High School auditorium. Dr. Alexander is a brain surgeon who was a religious agnostic because he believed what so many neuroscientists believe: that the mind, the center of human consciousness, is purely a product of the brain, so that when the brain dies the person simply ceases to exist. There is no life after death, no soul that survives the body, because what we call the soul is just something the brain does while it's alive. When the brain is gone the person is gone too.

That notion, sometimes called physicalism or materialism, is hardly a new idea. It's at least as old as the Epicureans, a few centuries before Christ, and you can read it in the form of a long poem by Lucretius called *On the Nature of Things*, from the first century BC. The idea has enjoyed a new surge of support in our day, of course, with the tremendous advances in brain science. Brain imaging and other techniques now show with greater and greater accuracy what parts of the brain are active when people experience all sorts of things, so it's an easy leap from there to the conclusion that the materialists were right all along: the mind is just something the brain does. When the brain stops working, the person stops too, and all our notions of life after death are just wishful thinking.

Dr. Alexander was inclined to think that way on the basis of his scientific training, until he had his own near-death experience. He describes it in his first book, called *Proof of Heaven*, but the short version goes like this. In

November of 2008 he contracted a rare form of meningitis caused by *E. coli* bacteria, which he says should have shut down his cortical functions and kept him from being conscious of anything at all. While he was in the hospital for several days, though, he had the experience of visiting another realm where he encountered beings of light and saw lots of people dancing in an atmosphere full of love and joy and marvelous music.

An intriguing twist to Dr. Alexander's story has to do with a person who accompanied him on his journey. He says there was this beautiful girl who radiated unconditional love and showed him around the heavenly realm. A few months later, after he'd been treated with powerful antibiotics and was well on the way to recovery, he received some things from his birth parents, whom he was just getting to know because he had been adopted as an infant. Among those things was a picture of a sister he never knew he had, who had died sometime before his own near-death experience. It turns out that this unknown sister in the picture was the same image as the girl he met in his experience of heaven.

I've read lots of stories about near-death experiences and what Dr. Raymond Moody calls "shared death experiences," and the sorts of things Dr. Alexander describes also turn up in many other people's tales, though he says he didn't know anything about the subject before his own experience. I wouldn't go so far as to call any of these experiences "proof," since proof is a pretty high bar and the materialists are trying hard to explain all this away. What I would say is that there is a great deal of evidence that's not so easily dismissed, and the stories of Dr. Alexander and thousands of other people, not to mention my own experience, are consistent with traditional belief in life after death, and hard to explain away in the reductionistic terms of

ordinary brain science.

Dr. Alexander draws at least three conclusions from his near-death experience. The first is that physicalism is wrong. The idea that the mind or the soul is just something the brain does, so that when the brain stops the soul stops too, is simply mistaken. There's too much evidence to the contrary, and science has to consider all the evidence. If scientific theories can't accommodate all the facts, then the theories need to be reconsidered.

His second conclusion is that you and I and everyone else are loved because the power behind all creation is love. His experience of an overwhelming, unconditional love in heaven convinced him that God really is love, as Christianity has always claimed.

The third conclusion is related to the first two: namely, that we have nothing to fear. If the death of this body is not the end of our existence, and if what awaits us on the other side is unconditional love, then we don't need to be afraid of either death or ultimate condemnation. There is a life review, he says, and that review requires people to face squarely all the things they have done, for better and for worse. But the purpose of the life review is redemption and renewal, which is consistent with the biblical claim that God will make all things new, including us. Dr. Alexander concludes his lecture, then, by saying, "You are loved, and you have nothing to fear. God bless you."

Now you might think that Dr. Alexander's story would be universally welcomed as good news, and in fact many people respond in just that way—which is why his books have sold a huge number of copies in a great many countries. But at least two groups of people are not so happy

about his claims.

The first are the physicalists, whose fundamental dogma is that consciousness is impossible apart from our physical bodies as we know them. They live under a kind of “promissory materialism,” as the philosopher Karl Popper called it: the idea that even if we can’t account for all experience in purely material terms now, it’s just a matter of time before science learns how to do that.

