

Dear Dad, I Am Not Your Enemy

David Carl Wilson

22–28 minutes

Editor's introduction: Carl W. Wilson (1924–2022) was an evangelical Christian pastor and author who published several books between 1976 and 2016, many of which sought to provide a conservative Christian analysis of contemporary culture, science, and ideas.

His son, David Carl Wilson, intended to follow in his father's footsteps and "become an intellectual defender of the faith." He headed the Campus Crusade for Christ at the University of Georgia, later attended Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, and assisted his father with his discipleship organization.

David told Free Inquiry that one of his standard lines when speaking to college students was, "If you honestly, objectively investigate the evidence, Jesus Christ will stand up from the midst of all the competitors and say, 'I am the truth.'" But David began to realize that he had never done this himself; rather, "I had imbibed my convictions with my mother's milk." Over a period of several months of earnest inquiry, David concluded that he had been wrong. He told his father and other authorities in his religious life and dropped out of seminary to pursue a doctorate in philosophy

from UCLA.

As to how his relationship with his father unfolded, David told us, “He unrelentingly proselytized me. His firm belief was that I would return to the fold and be all the more effective because of my decades of unbelief. It was often as though I was some nameless audience member he was preaching to.” David described his father as “a complicated man—a self-styled evangelical intellectual and minor Christian guru whose prophetic posture was hardest on those who were closest to him.” Carl Wilson died on January 4, 2022, at age ninety-seven.

*In 2004, Carl Wilson sent a draft chapter from his book *Liberty in an Evil Age* to David, who was Dean of the College of Arts & Sciences at Webster University at the time. What follows is the letter David sent in reply to his father, an attempt to foster constructive dialogue with religious believers through kindness. It has been lightly edited for clarity.*

*“I cannot claim that the letter was successful,” he told *Free Inquiry*. “At most, I claim that it helped contribute to a kind of patriarchal paradox. He never stopped judging me, sometimes cruelly. But I could tell he never stopped respecting me. And that is something to prize.”*

July 13, 2005

Dear Dad,

I’m writing in response to your letter of June 14, 2004, more than a year ago, about your new book. Thank you—I enjoyed reading it and the enclosed chapter. I apologize for not answering sooner.

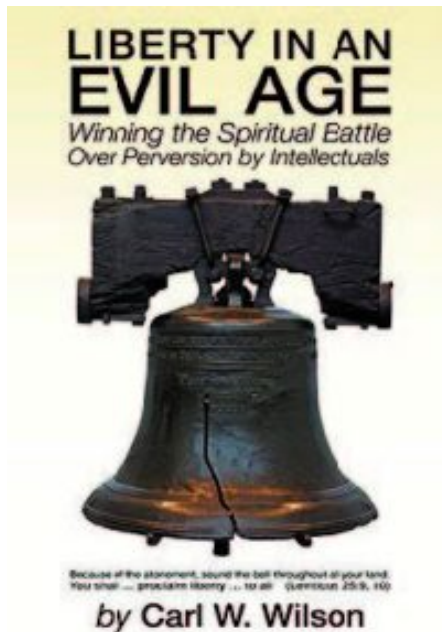
I realize that, according to the enclosed chapter, I am not part of

the book's intended audience. You say you are aiming it at Christian leaders to help them see what they're up against, to help them better understand the enemy, and to see the superiority of their own position (to see "the triumph of the wisdom of God"). So I am among the enemy that your audience is supposed to understand better and see itself as triumphing over. According to the book, I'm one of the intellectual elite, one of the university leaders who are—to use your terms—dishonest, hypocritical, self-righteous, arrogant, prejudiced, biased, and perverted. People like me are "committed to undercutting religion and giving people unbridled freedom to indulge their desires." According to your book, it isn't even worth aiming a book like this at people like me, since we won't get it.

One way of putting it is that your model isn't a bridge-building model of conversion; it's a Gestalt-shift model. All that you and other Christian leaders can do is preach the gospel and hope that we experience a Gestalt-shift in our view of ourselves and the world.

