Wes Huff – Billy Carson Debate

A significant corner of the internet recently (October 28, 2024) blew up with a debate between Christian apologist Wes Huff and popular skeptic Billy Carson when their online debate went viral. Kyle Skaggs provides context and understanding.

In recent years, social media platforms that allow monetized live streaming services like Twitch and YouTube have gained significant importance. While live streaming first became popular for gaming content on Twitch, it quickly expanded its scope to more diverse mediums of engagement, the latest of which is the academic world.

The interactive format allows experts and enthusiasts to engage with diverse audiences in real-time, creating a more accessible form of dialogue. Live streaming services are slowly evolving into a hub for philosophical, religious, and ethical debates.

This year started with a debate over the reliability of the Scriptures, and the uniqueness and goodness of the Christian worldview went viral. So, why did it resonate with so many people, what happened during the debate, and what can it teach us about apologetics?

First, the popularity of streaming services on Twitch and YouTube among Millennials and Gen Z cannot be understated. For people my age and younger, these platforms are the most common way to learn different philosophies and worldviews rather than the classroom.

The Billy Carson–Wes Huff debate was initially to be between Carson, a popular Bible conspiracy theorist, and his friend Mark. Mark, believing he was not knowledgeable enough to do the subject matter justice, asked Director of Apologetics

Canada, Wes Huff, if he would debate Carson while Mark moderated.

Huff thoroughly dismantled each of Carson's arguments with historical and literary evidence. Shortly afterwards, Carson demanded Mark not to post the debate, a request that was ignored. Carson is now trying to sue Huff. The debate was already popular due to Carson and Mark's substantial audiences, and it further went viral after Huff was invited to speak about it on Joe Rogan's podcast.

Much of the debate's three-hour runtime is padded out by the host, who tends to lead the conversation on tangents, and his statements largely add little to the debate. This, paired with his habit of over-explaining and repeating his questions, causes the debate to drag in places. However, this is offset by the quality content produced between Carson and Huff.

The topics covered are the inspiration and reliability of the scriptures, and the Christian worldview. The first point of the debate was the crucifixion of Jesus. Carson explained that the Gospel of Barnabas, which predates the KJV, does not mention the crucifixion. Furthermore, the Gospel of Jesus's Wife, while controversial, is believed to be an accurate record that Jesus may have been married. This places the crucifixion in doubt.

Huff counters that the Gospel of Barnabas is a known forgery. We know it is a forgery because it is clear the author has no knowledge of the region, customs, and time of the first century. The author also paraphrased Dante's *Inferno*. Internal evidence heavily suggests a medieval date, not to mention the only two copies of it are in late medieval Spanish and Italian.

Carson claims parts of the Genesis story are copied verbatim from the Enuma Eilish (an ancient Babylonian creation myth), Sumerian cylinder scrolls, and other ancient texts. When Huff

asks him to summarize the Enuma Eilish Carson does so, but frames the story in his own interpretation to the point where it is borderline unrecognizable. It would have fit perfectly on a late 2000's history channel at 3:00 am. Wes does not focus on this. Instead, he asks which part of Genesis 1 and 2 is copied.

Huff asks this because having read both the Bible and Enuma Eilish, he does not find any parallels beyond the surface level. He points out that most Ancient Near East scholars see the Genesis account as an apologetic against documents like the Enuma Eilish.

Carson claims that there are certain words that let him know they were copied. As an example, the idea of separating the earth from the water, and the earth being void and formless tells us that somebody looked at the Enuma Eilish and copied them. Carson attempts to change the subject, saying there was so much more he wanted to cover.

Huff explains the purpose of the Enuma Eilish was to show that the deities come from the created order, which is a fluke. The common man does not matter. Only the kings were made in the image of the divine. On the other hand, the Bible says there is only one God who creates, what He created was good, and man is made in the image of God. Huff argues that rather than plagiarism, the Genesis account is a polemic against works like the Enuma Eilish.

Carson closed his argument by claiming the scriptures are clearly 100% man-made because there are statements in the text that encourage genocide, slavery, and all sorts of horrible things. Wes counters with the ethic found in Judaism and Christianity that is found nowhere else, that we are created in the image of God. People are always going to abuse scripture and religion. The earliest criticism of Christianity is that it's a religion of slaves and women. The Christian worldview gives agency to the marginalized.

