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SEVEN THINGS YOU SHOULD KNOW ABOUT UFOS

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As unlikely as it may at first have seemed, the UFO phenomenon appears to be going mainstream. For most evangelicals, belief in UFOs has been more a matter of amusement than concern, but in today's postmodern culture this movement needs to be taken seriously.

How should Christians address this seemingly preposterous, yet pressing issue? What should parents teach their children about aliens? How can youth workers answer the ET questions of their teenage congregations, and how can the Christian employee capably address this topic with his or her co-workers? Does church history provide any lessons for us? We should be aware of at least seven key issues while addressing those who believe in the existence of extraterrestrial intelligence.

1. IT'S NOT JUST A FRINGE BELIEF ANYMORE

No matter how far out belief in extraterrestrials may seem to some people, the fact is that belief in their existence has become both widespread and en vogue. In an issue of *Popular Mechanics*, Kenneth Neelson, a scientist on the National Academy of Sciences Subcommittee for Solar System Exploration, said, "The search of life is no longer a fringe type of thing."¹ Politicians, scientists, astronauts, and various celebrities (America's unofficial worldview spokespersons) concur that intelligent extraterrestrial life must exist within the universe and that it is "arrogant" to presume that humanity is the only intelligent life form. A survey by *USA Today* revealed that "61 percent of Americans say they believe humans are not the only life form in the galaxy."² (Interestingly, another survey revealed that six percent of Americans claimed to have actually seen a UFO first hand.³) Need more proof that UFOlogy has permeated the American worldview? Consider the following:

The American Public: A 2000 *USA Today* survey revealed that 43 percent of Americans believe UFOs are real.⁴

Astronaut Gordon Cooper: "I believe that these extraterrestrial vehicles and their crews are visiting this planet from other planets and are obviously more advanced than we are here on earth....Also, I did have occasion in 1951 to have two days of observation of many flights of them [UFOs], of different sizes, flying in higher formation, generally from east to west over Europe."⁵

U.S. Presidents:

Jimmy Carter: "I don't laugh at people anymore when they say they've seen UFOs. I've seen one myself."⁶

Gerald R. Ford (while in congress, 1966): "In the firm belief that the American public deserves a better explanation than that thus far given by the Air Force, I strongly recommend that there be a committee investigation of the UFO phenomena. I think we owe it to the people to establish credibility regarding UFOs, and to produce the greatest possible enlightenment of the subject."

U.S. Senator: A caller on *Larry King Live* asked Senator Barry Goldwater, "Do you believe that the government is withholding information on UFOs?"⁷ Goldwater replied, "Yes I do."

The U.S. Government: In 1992, the government authorized funding for NASA to search for artificial radio signals generated by extraterrestrial civilizations. Congress terminated the

program in 1993, but it is now operated privately and known as the SETI (Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence) Institute.

Scientist: Carl Sagan was perhaps one of the best-known scientists to have expressed a belief in the *possibility* of extraterrestrial intelligence.⁸ In 1977, he was instrumental in the launching of the Voyager spacecraft, which transports a gold-coated phonograph with recorded messages of music and sounds of Earth in the hope of communicating our existence to other beings.

It wasn't that long ago when an admission of the belief in aliens may have qualified a person as a candidate for an insane asylum. Today, such a confession may further advance one's chances in receiving a research grant or qualifying as a candidate in a Ph.D. program. The first step in addressing this phenomenon, therefore, is to recognize that it is considered a legitimate subject in a variety of mainstream circles. As ludicrous as this may sound, this recognition is essential for effectively ministering to the postmodern culture in which we now live. This is not to imply that we are to patronize their beliefs; rather, we are to treat them with the respect they deserve as human beings and so earn the right to be heard (1 Pet. 3:15).

2. PEOPLE REALLY ARE SEEING THINGS

I was one of many who witnessed what's now referred to as the "Phoenix Lights" incident. On the evening of 13 March 1997, hundreds of people in Arizona observed a very unusual formation of lights that was well documented by video and eyewitness accounts. The incident created a flurry of speculation concerning the nature of the lights, with the most popular being extraterrestrial. The Air Force acknowledged the occasion with the explanation that the lights were actually flares.

This was not the first time that such a report has received widespread attention. Fifty years earlier, in 1947, the term *flying saucer* entered the American lexicon when Ken Arnold reported seeing nine "flying saucers" near Mount Ranier, Washington, traveling at speeds well beyond the capabilities of any conventional aircraft at the time.⁹ His report received international coverage. Approximately one week later the so-called "Roswell Incident" took place, which also received international attention. Almost overnight, a foot was in the door for the emergence of a worldview that raised the question: Are beings from outer space visiting us?

