Alex Trebek and the game show *Jeopardy!* have been a staple in American culture for almost 35 years. What are the reasons behind their endurance and mass appeal? What parallels can we draw between Alex Trebek’s show and the Christian journey?

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A Cultural Touchstone

Since the introduction of its current iteration in 1984, the game show *Jeopardy!* has been entertaining, exciting, and educating audiences on a daily basis. Over 35 seasons, the show has received 34 Emmy Awards and a Peabody Award. In 2013, it was named one of the 60 greatest television shows by *TV Guide* magazine. Recently, Alex Trebek, the 78-year-old host of *Jeopardy!*, announced that he had been diagnosed with stage IV pancreatic cancer. The announcement prompted widespread reflection about the enduring appeal of the show, its host, and the place of *Jeopardy!* in our cultural landscape.

Even if you’ve somehow never seen an episode of *Jeopardy!*, you’re likely familiar with its impact on our culture. From the contestants’ answers in the form of a question to the iconic “Think!” music that accompanies Final Jeopardy, *Jeopardy!* is more than a game show; it’s a cultural touchstone. The show has been parodied, imitated, and featured in sitcoms (*The Golden Girls, Cheers*), sketch comedy shows (*Saturday Night Live*), and movies (*Groundhog Day, Men in Black, Die Hard*). Due to its familiarity and ubiquity, it’s an easily recognizable and accessible reference; and in our present moment of cultural division, it’s refreshingly neutral.

The early 2000s kicked off the current Golden Age of Television, when networks and streaming services focused on telling complex, morally bleak stories over the course of multiple seasons. Shows like *Mad Men, The Sopranos*, and *Breaking Bad* became must-watch...
television and inspired a generation of similarly immersive shows. Despite their popularity, the themes and content of these shows were frequently dark and not appropriate for the entire family. Game shows like Jeopardy!, in contrast, are diametrically opposed to these critically acclaimed dramas—and yet Jeopardy! continues to draw audiences on a daily basis.

Among game shows in particular, Jeopardy! is countercultural. The show celebrates knowledge and intelligence across a vast expanse of topics, and the contestants are delightfully normal in their quirky awkwardness. For many, these 30 minutes every day provide an escape from the doom and gloom of the evening news; and considering the world outside our doors, the stakes are relatively low for those of us watching at home. The comfort and constant presence of Jeopardy! as a daily ritual have surely contributed to its longevity and popularity.

REFLECT:
• Are you a Jeopardy! fan? If so, what’s appealing to you about the show?
• Can you recall other places where you’ve encountered imitations or send-ups of Jeopardy!?
• Do you enjoy playing trivia-type games? Why or why not?

“And Now, Your Host, Alex Trebek”

After 35 years hosting the same show, Alex Trebek and Jeopardy! have practically become synonymous, and Trebek has become a cultural icon. With the announcement of his pancreatic cancer diagnosis, people were forced to imagine Jeopardy! without Alex Trebek at the helm and began to consider his legacy. On Twitter, Ken Jennings, the contestant with the longest consecutive streak of wins, called Trebek “the last Cronkite: authoritative, reassuring TV voice you hear every night, almost to the point of ritual.”

Though there are notable differences between a news anchor and a game show host, Jennings accurately articulated a few of the traits that have made Trebek and the show itself so successful. Particularly at a time when news coverage is divided by political persuasion and “fake news” infects the Internet, the factual clarity of Jeopardy! answers is reassuring. Trebek himself is middle-of-the-road and authoritative without being stiff, displaying both balance and consistency while peppering in the occasional wry joke. His energy matches that of the show, and he inhabits his masculinity in a manner similar to Fred Rogers, coming across neither toxic nor threatening.

Given his lengthy time in the public eye, the Canadian-American’s lack of scandal is also notable. His success has led to appearances as himself on television shows and in movies as well as professional recognition, including a Lifetime Achievement Daytime Emmy Award and honors from his home country of Canada. Trebek also holds the Guinness World Record for most game show episodes hosted by the same presenter (same program), surpassing The Price Is Right host Bob Barker.

REFLECT:
• What do you find appealing about Alex Trebek? Why do you think he has had such an impact on our culture?
• Do you think we’re more likely to trust people who look like Alex Trebek, Walter Cronkite, and Fred Rogers? Why or why not?
• In our current economy, most people change jobs many times over the course of their career. What advantages are there to having the same job for decades?