My putting it this way doesn't mean that I am bitter or angry. I'm simply using the language of your book. I don't take it personally. I understand the theological position that sets things up this way. But your setting it up this way does make it seem futile for me to even offer my thoughts on your book, since I am assuming the bridge-building model. I'm assuming that even though we disagree, we can find an area of commonality and come to understand one another better. And I'm assuming we can both be honest—that we can both want to know the truth, regardless of what it may be. A reader of your first chapter, however, would expect that if we disagreed, my ideas would not be judged on

their intellectual merits; rather, they would be dismissed as the product of a mind that is dishonest, hypocritical, self-righteous, arrogant, prejudiced, biased, and perverted. (Again, I am merely using your language.)



Not a very good starting point for a conversation, I suppose, but, nevertheless, I'll give it a try. After all, we know and love each other, and I'm comfortable asking you to make an effort to judge my thoughts on their own merits. Further, I don't expect to say anything that couldn't plausibly be said by a devout Christian who takes a different theological position from yours regarding how God might choose to work on nonbelievers and a different intellectual position from yours on the nature of science. Or, to put it in a way that I think would make sense to your project—I think my comments could make sense within your broader Gestalt. I have five disagreements in particular I'd like to describe.

1. Rhetoric of Name-Calling

My first concern is with your rhetoric. I'll call it the rhetoric of name-calling. Peppering your prose with these names for your

opponents (for example, “dishonest,” “hypocritical,” “self-righteous,” “arrogant,” “prejudiced,” “biased,” “perverted”) may comfort many of your readers. And it may seem to you and your readers to be entirely justified, since you think your opponents have called you similar names, which, on some sort of scale of justice, perhaps makes it OK to call names in return. But I do object to the rhetoric of name-calling, whether it’s used by those I agree or disagree with. (And when I do it, I shouldn’t.)

I think that it undermines the long-term effectiveness of your book—in the same way that this rhetoric similarly compromises the effectiveness of, say, Rush Limbaugh and Ann Coulter on the right and Michael Moore and Noam Chomsky on the left. My background view is that when people hold differing views (on religion, politics, or everyday matters), sometimes one or both is dishonest, but sometimes one or both has simply made an honest mistake. Cognitive psychologists (such as the recent Nobel winner Daniel Kahneman and his deceased partner Amos Tversky) have shown how we all use a well-defined set of cognitive heuristics that usually helps us but sometimes inadvertently leads us astray. And logicians have for centuries cataloged logical fallacies that can easily mislead even the most well-intentioned reasoner. Surely many of your opponents, insofar as they are indeed mistaken, have made honest mistakes. You may have made a few yourself. Instead of attacking your opponent’s motives—regarding which you can only speculate—why not critique the mistake itself? If it really is an honest mistake, you have avoided an unnecessary offense. If it is dishonest, your opponent may well appreciate your generosity of spirit and learn from what you say.

There are three specific ways I think this rhetoric undermines the long-term effectiveness of the book. First, attribution of bad motives will not only offend your opponent (something you seem to expect, owing to your opponent's sinful nature), but it will also *suggest even to those who agree with you that you sometimes jump to conclusions that go beyond the evidence—from the stated belief to the unstated motive*—thus raising questions about the reliability of your other arguments as well.

Second, such rhetoric can hurt you owing to the tone of anger, resentment, and bitterness that such rhetoric generates. I'm not saying you are angry, resentful, and bitter—just that such language conveys that tone. Note that when I used the same language to describe myself in my second paragraph, it sounded as though I too was angry, even though I was merely using your language to describe your picture of people like me. Because *anger and resentment can interfere with careful research and reflection*, name-calling is a clue to your more reflective readers—even those who are devout Christians—that they will probably not learn much from the substance of your work, and thus it may not be worth the effort to try.