Prior to the "Phoenix Lights," one of the best-documented and recorded UFO events in history occurred on New Year's Day, 1993, in Mexico City. In broad daylight, at approximately 2 P.M., a vast number of Mexico City residents reported a silvery, metallic object performing unusual aerial maneuvers above the city. Many observers documented the occurrence with camcorders. Local television and radio stations also provided coverage. The event even resulted in a minor traffic jam as drivers brought their vehicles to a stop to witness the object.

Military and airline personnel, engineers, air traffic controllers, police, and people of all walks of life across the globe have made UFO reports. It is true that a significant number of reports are hoaxes and intentionally fraudulent,¹⁰ but the fact remains that credible people are witnessing events that they cannot explain. We should, however, not conclude that because something is unidentifiable that it has extraterrestrial origins. Simply put, UFO does *not* equal ETI.

It must be remembered that UFO is an abbreviation for unidentified flying object. Mark the word *unidentified* and note that it is the term that the individual making the report ascribes to the flying object, which simply means that it is unidentifiable to the observer. In most cases, with minimal research, the object turns out to be quite explainable. With others, it may be a rare event, such as a satellite re-entry. With a few, it is the result of a hoax or the vivid imagination of "close encounter wanna bes."

3. NO HARD EVIDENCE SUGGESTS THAT THERE IS ETI

To date there is no nut, bolt, spaceship, carcass, or transmission to provide overwhelming and convincing proof that ETI exists. This is not to deny that credible people are seeing inexplicable aeronautical and cosmic incidents. It is noteworthy, however, that the vast majority of UFO reports are easily explainable.

This may not be the sensationalistic answer for which many people in our culture are looking, but the fact remains that the overwhelming majority of UFO reports have earthly origins.

For example, from 1947 to 1969, the United States Air Force officially studied UFOs under the name "Project Blue Book." The project, headquartered at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base, Ohio, was terminated on 17 December 1969. Of the 12,618 sightings reported, 11,917 (94 percent) were solved. The conclusions of the study were:

(1) no UFO reported, investigated, and evaluated by the Air Force was ever a threat to our national security; (2) there was no evidence submitted to, or discovered by, the USAF that sightings categorized as "unidentified" represented technological developments or principles beyond the range of modern scientific knowledge; and (3) *there was no evidence indicating that sightings categorized as "unidentified" were extraterrestrial vehicles.* (emphasis added)¹¹

What about Roswell? Like a lawyer yelling "objection," UFO enthusiasts are quick to point to Roswell as the smoking gun for proof of ETI. Most UFOlogists refer to Roswell as the undisputed site of a UFO crash landing covered up by the government. No doubt, something did crash in Roswell, New Mexico, in the summer of 1947. A little investigative work, however, reveals that although there was a crash and a military cover-up, this does not prove extraterrestrial involvement. Today, we know that the "crash" was actually the debris of a downed balloon for a top-secret military project referred to as "Project Mogul" from nearby White Sands, New Mexico. It was a pre-U-2 attempt to spy on Soviet Russia to ascertain their nuclear capabilities.¹² This prompted the initial controversy and suspicion since the Air Force couldn't reveal the details of the incident at the time and consequently reported that it was just the debris of a "weather balloon," and nothing more.

In the summer of 1947, lightning possibly struck one of those spy balloons, which then crashed on Mac Brazel's ranch. Some of the debris, indeed, did not look like anything Brazel or any non-Project Mogul personnel had ever seen before, but it was not extraterrestrial. Much of the debris, in fact, was comprised of very recognizable ingredients, such as tape and balsa wood. Over the years, Roswell witnesses confused other events in the area with the 8 July 1947 report of a recovered saucer, such as the testing of high-altitude parachute drops with dummies from the stratosphere (Project High Dive), the flights of test pilots (Project Excelsior), and numerous other aeronautical experiments.

The military has gone on record to state that many of the UFO reports are probably the result of experimental projects. The July 1997 issue of *Popular Mechanics* detailed how Air Force interest in duplicating Nazi technology led to two American flying discs. "Documents declassified since then point to a...secret project, a 40-ft. 'flying saucer' designed to rain nuclear destruction on the Soviet Union from 300 miles in space."¹³ UFO buffs, of course, quickly counter that such explanations arise from a conspiracy to cover up alien technology, but inductive reasoning points to aeronautical experiments related to national security. The burden of proof remains with the ETI proponents. To date, proof of ETI existence is nonexistent.

4. BIBLICAL REVELATION LENDS NO SUPPORT TO ETI

The Bible does not refer to intelligent life on other planets. The focus of the Bible, instead, is on humanity's need for redemption. When Jesus commissioned the disciples to preach the good news, He directed them to spread the gospel to the "uttermost parts of the *earth*" (emphasis added), not to the uttermost regions of the galaxy or universe (see Acts 1:8). One doesn't have to read between the lines to understand that God has a great interest in people on earth, whereas we have no specific revelation demonstrating God's interest in intelligent life outside of Earth. A dogmatic belief in ETI simply cannot be justified from Scripture.