Before going into the debate, Huff looked into the content Carson produces to get a feel for what kind of arguments he'd be facing. So he knew that all he needed to do was let Carson ramble. If Carson had not acted the way he did, and just took the loss, this would not have exploded in popularity.

Huff constantly asks Carson what is his methodology for determining what is an accurate source of information. Carson says his methodology was gathering up as many texts as he could, alongside traveling to learn from their various cultures and the stories they tell. This gave Huff an idea of how much research Carson was doing, but did not answer his question.

Why is methodology so important for Wes? He explains in his interview with Joe Rogan, "What I was trying to get Billy to get to the bottom of was partly a question of methodology." Professionals in Wes's field of study make sure they can explain the criteria they use when looking at one source versus another source to develop a conclusion. They must rely on non-deductive reasoning, which deals in probability. This means we look at the data we have, and make inferences to the best possible conclusion. Historians rarely disagree with the data, but the conclusion can be vastly different.

Carson's claims disagree with the data. Everything that Billy cited against the crucifixion was either false in the case of the Sinai Bible, or verified forgeries. The evidence against the crucifixion in terms of documentary evidence presented by Billy is not convincing. When Huff points this out, Carson tries to move on to a new subject, showing his inexperience with this kind of conversation. It would have been better if he clarified his criteria for determining the value of a source, or admitted his methodology was flawed. This way, he could keep his credibility as a scholar. By deflecting and changing the subject in the face of defeat he comes across as amateur.

Throughout the debate, we see Huff exemplify what Jesus told His disciples before sending them out among the people of Israel: “I am sending you out like sheep among wolves. Therefore be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves.” (Matthew 10:16) We can see from the comment section that Huff’s kind conduct resonated with people. Subscribers to Carson’s channel switched to following Huff! One wrote that their worldview was shattered, and they were picking up the Bible again! Huff later said he did not expect the debate to go viral in the way it did. It is amazing to see the Holy Spirit work through seemingly little things.

“…[I]n your hearts revere Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander.” (1 Peter 3:15)

When we answer with gentleness and respect we show the other person we don’t want to dominate them. If they don’t become less combative, they at least become more willing to listen. From there, it’s all the Holy Spirit’s work. This is why I say we need more debates like this, because no matter how we argue, the people we speak to directly may never accept the Gospel, but what about those listening in?

Making a Defense

Rick Wade explores the meaning of the word "defense" in 1 Peter 3:15, suggesting that all Christians can do what Peter is urging us to do in defending our faith.

Apologetics has grown into a very involved discipline over the last two millennia. From the beginning, Christians have sought to answer challenges to their claims about Jesus and complaints and questions about how they lived. Those challenges have changed over the years, and apologetics has become a much more sophisticated endeavor than it was in the first century.

The Scripture passage most often used to justify apologetics is 1 Peter 3:15: "In your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect." This verse is probably used so often because it sounds like marching orders. Other Scriptures show us defense in action; this one tells us to do it.

The word translated "defense" here is *apologia* which is a term taken from the legal world to refer to the defense a person gave in court. It is one of several words used in Scripture that carry legal connotations. Some others are *witness*, *testify* and *testimony*, *evidence*, *persuade,* and *accuse*.

Something that scholars have noticed about Scripture is the presence of a kind of trial motif in both Old and New Testaments, what one New Testament scholar calls the "cosmic trial motif."{1} There is a trial of sorts with God on one side and the fallen world on the other. The use of legal terminology isn't merely coincidental.

Think about the arguments you've heard presented by apologists that are philosophical or scientific or historical. The core

issue of apologetics is generally thought as being truth.{2} While all this fits with what Peter had in mind, I believe there was something deeper and wider behind his exhortation.

In short, I think Peter was concerned with two things: faithfulness and speaking up for Christ. He wanted Christians to acknowledge and not deny Christ. And, as we'll see later, Jesus said demands for a defense were to be seen as opportunities to bear witness. Defense in the New Testament doesn't function separately from proclaiming the gospel.

The Old Testament Background

As I noted earlier, there is a kind of cosmic trial motif running through Scripture, or what we might call a "forensic theme," which provides a background for understanding Peter's exhortation. One thing that will help us think about defense and witness in the New Testament is to look at the trial motif in the Old Testament.