The other group that isn’t happy with stories like Dr. Alexander’s includes a certain kind of evangelical Christian. They object to the idea that anyone can come to the joy of heaven regardless of their religious beliefs, or even if they have no religion at all. They cite certain passages in the New Testament, and they conclude that unless people accept Jesus Christ as their “personal Lord and Savior” in this life, they can’t get to heaven. They’re suspicious of many near-death experiences because they think they contradict the Bible and undermine the uniqueness of Christ and the importance of evangelism and individual conversion.

So what are we to make of stories like Dr. Alexander’s from a Christian perspective?

First, the notion that there is a heavenly realm of light and beauty beyond this world, where individuals continue to live in love and joy and peace, is completely consistent with the gospel message. Jesus says in John’s gospel, “In my Father’s house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you?” And the book of Revelation tells of a place where “Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away.” The central claim of the Christianity is the resurrection of Christ, who

says, “Because I live, you also will live.” As St. Paul tells the Corinthians, “if Christ has not been raised, then our proclamation has been in vain and your faith has been in vain.”

The notion of a heaven where souls go after this earthly body is destroyed agrees completely with classical Christianity. It’s what the faith has always taught. But what about the question of who gets to heaven, and how?

It’s certainly true that the New Testament points to Jesus Christ as the only means by which anyone is saved from sin and death. Again in John’s gospel Jesus says, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” And Peter says in a sermon in the book of Acts, “There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved.” Some people interpret these and a few other passages as a kind of Christian exclusivity: unless you profess faith in Jesus Christ here and now, you can’t get to heaven. They also cite John 3:18, which says, “Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God.”

But those are not the only passages that talk about God’s will for people to be saved. John 3:16 says, “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life.” Everyone who truly believes in Jesus, who trusts in him and commits his or her life to him, will be saved, and that should be a source of great hope and confidence for sincere Christians. But does it follow that everyone who does not profess faith in Christ here and now will not be saved?



Consider John 12:32, where Jesus says, “And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.” He says he will draw *all people* to himself, not just some people. The First Letter to Timothy says, “... we have our hope set on the living God, who is the Savior of all people, especially of those who believe.” Do you hear it? God is the Savior of *all people*, especially those who believe. Doesn't the word “especially” imply that salvation is not limited only to those who believe here and now? Might it be that believers are simply privileged to see more clearly God's plan of salvation, but God's plan is far broader than many people imagine?

That doesn't mean there is salvation in anyone other than Jesus Christ. It only means that Christ is bigger than Christianity, which the Bible rather clearly implies. Remember, John's gospel begins by claiming that Jesus is the Logos, the logic of the mind of God, the very Word God spoke to bring the world into being, as Genesis so poetically puts it. John says that all things were made through him, and Paul says the same thing to the Colossians: “He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; ... all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together.”

If Christianity is true, then anyone who is saved for eternal life is saved through Christ, for the simple reason that Christ is the very Word of God, the Second Person of the Trinity. How else would anyone come to God but by the Word of God? But it doesn't necessarily follow that Jesus only saves those who recognize him here and now.

The message of the gospel is that God is love, and God invites all people to come to him. Paul tells the Romans that “all Israel will be saved,” because God is faithful to the

covenant he made with Abraham and with Moses. Even those lines in John's gospel that are claimed to be exclusive come in the context of whether people love darkness or light. Those who love God and want to do what is right will also love the Son when they meet him, because Father and Son are the same God. And the Spirit of God, who is also the Spirit of Christ, blows where it will, John says, and brings people to God in ways that we don't always understand.

Dr. Alexander may or may not be entirely orthodox in the way he interprets his own experience, but there are literally thousands of such experiences recorded over the centuries, and many more recently, since medical science has been able to bring people back from the brink of death. Do they prove the reality of heaven? No, but they are evidence consistent with the basic message of the gospel: that God is love, and death is not the last word, and Christ has gone to prepare a place for us.

Is it only Christians who are welcome in heaven? Ask yourself what you know about the nature of God, especially as we meet God in the person of Jesus Christ. The New Testament itself suggests that Christ is bigger than Christianity. We know that God is love, and God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself. And Paul writes to the Romans that nothing in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. A love as broad and deep as the love of God surely extends to anyone who wants to receive it, and is willing to be transformed by it.

If that's true, then the basic message we heard from Dr. Alexander last week is also true: Death is not the end of life, and you are loved, and if you love God you have nothing to fear.



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