The focus of the ministry of Jesus Christ, as well, is on the human race. The most famous verse of the New Testament probably is John 3:16: "For God so loved the *world*, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have eternal life" (NASB, emphasis added). It's true that the Greek word for "world" (*kosmos*) can also be translated as "universe," but the claim that this verse validates and biblically proves the existence of ETI is not only a massive stretch but also a hermeneutical

(rules of biblical interpretation) violation. First, the word “kosmos” is used in other places in the New Testament specifically to refer to humanity (see, e.g., John 1:9). Second, such an interpretation would be out of context with the entire Bible as a whole because its message is clearly focused on the human condition and need for redemption.

What about the “wheels” in Ezekiel? The passage referring to “wheels within wheels” (Ezek. 1:16) initially does indeed sound like an ancient UFO report, and UFO enthusiasts regularly cite this passage in an attempt to verify their claims of extraterrestrial interventions in the course of human history. A closer examination of the text, however, clearly demonstrates that Ezekiel was communicating a vision from God (vv. 26–28) and not an extraterrestrial visitation. Basic hermeneutic rules are violated when it’s assumed that the “wheels” of Ezekiel are spaceships.

First, we must read the passage within the entirety of its context. Second, we must attempt to interpret what the biblical author was communicating to his intended audience. With this in mind, we see that this passage inaugurates several *visions*.

Events seen in visions are not necessarily literal but often symbolic and metaphorical. In this case, the creatures and wheels are most likely representations of angels, who are presented as God’s attendants delivering a message for Israel from God to Ezekiel (cf. Isa. 6:2).

Some commentators concur that, among other things, the “wheels” are a vision to encourage Ezekiel by reminding him of God’s omnipresence. Since the Kebar River, the location of the vision, was probably south of Babylon and a place of prayer for the Jewish exiles, this vision would have been most appropriate at this site to remind Israel that wherever they went, God went, even to Babylon.

5. PROOF OF ETI WOULD NOT UNDERMINE CHRISTIANITY

Even if extraterrestrials do exist, God is their Creator, too. According to Genesis 1:1, “God created the heavens and the earth.” Such a discovery, therefore, would *not* nullify Christian doctrine but rather confirm the extent of God’s creative capabilities. From Scripture and from creation, we see clearly that God delights in His creativity. For example, when He created angels, He didn’t create just one type but rather many different kinds. It shouldn’t surprise Christians if other life forms exist in the universe. We should learn from the Copernican revolution and choose our battles wisely and avoid dogmatism with scientific issues that are not clearly articulated in Scripture. The bottom line for humanity, nevertheless, is that we on earth are spiritually corrupt and in need of a Savior for forgiveness and everlasting life that is available only through Jesus, regardless of the existence of ETI.

6. THE UFO PHENOMENON TENDS TO HAVE OCCULT QUALITIES

Due to the paranormal attributes of many UFO encounters, it can be logically argued that some supernaturally devious activity exists within the UFO phenomenon. Consider the following observations:

Evil Encounters. Speaking generally, UFO abduction encounters are not pleasant and wholesome experiences. For the most part, they are nightmarish events that often plague victims for years, if not for the rest of their lives. These abduction encounters are obviously not the work of benign and benevolent “space brothers.”

False Prophets. The aliens consistently proclaim a different gospel. The religion of these beings is typically a version of Eastern mysticism or New Age philosophy, which is, in actuality, very old — so old, that it goes back to the Garden of Eden with the temptation to “be like God” (Gen. 3:5). Paul warned the church in Galatia to beware of false teachings regardless of how impressive the source might be. “But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let him be eternally condemned!” (Gal. 1: 8).

There have been numerous reports of contact with aliens, and yet none thus far has acknowledged Jesus Christ as *the* Son of God. (If you know of any, please write and let me know about it.) They almost always

sanction various Eastern and New Age groups instead as their official spokespersons. A significant percentage of all alleged contactees have admitted to being involved in some form of occult beliefs or practices.¹⁴ It is therefore reasonable to presume that in some cases a spiritual dimension is within the UFO phenomenon, and it is obviously outside the presence, activity, and authority of the Holy Spirit.

7. THE UFO PHENOMENON IS INDICATIVE OF A SPIRITUAL QUEST

One of the characteristics of our postmodern society is spiritual curiosity. This helps explain why books such as *Left Behind* and *Harry Potter* that are poles apart in their worldviews can simultaneously share a secular bestseller list. The popularity of spiritual topics, in my opinion, is a reflection of a society that is hungry for meaning and purpose in life, which they mistakenly believe will be fulfilled via contact with extraterrestrial civilizations or proof that life exists outside of planet earth. In effect, for some, the search and hope for ETI amounts to a quest for an extraterrestrial savior.