Bible scholar A. A. Trites notes the frequency with which one encounters lawsuits or controversy addressed in a legal manner in the Old Testament such as in the book of Job and in the prophets. On occasions of legal controversy, witnesses were the primary way of proving one's case. They were not expected to be "merely objective informants," as we might expect today.{3} The parties involved "serve both as witnesses *and* as advocates," Trites says. "It is the task of the witnesses not only to attest the facts but also to convince the opposite side of the truth of them (Isaiah 41:21-4, 26; 43:9; 51:22; cf. Gen. 38:24-6)."{4}

Especially notable in the Old Testament is the controversy between Yahweh and the pagan gods, represented by the other nations, recorded in Isaiah chapters 40-55. "The debate is over the claims of Yahweh as Creator, the only true God and the Lord of history (40:25-31; 44:6-8; 45:8-11, 21)," says

Trites.{5} Yahweh brings charges and calls the nations to present their witnesses, and then calls Israel to be His witness. A representative passage, which I'll leave you to look up for yourself, is Isa. 43:9-12.

Since the other nations have nothing to support their case on behalf of their gods, they lose by default. By contrast, Israel *has* witnessed the work and character of Yahweh.

The New Testament: John and Luke

As I continue to set the context for understanding 1 Peter 3:15, I turn now to look at defense in the New Testament.

The apostles had a special role to fulfill in the proclamation of the gospel because they were eyewitnesses to the events of Jesus' life. Trites says that they "were to be Christ's advocates, serving in much the same way that the witnesses for the defendant served in the Old Testament legal assembly."{6} Beyond giving the facts, they announced that Jesus is Lord of all and God's appointed judge, and they called people to believe (see Acts 10:36; cf. 2:36-40; 20:21).{7}

I spoke above about the controversy recorded in Isaiah 40-55 between Yahweh and the nations and their gods. This "lawsuit" continues in the Gospels in the conflict between Jesus and the Jews. New Testament scholar Richard Bauckham writes, "It is this lawsuit that the Gospel of John sees taking place in the history of Jesus, as the one true God demonstrates His deity in controversy with the claims of the world."{8} Multiple witnesses are brought forth in John's Gospel. In chapter 5 alone Jesus names His own works, John the Baptist, God the Father, and the Old Testament. And there are others, for example the Samaritan woman in chapter 4, and the crowd who witnessed the raising of Lazarus in chapter 12.

This witness extends beyond simply stating the facts. As in the Old Testament, testimony is intended to convince listeners

to believe. The purpose of John's Gospel was to lead people to belief in Christ (20:30-31).

The concept of witness is important for Luke as well; obviously so in the book of Acts, but also in his Gospel. In Luke 24 we read where Jesus told His disciples, "Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. And behold, I am sending the promise of my Father upon you. But stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high" (24:45-49). Here we have a set of events, a group of witnesses, and the empowerment of the Spirit.

The New Testament: Luke and Paul

It was a dangerous thing to be a Christian in the first century, just as it is in some parts of the world today. Jesus warned His disciples, "they will lay their hands on you and persecute you, delivering you up to the synagogues and prisons." Listen to what He says next: "This will be your opportunity to bear witness. Settle it therefore in your minds not to meditate beforehand how to answer" (Lk. 21:12-14). "How to answer" is the word *apologia,* the one Peter uses for "make a defense" in 1 Peter 3:15.

It's important to keep the central point of this passage in Luke in view. What Jesus desired first of all were faithful witnesses. The apostles would face hostility as He did, and when challenged to explain themselves they were not to fear men but God, to confess Christ and not deny Him. This warning is echoed in 1 Peter 3:14-15. Jesus' disciples would be called upon to defend their actions or their teachings, but their main purpose was to speak on behalf of Christ. Furthermore, they shouldn't be anxious about what they would say, for the Spirit would give them the words (Lk. 12:12; 21:15). This

isn’t to say they shouldn’t *learn* anything; Jesus spent a lot of time teaching His followers. It simply means that the Spirit would take such opportunities to deliver the message He wanted to deliver.

Witness and defense were the theme of Paul’s ministry. He said that Jesus appointed him to be a witness for Christ (Acts 22:15; 26:16; see also 23:11). As he traveled about, preaching the gospel, he was called upon to defend himself before the Jews in Jerusalem (Acts 22 and 23), before the governor, Felix, in Caesarea (chap. 24), and before King Agrippa (chap. 26).