This means that the readers who will pay more attention to your work are, in large part, the less reflective ones, the ones who are mainly looking for comfort and who are comforted by assurances that their opponents suffer from severe character flaws. This leads to my third point about how the rhetoric of name-calling may be unhelpful to you. It encourages those readers who do take you seriously to dismiss their opponents as people they can't learn from, making it harder for them to adopt the attitude that "I may not be perfectly right about every little thing, so let's talk to each

other, listen to each other, and see if we can learn from each other.” Those readers who stick with you may be rendered less likely to examine their own motives or their own reasoning; *you might thereby undermine the very intellectual honesty that you aim to promote.*

You may respond that the real reason people don't want to be called names is because they are sinful and don't want to hear the truth. That may be. But the points I have made are really about the ill effects of this approach on those who agree with you, not on those who are not Christians. So I hope that response isn't used as an easy way to ignore the three general points I've made above.

For these reasons, I regularly encourage my students to focus on motives only when they are critiquing themselves. When they are critiquing others, I encourage them to focus strictly on the quality of the arguments.

2. Original Intent of an Activity



Carl W. Wilson and David Carl Wilson.

You place a lot of emphasis in this chapter on your premise that science was originally intended as a means of understanding the creative activity of God. You then infer from that premise that science has gotten off track, indeed, has become perverted, since it now is only concerned with understanding natural laws. I don't see the force of that argument. More specifically, I don't see why the intentions of those who originally engaged in an activity have any bearing whatsoever on what the intentions ought to be of those who come later.

Writing was originally intended for keeping business records. Microwaves were originally intended for communication. The internet was originally intended for national defense. Chemistry grew out of alchemy, which was intended for the creation of precious metals out of ordinary materials. Easter may have originally been a pagan fertility celebration. I'm sure you wouldn't claim that any of these has gotten off track and should return to its origins. *Origins are historically fascinating, but they are not normative.*

3. What Is Science?

The chapter you sent me doesn't very clearly work out what science is and how it relates to religion. I think you are overlooking the fact that science *per se* is intrinsically neutral with respect to religious belief, regardless of who the scientist is and how the scientist behaves. The scientist may well report scientific results and then go on to say, "This leaves no room for God" or "This proves that there must be a god." Scientists often do that. *But that inference is not itself science.* Depending on the context,

it's perhaps philosophy, theology, or religion. The scientist certainly has the right to draw such an inference, but it should be clear to the scientist and everyone else that the inference itself is not scientific and thus gains no "scientific" credibility by virtue of having been uttered by a scientist. Please note that my point applies equally to the theistic and the nontheistic scientist. Also please note that I do not claim that the inference is irrational, unrespectable, or false. Just that it is not scientific. There is much that is rational, respectable, and true that is not scientific.

What is science? It is the attempt to understand whatever natural laws there may be that explain the world. More specifically, it is the attempt to do this *by means of appeals to explanations—or theories or hypotheses—that lend themselves to the making of specific predictions that can be empirically falsified or verified.* Carefully stated claims about natural laws can lend themselves to empirical experiments that provide the opportunity to test the claims. But this sort of empirical testing is normally not possible with claims about the supernatural. An appeal to the supernatural is typically an appeal to the miraculous, an appeal to the suspension of some natural law or other. The miraculous, by its very nature, does not lend itself to any prediction that can be empirically tested.

(As an aside, this is the short and simple reason "intelligent design" does not belong in biology textbooks—not because it is false, not because science rules it out, but because it calls for a miracle instead of a natural law, thus it does not lend itself to empirically testable predictions and thus belongs somewhere else in the curriculum. By analogy, history texts do not include "God's plan" as an alternative explanation for some historical event of

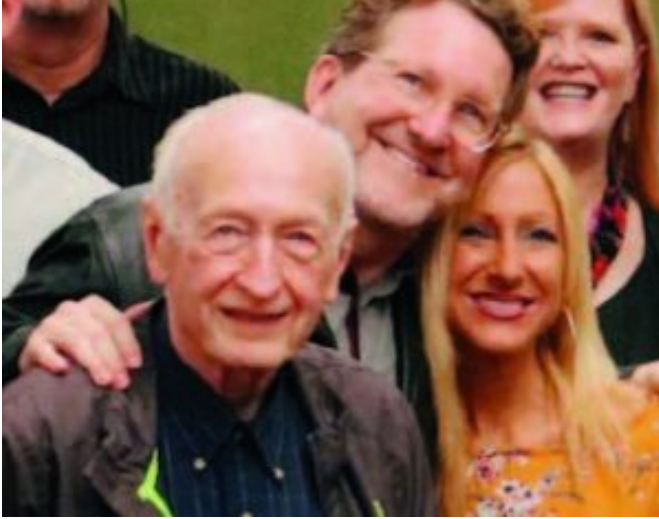
significance, since that could short-circuit our understanding of whatever natural causes there may be for the event. But the text's omission of that deeper explanation does not mean that history is opposed to God; historians and their readers are free to see the textbook's account as consistent with the belief that God is ultimately in the background carrying out his plan. Or not.)

