

INTRODUCTION

The Undiscovered Country

My first step toward discovering *The Gospel According to Star Trek* was walking away from Star Trek.

Growing up, I was a huge Trekkie. That probably had a lot to do with when I became aware of Star Trek. I'd seen the Original Series on late-night television and thought it was pretty hokey. Was I really supposed to believe that those brightly colored wooden blocks that people loosely stuck into slots on the *Enterprise* were data tapes? That a twenty-third-century computer would make mechanical noises? I thought it looked pretty laughable. But I hadn't seen much of it and, despite my inability to forgive what seemed like outdated visual effects, I thought the concept was great.

So, when *Star Trek: The Next Generation* was announced, I was very excited. Finally! A Star Trek series that would actually look good! (At the time, I clearly had no appreciation for the artistry and skill demonstrated on the original *Star Trek*. Forgive me. I was eight.) Eagerly anticipating the quality and credibility of 1980s sets, costumes, and visual effects, I was counting the days until the series premiered. I honestly don't remember watching "Encounter at Farpoint" for the first time. But I stayed with *Next Generation* into my teens and around Trek's twenty-fifth anniversary, I got into the original crew movies, which I loved. I even got the first Star Trek Christmas ornament, the Original Series *Enterprise*, released in celebration of the anniversary. I got a new ship each year and strung up Christmas lights in my bedroom's box window so I could leave them up year-round.

But, somewhere around the fifth season of *TNG*, I started watching less. *Deep Space Nine* was beginning and I was trying to learn to like it. But I was getting busy with school and other obligations and started missing episodes. As I fell behind in my viewing, it became harder and harder to catch

up through reruns. By the time *Voyager* premiered, I had mostly stopped watching new episodes and once *TNG* was off the air, I didn't keep up with *Deep Space Nine* and maybe saw part of one episode of *Voyager*. This was the beginning of, essentially, a fourteen-year Star Trek hiatus, during which I watched none of the series and only got out to see the movies. After I saw *Star Trek: Insurrection*, however, I wondered if seeing the movies would continue to be worthwhile. Finally, *Nemesis* looked like it might be better than its predecessor and I wanted to see it, but somehow never got around to it.

I still loved the series and the films, but I just wasn't that (ahem) *engaged*. The reasons for this are hard to pin down, but I felt that Star Trek had grown too fast and in too many directions for me to keep up with it. Someday, I expected I would return, but I didn't know when. I'm ashamed to admit this, but during this period, I even stopped collecting the Star Trek Christmas ornaments. (Insert years of painful regret here.) I wasn't against Star Trek; I just wasn't as close to it as I had been.

My flagging faithfulness aside, remnants of my fandom lurked beneath the surface and even emerged from time to time, mostly when there was a Trek film in theatres. That is, with the exception of *Nemesis* in 2002, which I neglected to see, though I did purchase the first season of *TNG* on DVD when it was released that same year. While it didn't herald the return to full Trekkie status I'd hoped for, watching it certainly spurred some renewed Trek interest. So, I started collecting the movies in that format as well, though I didn't watch them. I gathered them slowly because I was only buying used and was very stingy on the price. Ultimately, my collection lacked two films—*Generations* and *Nemesis*. This remained the case for quite some time.

Then in 2008, while I was serving as a live-in caregiver for my grandfather-in-law, I finally found the two remaining films cheaply enough and bought them. A few nights later at Granddad's house, having not seen a minute of Star Trek in six years, I suddenly had the strongest urge to return. I missed the characters, the universe, the stories. I wanted to experience everything I'd not seen before. I wanted to be a Trekkie again.

The only Star Trek DVDs I had with me that night were *Generations* and *Nemesis*, because I had neglected to take them back to my house. I hadn't liked *Generations*, but wanted some lead-in to the final screen voyage of Picard and crew, so it would have to do. It was still not the strongest film in the franchise, but *it was Star Trek!* Despite the film's weaknesses,

it was like a grand reunion with old friends. I was in love with Star Trek all over again. The next night, I would finally get to see *Nemesis*. I could barely stand the anticipation. The day couldn't be over fast enough. I got my grandfather-in-law to bed and went straight for the den. It was Star Trek time!