Toward the end of his life when he was imprisoned in Rome, Paul told the church in Philippi, “I am put here for the defense of the gospel (1:16; cf. v.7). That claim is in the middle of a paragraph about preaching Christ (Phil. 1:15-18).

In obedience to Jesus, Paul was faithful to confess and not deny. Although he was called upon to defend *himself* or his *actions*, he almost always turned the opportunity into a defense and proclamation of the *gospel.*

1 Peter

Finally I come to 1 Peter 3:15. What is the significance of what I’ve said about the trial motif in Scripture for this verse?

A key theme in 1 Peter is a proper response to persecution. Christians were starting to suffer for their faith (3:8-4:2). Peter encouraged them to stand firm as our Savior did who himself “suffered in the flesh,” as Peter wrote (4:1).

After exhorting his readers to “turn away from evil and do good” (1 Pet. 3:11), Peter says,

> Now who is there to harm you if you are zealous for what is

> good? But even if you should suffer for righteousness' sake, you will be blessed. Have no fear of them, nor be troubled, but in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect, having a good conscience, so that, when you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ may be put to shame (3:13-16).

The main point of this passage is faithfulness: faithfulness in righteous living, and faithfulness in honoring Christ and speaking up when challenged.

So how does the idea of witness fit in here? I submit that Peter would have remembered Jesus' instructions to turn demands for a defense into opportunities to bear witness. Remember Luke 21:13? Peter did this himself. When he and John were called before Caiaphas, as we read in Acts 4 and 5, rather than deny Jesus as he did when Jesus was on trial (Mk. 14:66-72), Peter faithfully proclaimed Christ not once but twice. The second time he said, "We must obey God rather than men," and then he laid out the gospel message (Acts 5:27-32; see also 4:5-22).

Sometimes I hear apologists talking about how to put apologetics and evangelism together. While there may be a conceptual distinction between the two, they are both aspects of the one big task of bearing witness for Jesus. The trajectory of our engagement with unbelief ought always to be the proclamation of the gospel even if we can't always get there. As Paul said in 1 Cor. 2:5, our faith rests properly in Christ and the message of the cross, not in the strength of an argument.

Defense and witness are the responsibility of all of us. If that seems rather scary, remember that we're promised, in Luke 12:12, the enabling of the Spirit to give us the words we need.

Notes

1. Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 389.

2. See for example James K. Beilby, *Thinking About Christian Apologetics* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2011), 20.

3. Allison A. Trites, *The New Testament Concept of Witness* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1977), 21.

4. Ibid., 46.

5. Ibid., 45.

6. Ibid., 139.

7. Ibid., 133.

8. Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, 387.

Defending Theism: A Response to Hume, Russell, and Dawkins

T.S. Weaver looks at anti-God arguments from three prominent philosophers, showing why belief is God is more reasonable than their objections to His existence.

Theism, broadly defined, is the belief in the existence of a supreme being or other deities. Believers in Jesus Christ would say we follow Christian Theism, believing in and trusting the one true God who has revealed Himself through His word and through His Son Jesus. In pursuit of the defense of

theism and answering profound antagonists to the faith, I will engage with some of the objections raised by three prominent thinkers: David Hume, Bertrand Russell, and Richard Dawkins.

David Hume

David Hume (1711-1776) was a Scottish philosopher who is often considered the best philosopher to have written in the English language. Although he was wary of metaphysical things like God, he was very fascinated by religion. He is widely considered to be an atheist, but we do not know for certain whether he was atheist [one who denies that God exists], agnostic [one who is not sure if God exists], or deist [one who believes God created the universe but then let it run according to natural laws without divine intervention] by the time of his death. Regardless, his more prominent work is *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*. In it he presents classical challenges to theism.

The strongest challenge to theism Hume presents in *Dialogues* is the problem of evil and God's moral nature. His view is that with the amount of evil in the world, we cannot consider God as morally sensible, morally great, and powerful. His assumption is that if God were to exist, He does not care to solve the problem of good and evil. While this is the toughest intellectual challenge a theist has to answer, I believe there is an answer.