Jeopardy! and Faith

If you watch Jeopardy! for any length of time, you will inevitably see questions that touch on the Bible or Christian history, even though it obviously isn’t an explicitly Christian show. Over the 35 seasons of the show, some of the contestants have even been religious leaders like pastors and rabbis. Geoffrey Mitelman, a former contestant and Reform Jewish rabbi, helped to organize an
interfaith prayer service for Trebek in the wake of his diagnosis. As clergy myself, I can understand why some ordained leaders end up on the show, as I too have acquired a lot of trivial information over the years from reading broadly and talking to many different kinds of people.

Additionally, Alex Trebek’s tenure and demeanor remind me of some of the best pastoral leaders I’ve known. The upsides to a long residency are clear—a strong impact on the culture and an ability to build up trust—but the downsides become evident when it’s time to leave. Like Bob Barker retiring from *The Price Is Right*, it’s difficult to imagine what will happen when Trebek leaves *Jeopardy*! The show must go on—or must it? Any new host will be compared, and rarely positively, to the old one in the same way that a new pastor coming after a beloved longtime one is often found wanting.

With the deaths and retirements of many trusted and authoritative cultural figures, there seems to be a sea change afoot. Between a multiplicity of cable networks and streaming services, we can each have our viewpoints and tastes catered to without the kind of communal experience a news program or game show allows. This, in turn, can make it harder to relate to one another.

**REFLECT:**
- What qualities might a cultural figure or other authoritative voice need to have today that differ from times in the past?
- Do you think it’s better to have church leaders with longer tenures or shorter ones? Why?

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**Core Bible Passages**

*Jeopardy!* and other trivia-based games frequently test the knowledge of contestants based on the premise that the person who knows the most is the smartest. In the same way, our broader culture equates intelligence with measurable outcomes like high grades in school and high standardized test scores. In contrast, the Bible speaks more about the virtue of wisdom than it does about knowledge. As British journalist and musician Miles Kington put it, “Knowledge is knowing a tomato is a fruit; wisdom is not putting it in a fruit salad.”

There is a whole category of Scripture referred to as Wisdom Literature, though *Proverbs* might be the book best associated with this tradition. In the first nine chapters, Wisdom is anthropomorphized and portrayed as a woman. Historically, this rendering of Wisdom is commonly associated with the second person of the Trinity. As Woman Wisdom says in *Proverbs 9:10*, “The beginning of wisdom is the fear of the Lord; the knowledge of the holy one is understanding.”

Throughout the Bible, we learn that true wisdom originates with God through Christ. Nowhere is this more clear than in 1 Corinthians 1:24-25: “But to those who are called—both Jews and Greeks—Christ is God’s power and God’s wisdom. This is because the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength.” However intelligent we may think we are and however much knowledge we might accumulate, our ultimate pursuit should be the wisdom of God.

**REFLECT:**
- What are the differences between wisdom and knowledge? What characteristics make someone smart?
- In what ways are wisdom, knowledge, and faith in God connected in the Christian journey?
Cancer and Battle Language

When Alex Trebek released a video sharing his diagnosis of stage IV pancreatic cancer, he admitted that the prognosis wasn’t good but, with his trademark humor, added that he planned to fight and beat his cancer, in part because he was contracted to host *Jeopardy!* for another three seasons. According to the American Cancer Society, pancreatic cancer across all stages has an average five-year survival rate of nine percent.

While Trebek’s insistence on remaining positive and seeking treatment was inspiring to some, the language that we frequently use about cancer patients (and that some cancer patients use for themselves) has received some recent criticism. When talking about cancer, people use terms like *battle* or *fight*, while other diseases are merely treated. And if the cancer “wins,” is it due to the patient not fighting hard enough? As journalist and commentator Xeni Jardin put it in an opinion piece for CNN, “Cancer, I soon learned, is my own cells going rogue. Suddenly all the combat language was confusing. Am I the invading army or the battleground?”

Others with a similar prognosis to Trebek’s may choose more palliative options, but that doesn’t mean they’re bad soldiers in the war against cancer. Death will eventually come for us all, and making peace with that process is also beneficial.