I had so much fun seeing a brand-new adventure with all my old *Next Generation* friends that I was totally blind to the film's shortcomings. All I saw were my favorite Trek actors, more seasoned and adept than ever at bringing life to my favorite Trek characters. I saw cool new uniforms, beautiful sets, and sleek visual effects, underscored by awesome Jerry Goldsmith music. I was loving every second. It was funny, adventurous, high stakes, and exciting! Who could ask for more? I couldn't have been happier or, ultimately, more emotionally responsive. Something about that film—as flawed as I would later see that it is—affected me very deeply.

And then it occurred to me: Data was a Christ figure.

Here I must explain that, in the intervening years between my gradual exit from the Star Trek universe and my triumphant, tearful return, I had undergone what I have since referred to as a worldview conversion. In particular, this conversion had to do with the broadening, deepening, and strengthening of my understanding of a Christian worldview. I had grown up in an Assemblies of God church at which my great aunt, who had founded the church with her late husband, was pastor, my grandmother led the singing, and my mother played the piano. So I was no stranger to the gospel. I had decided to follow Christ not a year before I got into Star Trek and had been very involved with youth ministry at the Baptist church my family was later a part of.

After high school, I started working at the largest Christian bookstore in America and attending an upstart college ministry/church plant based on engaging postmodern culture and philosophy and rethinking our ideas of what the Church truly is. (This would later be called an “emergent” church, but there was no such terminology at that time and present-day emergent churches are much different from what we did.) These experiences combined to interest me further in reading and writing, in philosophy, theology and, in particular, Christology. But all that crystallized when I went to Dallas Baptist University.

I was attending on a scholarship my grandfather-in-law provided for all his grandchildren, as well as for many other students. I was a Communications major and went simply to get a degree to hang on the wall so I could

get a better job in video production or film. But, when I had the opportunity to take Intro to Philosophy, I thought it would be a good extension of what I was already exploring at my church and at the store. On the first day of class, Dr. David Naugle gave a lecture, of which I do not remember a word. What I do remember, though, is that he opened my eyes to the real value of education, not just for furthering my career, but for becoming a better human being and a better Christian. He revealed to me that, at their best, intellectual pursuits are spiritual pursuits. After class, I went directly to my advisor to ask how I could change my major. In short order, I was earning an interdisciplinary degree in Communication and Philosophy.

I took every course taught by Dr. Naugle I could from that time forward, all the way through my graduate degree. I became a member of his Paideia College Society and presented papers at every annual Paideia conference. The process was endlessly exciting, enriching, and life-changing. It was this experience that finally pushed me to realize that I wanted to be a career author and speaker and led me to teach at DBU after I graduated. It was also this experience that caused all the interests, talents, and ideas that had been in my head for so long to lock together into a vision of who I was and who I was becoming. In this reality, I saw all things as under the dominion of Christ and shot through with God's story. It was with these new eyes, this new understanding, that I came back to Star Trek.

I'd been writing on media and pop culture almost exclusively throughout my time at DBU, even becoming a film critic for a Baptist newspaper. So I had become quite adept at putting my Christian worldview into conversation with films, television, and music. But, for whatever reason, it had never occurred to me to look at Star Trek in this way. So, after seeing *Nemesis* and realizing that Data was reflecting Jesus, I wanted to explore further. I decided to go through the entirety of *Next Generation* and watch Data develop as a character. Would I see any glimmers of what was to come? Would I find other parallels between Data and Christ? I expected I would, and therefore intended to write my next Paideia paper on the subject.

Before I could finish *Next Generation*, the first J.J. Abrams Star Trek film was on its way to theatres, so I decided to take a break from *TNG* to get up to speed on the Original Series before seeing the reboot. As I went through both series and the new film, I began looking at all of Star Trek—not just Data—with my Christian worldview lenses on. My paper was soon no longer about Data, but about what I was seeing in Star Trek and how it was deepening and informing my faith. Everywhere I looked, I saw the

philosophy, theology, and critical thinking I had done over the previous several years reflected. I saw parallel after parallel with Scripture and with a Christian worldview. In fact, I saw things in Star Trek that I felt the Church had lost and needed to hear, holes in our understanding and practice of the gospel that Star Trek's spiritual humanism directly and cogently addressed.