Scientists can and do make all sorts of assumptions about things far beyond the realm of science. And their science often affects or is affected by these assumptions. But to the extent that scientists do this, they do it as philosophers, theologians, or human beings, not as scientists. Science *per se* doesn't, indeed can't, say that there is no supernatural or that the only possible explanations of the world are natural explanations. This is none of science's business. It may well be the business of someone who happens to be a scientist and who is thinking and speaking as a human being—but not as a scientist.

So this is not in and of itself a bias against God. Nor would it be a bias against, say, ethics, politics, or law to say that science *per se* cannot draw conclusions about ethics, politics, or law. As with the supernatural, scientists have the right to make claims about ethics, politics, and law, and often do. Their claims might be quite reasonable. But their claims are not rendered scientific by virtue of the fact that they are made in a scientific context by a scientist. They are scientific only if they are explanations that have produced and survived empirically testable predictions. Ethics, politics, and law (like religion) don't typically do that.

4. The Unexplained





The Wilson family.

My fourth concern has to do with your remarks about the extent to which science does not yet understand the world. I fully agree with you that what science hasn't yet explained probably weighs a lot more than the considerable amount it has explained. As the history of science shows, each new scientific explanation raises new questions—perhaps by challenging something else we had thought was long settled, perhaps by introducing new concepts that had not before been entertained, or perhaps by turning our attention to phenomena we had never before noticed. (To illustrate the latter with something I've just been reading about: plate tectonics emerged as the rather dramatic explanation for continental drift and then led us to new questions about how the newly discovered kingdom of one-celled monera at the perfectly dark deep sea joints of those lava-driven plates can live without photosynthesis.)

I also agree with you that the scientist who offers no explanations of the as-yet-unexplained is, in a way, no better off than someone who offers God as the explanation. They both are left with mystery.

I do not think, however, that it follows that it is therefore scientifically respectable to infer that God is the explanation, for reasons that I've given above. The supernatural, the miraculous, is not the business of science. As soon as you draw an inference that a miracle has occurred or has not occurred, you are beyond the domain of natural laws, beyond the arena of empirically testable predictions. It is the business of science to imaginatively conjecture new naturalistic explanations, formulate testable predictions, and test them. Science may or may not find new naturalistic explanations that pass the test. But searching for them is what science is all about.

So, such speculations about the presence or absence of the supernatural are really either philosophical or religious, not scientific. I do have concerns about such speculations from both the philosophical and the religious perspective. From the *philosophical* point of view, I cannot see why the absence of a good natural explanation could be a good reason to infer that the explanation must be supernatural or miraculous. The explanation *could* be supernatural, in which case science will never figure it out. It could be natural, in which case science may or may not figure it out. This does not mean the scientist must be an agnostic; in principle, there may be some other nonscientific but philosophically sound reason for believing that there is or is not a god who fills the explanatory gap. My point is simply that today's absence of an explanation is not a sound reason for rushing today to fill the gap. *The reasonable attitude, it seems to me, is the one that we find in most scientists—awe in the face of mystery, driving curiosity about the mystery, and the hope that a natural explanation can be found.*

You may object to my last point by saying that “the hope that a natural explanation can be found” indicates a bias against God, the hope that no god will be found. Not at all. It does, perhaps, indicate a bias (a bias of a weak sort—i.e., a hope, not a conviction) against a certain *sort* of god—against a god who created a world that lacked certain natural laws and thus that *required* his constant miraculous intervention. For theistic scientists, then, this bias would be a bias in favor of a god who established natural laws in a way that did not require (but, of course, did not prevent) his constant intervention—a god who *could* use cruise-control when he wished, but who felt free to manually override it whenever he chose to do so. Note that deism does not follow. Deism says that God *doesn't* get involved. The scientist I am describing says that God doesn't *have* to get involved. This hope, of course, is a bias that should be accompanied by the disclaimer “but my hope might be proven to be misguided.” Fortunately for all of us, such a mild bias has so far not been shown to be wrong since it has turned out to be extremely important in driving the great successes of science over the past several centuries.