We witnessed a glimmer of this perspective in 1996 with the premature announcement that evidence for life on Mars had been found in a meteorite known as ALH84001. President Bill Clinton said, "Today, rock 84001 speaks to us across all those billions of years and millions of miles. It speaks of the possibility of life. If this discovery is confirmed [it wasn't], it will surely be one of the most stunning insights into our universe that science has ever uncovered. Its implications are as far-reaching and awe-inspiring as can be imagined."¹⁵

In *Megatrends 2000*, John Naisbett accurately forecasted that the late nineties and early twenty-first century would experience an increased and renewed interest in spirituality, but that people would not necessarily seek out the mainline Christian denominations to have those needs met.¹⁶ He was right. Spirituality is big business. The typical secular bookstore has entire sections devoted to UFOs, Wicca, Eastern thought, and, yes, even Christianity. An article in the *New York Times Magazine* described this surge of interest as a "revival";¹⁷ although the "revival" is not within Christianity per se, the church should recognize its unique position in being the only candidate capable of truly meeting this need. The church should, therefore, equip its members to translate the Gospel into a vernacular that the spiritually curious can understand.

We have seen, then, that the proof for ETI is deficient and lacking. Regardless of the existence of ETI, humanity needs redemption, which is exclusively available through Jesus Christ. The presupposition that an advanced alien race could solve the world's problems is misleading and deceptive. Such a hope is a cloud without rain. Christ alone is able to provide a solution to the problem of sin, and we have been commissioned to spread this good news to the uttermost parts of our planet. We must focus our attention on the Gospel.

NOTES

1. Kenneth Neelson, *Popular Mechanics*, July 1999, 66.
2. *USA Today (Snapshots)*, 9 March 2001.
3. *USA Today (Life)*, 16 February 2000.
4. Bob Laird, *USA Today* (Life section), 16 March 2000, 1.
5. Gordon Cooper's 14 July 1978 letter to the United Nations, published in Timothy Gord, *Above Top Secret* (New York: William Morrow Co., 1988), 378-79.
6. Buck Wolf, "Carter's Close Encounters," *ABCNews.com*, <http://abcnews.go.com/sections/us/dailynews/ufo990122.html>. In 1969, Jimmy Carter and several others claimed to have witnessed a UFO outside a Lion's Club, which appears to have most likely been the planet Venus. I realize this sounds a bit ludicrous at first, but as an amateur astronomer I can attest to the unique brightness of Venus at various times of the year, which has made it the source of numerous UFO reports over the years.
7. *Larry King Live*, 13 October 1988.
8. ET is an abbreviation for extraterrestrial, which implies nonearthly biological life but not necessarily intelligent life. ETI, on the other hand, is an abbreviation for extraterrestrial intelligence, which is a reference to life forms capable of making intelligent decisions.
9. Arnold said the flight pattern of the objects was "like a saucer would if you skipped it across the water." Quoted in John Spencer, ed., *The UFO Encyclopedia* (New York: Avon Books, 1991), s.v. "Arnold, Kenneth."
10. Today's technology has further simplified the ability to create a UFO hoax.

11. *The US Government and Unidentified Flying Objects*, NASA Fact Sheet 2000-01-015-HQ (<http://www.hq.nasa.gov/office/pao/facts/HTML/FS-015-HQ.html>).
12. The USAF officially released this information in a now out-of-print book entitled *The Roswell Report*, published by the U.S. Government Printing Office in 1997.
13. "America's Nuclear Flying Saucer," *Popular Mechanics*, November 2000, 68.
14. John Ankerberg and John Weldon, *The Facts on UFOs and Other Spiritual Phenomena* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 1992).
15. Quoted in *FYI: The American Institute of Physics Bulletin of Science Policy News*, no. 122, 9 August 1996.
16. John Naisbitt, *Megatrends 2000* (New York: Avon Books, 1990), 290.
17. Jack Miles, "Religion Makes a Comeback," *New York Times Magazine*, 12 December 1997.

We should be aware of at least seven key issues while addressing those who believe in the existence of extraterrestrial intelligence. 1. It's not just a fringe belief anymore. No matter how far out belief in extraterrestrials may seem to some people, the fact is that belief in their existence has become both widespread and en vogue. 2. people really are seeing things. I was one of many who witnessed what's now referred to as the "Phoenix Lights" incident. On the evening of 13 March 1997, hundreds of people in Arizona observed a very unusual formation of lights that was well documented by video and eyewitness accounts.