When I wrote that first paper, "The Undiscovered Country: Star Trek and the Christian's Human Journey," I knew it was the beginning of a book. So, to help me further my research and writing and to build a platform from which to share that book, I started The Undiscovered Country Project, which I termed my "ongoing voyage through Star Trek from a Christian worldview perspective." With the help of my good friend and UCP First Officer, Tim Van Orden, I launched a blog and a series of audio commentaries on the Original Series, *TNG*, and the Star Trek films. With the help of my other good friend and colleague Jeff Sellars, that original paper was expanded and published in Jeff's book, *Light Shining in a Dark Place: Discovering Theology Through Film*.

From its inception, *The Undiscovered Country* was the intended title of the book you are now reading. That plan changed while I was doing research on competing titles for my book proposal. At some point I realized that, while I was familiar with many of the titles and authors in the field of Star Trek and religion, I had no idea who had written *The Gospel According to Star Trek*. For those who may be unfamiliar, books whose titles begin with *The Gospel According to . . .* are practically their own sub-genre, perhaps comprising the cornerstone of books discussing media and pop culture from a Christian perspective. There are *Gospel According to . . .* titles from various publishers on everything from Harry Potter and the Beatles to Superman and Dr. Seuss. I knew the names of many of these books' authors: Connie Neal, Mark I. Pinsky, and the man who, it could be argued, started it all with *The Gospel According to Peanuts*, Robert L. Short. Somehow, though, the name of the author of *The Gospel According to Star Trek* had eluded me.

So, I looked it up. And, to my surprise, I didn't find it. I had been certain there was such a book. There was a *Gospel According to Science Fiction* and a *Gospel According to Star Wars*, but no *Gospel According to Star Trek*? This was just wrong. To that point, I had considered *The Gospel According to . . .* an overused title trope. I respected the genre, but thought the title was a bit of an easy grab. Now, however, *The Gospel According to Star Trek* was

not a corny title. It was my mission. There was no *Gospel According to Star Trek* because I hadn't written it yet!

So, here we are. Eight years after I began this journey, I'm writing the book I've envisioned for so long. And it's only the first one. In these pages, you'll find my examination of the stories of the original crew—Kirk, Spock, McCoy, and their compatriots. It is the beginning of a journey that will include a book for every *Star Trek* series. I'll be employing a number of interpretive and analytical methods, from applying *Star Trek's* humanism to a Christian worldview and vice versa, to discussing the influence of Scripture on *Star Trek's* stories, to clarifying and exploring the spiritual beliefs of the series' creator, to finding surprisingly deep—if wholly unintentional—metaphors within its narratives. The varieties of approaches reflected in this book are a natural result of the variety of ways in which I have been able to engage my Christian worldview with the *Star Trek* universe. And it's just the beginning.

This book is an introduction, a survey. It represents the broadest possible glimpse of the richness available in a Christian engagement with the original crew stories of *Star Trek*—including the latest versions of those stories in the “Kelvin Timeline” films. Granted, *Star Trek* itself is a vast topic and one that I am still exploring. I am writing this book and all the subsequent books in this series, not from the place of having arrived, but from a place of still being very much on the journey. I feel comfortable doing this because, in many ways, I expect to always be in the process of discovery. Conventional wisdom tells us that one would need to have “arrived” as an “expert” to be able to write a book of such broad scope as this one. Experience tells us, however—as does *Star Trek*—that none of us ever arrive. We are always on a continuing voyage of learning and growth.

After fifty years, six (soon to be seven) television series and thirteen films, the *Trek* universe is a wide and varied place to explore. So, in a sense, *The Gospel According to Star Trek* series is itself a trek. It is a journey through a complex network of stories and characters, and a continuing series of philosophical discussions, big questions, and even bigger answers. It is, ultimately, a human journey and one that, for me, has been incredibly encouraging and enriching for my faith—not in the confines of church and religion, but in the whole of life. That's really what we're here to discover: a whole-life gospel that is for everyone, that doesn't hide from or shun humanity, but embraces it as God's very good work. As *Star Trek* seeks to

understand what it means to be human, it provides us with some essential elements of what it means to be human to the glory of God.

If you're a Christian, I hope this book series deepens and encourages your faith in Christ and your appreciation of Star Trek and its values. If you're not, I hope it helps you see that the things we love about Star Trek are deep within us as human beings and that there may in fact be a reason for that. If nothing else, I hope my story, my journey as reflected in this series, will in some way help you as you explore the undiscovered country at the heart of the gospel and at the heart of Star Trek: the human soul.

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