I also have concerns from the *religious* point of view about invoking God as an alternative explanation for the as-yet-unexplained. It sets up a conflict between religion and science, presenting religion as threatened when science fills in an explanatory gap and as strengthened when science fails to fill such a gap. Why would the believer in God wish to set up such a tension? This tension has already tended to undermine religion, as science has dramatically claimed so many of these gaps in recent centuries. Why not embrace the march of science with the

confidence that there are fundamental things that science will never answer, since they are beyond the domain of science, and with the conviction that there is a god whose existence does not need to be proven by the “failures” of science? Science, for example, will never tell us why there is something rather than nothing. It will never tell us why we have *this* set of natural laws rather than some other set of natural laws. It will never tell us whether there is any broader meaning to life, bestowed by a meaning-giver who has orchestrated it all in mysterious ways that are by definition beyond the reach of science. And, of course, it will never tell us how to live a good and meaningful life or how to live well together.

Why say gleefully, “x is unexplained by science, so God must be the explanation”? *Why not say, instead, “God created the world for his purposes, established this set of natural laws—which we are still trying to understand—for his purposes and provides a way for people to live according to those purposes”?* With this point of view, religion may continue to be in tension with many *scientists*—the scientists who go beyond the realm of science to make claims that undercut the core set of religious beliefs I’ve just described. But it would not be in tension with science itself, nor would it set itself up to be undermined with each new scientific success, nor would it find itself in what I consider the embarrassing position of seeming to desperately need to find flaws in science.

5. The Higher Ed Conspiracy

Finally, I should remark upon your point about the conspiracy in higher education to eliminate Christians. I haven’t read the book

of yours that you refer your readers to, but I've certainly never heard of such a conspiracy. And I'm fairly deeply immersed in the world of higher education leadership. Most of the leaders I know in higher education are Christians (though some are Jewish or devotees of some other religion). I certainly have no aim of eliminating Christians—just ask any of my students or the team that reports to me. And I have never heard any other higher education leader express such a goal.

What I do see in leaders of higher education, and what I try to exhibit in my own activities as a professor and leader, is a commitment to fostering an environment in which those of any religious or nonreligious orientation are tolerant of one another, are prepared to learn from one another, and understand that there are vast areas of common understanding to be mastered and that there are attitudes of honesty and humility that can help us to build bridges to one another. I would call this the Ghandian approach to religion in the academy. Embrace your own religious tradition with respect and passion—but exhibit the same passion for making room for others to do the same with their tradition. And don't discourage that haunting inner suspicion that it's just possible you may be able to learn something from someone else.

I think you have misjudged your opposition. There are a few ill-willed and dishonest bullies in all camps, but many of us are trying hard to get it right. We are eager to learn and to get along and are happy to listen and discuss—especially if the conversational environment is one that is generous in the critique of motives and harsh only in the critique of ideas and arguments.

I apologize again for taking so long to respond. You can see why I often don't get a written answer to you at all. It's a big project. But

I do look forward to continuing the conversation.

Your loving son,

David

David Carl Wilson

David Carl Wilson earned his PhD in philosophy from UCLA, where he also taught for many years and served as associate provost. He served from 2002 until 2016 as dean of the College of Arts & Sciences at Webster University, where he is still professor of philosophy. His first publication, before becoming a nontheist in the 1970s, was several chapters he wrote for Josh McDowell's *More Evidence That Demands a Verdict*. His current work is in ethics, social philosophy, and the philosophy of leadership. A recent publication is the 2nd edition of *A Guide to Good Reasoning: Cultivating Intellectual Virtues*.