**REFLECT:**
- If you or someone you love has had a cancer diagnosis, was the “fighting” metaphor helpful or harmful?
- “Fighting” cancer often comes with serious side effects. How might someone’s end-of-life goals lead them to avoid some treatment options?

United Methodist Perspective

John Wesley once preached a sermon entitled “The Wisdom of God’s Counsels” based around Romans 11:33, which says, “God’s riches, wisdom, and knowledge are so deep!” In the sermon, he expounds upon the differences between God’s wisdom and God’s knowledge and argues that “the riches both of the wisdom and the knowledge of God are most eminently displayed in his Church.” Wesley then takes his audience through the history of the church, from God’s wisdom taking shape in laying the foundation in Christ’s incarnation until it appeared on Pentecost to the disputes between the early apostles, through the founding of the church in Great Britain, the Reformation, and its aftermath.

Far from portraying the church as infallible, Wesley preaches that God’s wisdom is evident in the raising up of new, zealous preachers when the old ones have fallen away from the gospel. By this, God repairs the decay of God’s work. Using the surety of God’s wisdom, Wesley provokes the complacent with the fear that they will be replaced by others whom God is raising up and pouring out God’s Spirit upon. In God’s wisdom, God continues to work in the world through grace, in both the spiritual and the natural world, by repairing the decay brought about by forces of evil.

**REFLECT:**
- How do you see God’s wisdom manifest in the created world and in the past history and present nature of the church?
- In what ways are forces of evil opposed to God’s wisdom?
- How is God’s wisdom qualitatively and quantitatively different from human wisdom?
Helpful Links


• Alex Trebek’s recent video announcing his cancer diagnosis and his intention to keep hosting *Jeopardy!*: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7cInGyxCY9k

• Religion News Service article about how the interfaith prayer vigil for Trebek came about: http://tiny.cc/4hj4y

• An article where individuals react to the words that frequently get used in the face of cancer diagnosis and treatment: http://tiny.cc/agfj4y

• A brief but comprehensive biography of Trebek’s professional and personal life: https://www.goodhousekeeping.com/life/entertainment/a22593703/alex-trebek-net-worth-wife/

• Fifty different Bible trivia questions: https://www.signupgenius.com/church/bible-trivia-questions.cfm

• John Wesley’s sermon “The Wisdom of God’s Counsels”: http://tiny.cc/7vfj4y

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**Next Week in**

**The Persistence of Print**

by Alex Joyner

According to recent articles, sales of printed books have risen while e-book sales have stalled. Why are we still so attached to books as physical objects? What does this trend mean for Christians, who are sometimes called “People of the Book”?

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Opening Prayer

Eternal triune God, you are the source of all wisdom and the fount of all knowledge. Be with us as we gather, learn, and discuss together, that we might grow in knowledge and love of you; in the name of Jesus. Amen.

Leader Helps

• Open the session with the provided prayer or one of your own.
• Have several Bibles on hand and a markerboard and markers for writing lists or responses to reflection questions.
• Remind the group that people have different perspectives and to honor these differences by treating one another with respect as you explore this topic together.
• Read or review highlights of each section of this issue. Use the REFLECT questions to stimulate discussion.
• Have a short Bible study based around the Book of Proverbs. Encourage participants to share their favorite verses from Proverbs and how this wisdom affects their lives. Alternatively, have participants look through the first nine chapters of Proverbs for the ways Wisdom (personified as a woman) is described.
• Invite participants to share their experiences with cancer, especially their personal or family experiences, if they feel comfortable doing so. Discuss how they handled the diagnosis and treatment and how they shared this information with those close to them.
• Close the session with the provided prayer or one of your own.

Teaching Alternatives

• Watch an episode of Jeopardy! as a group, particularly if you can find one featuring Bible or church history categories. Alternatively, put together a congregational trivia night with a Jeopardy!-style format with questions about your community’s history and lore.
• Interview a member of your congregation whom you view as embodying wisdom. What is it about how they live their lives that gives them this quality? Do they think of themselves as wise? What is the source of their wisdom?

Closing Prayer

O God, by whom the meek are guided in judgment and light rises up in darkness for the godly, grant us, in all our doubts and uncertainties, the grace to ask what you would have us to do, that the Spirit of Wisdom may save us from all false choices, and in your light we may see light, and in your straight path may not stumble; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.