When God created, He gave humans the ability to make free decisions. If this ability were denied, our love (the supreme ethic) for Him would not be a choice and thus coerced. As a result, it would not be real love. Church Father Augustine (354-430) commented on this in his book *On the Free Choice of the Will*, by arguing that free will is what makes us human. God made us that way so we could freely choose to venerate, trust, and follow Him. So built into love, veneration, trust, and obedience was the ability to make free decisions. Consequently, certain choices are going to be terrible or evil

(e.g., Adam and Eve's disastrous disobedience in the Garden of Eden). As a result, the only way to eradicate evil is to eradicate free will. Hence, evil is merely the consequence of the free will of humanity. John Stackhouse rearticulates this case:

> God desired to love and be loved by other beings. God created human beings with this in view. To make us capable of such fellowship, God had to give us the freedom to choose, because love, though it does have its elements of "compulsion," is meaningful only when it is neither automatic nor coerced. This sort of free will, however, entailed the danger that it would be used *not* to enjoy God's love and to love God in return, but to go one's own way in defiance of both God and one's own best interest. This is what the story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden portrays.{1}

It is not that God is insensitive to evil (Proverbs 6:16, 15:26; Psalm 5:4), but that moral and natural evils are the cause of the sin (free choice to disobey God) of man.

Bertrand Russell

Shifting gears, Bertrand Russell, (1872-1970) a famed agnostic philosopher, argued against theism with a famous view that everything on this globe is the result of "an accidental collocation of atoms."{2} Thus, there is no real aim for which we were produced. I believe this view is both incredibly depressing and incredibly wrong. If one were to take what Timothy Keller would call a "clue of God" like beauty and think this through, it would have serious implications. If this were true, as Keller put it in *The Reason for God,* "Beauty is nothing but a neurological hardwired response to particular data."{3} Conductor Leonard Bernstein once spoke of the effect of the beauty of Beethoven's music:

> Our boy has the real goods, the stuff from Heaven, the power

> to make you feel at the finish: Something is right in the world. There is something that checks throughout, that follows its own law consistently: something we can trust, that will never let us down.{4}

Does that sound like a "neurological hardwired response to particular data"? Or is Beethoven's music beautiful? As a seminary student, I often yearn for an excellent night of sleep. The thought is beautiful to me. Augustine in his *Confessions* argued that yearnings like this were clues to the existence of God. While my tiredness does not prove that my desire for an excellent night of sleep will happen tonight, it is correct that native yearnings like this link to actual substances that can fill them. For example, sensual yearning (linking to sex), hunger (linking to food), tiredness (linking to sleep), and interpersonal yearning (linking to relationship). We have a desire for joy, love, and beauty that no quantity or condition of sex, food, sleep, and relationship can satisfy. We hope for something that nothing on this globe can satisfy. Do you think this is a clue? I assert this unpleasing yearning is a deep-rooted native longing that is an undeniable clue not only for the existence of God, but also that God is the only one who can satisfy that yearning. C.S. Lewis wrote in *Mere Christianity,* "If I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world."{5} (Please also see Dr. Michael Gleghorn's article "C.S. Lewis and the Riddle of Joy" at probe.org/c-s-lewis-and-the-riddle-of-joy/) Tying all this back to Russell's famous view, it makes sense that if there were a God who can satisfy that kind of yearning, this God likely made us, not by accident, but with a purpose. That is worth investigating.

Richard Dawkins

Now I turn to Richard Dawkins (1941-), who I think is best described as a militant atheist scientist. He writes in his

book *The God Delusion*, describing God:

> The God of the Old Testament is arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction: jealous and proud of it; a petty, unjust, unforgiving control-freak; a vindictive, bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser; a misogynistic, homophobic, racist, infanticidal, genocidal, filicidal, pestilential, megalomaniacal, sadomasochistic, capriciously malevolent bully.{6}

Tell us how you really feel, Dawkins. Although there is a lot said here, what is most obvious is his portrayal of God as immoral because of what God displayed of Himself in the Old Testament. These acts are perceived to undermine his morally perfect nature. Although this will not be my main response, I want to highlight that for Dawkins to grumble that God has perpetrated immoral acts, he acknowledges there is an objective moral law. In a separate argument, I could go from here to make the case that for there to be an objective moral law there must be an objective moral law giver (God). However, I instead want to concentrate on "the God of the Old Testament."

The Old Testament passage found in Deuteronomy (7:1-5; 20:16-18) tends to be the most cited in an argument against God such as Dawkins's quote above. In this passage, God instructed the Israelites to destroy the Canaanites living in a specific region: "[T]hen you must destroy them totally. Make no treaty with them, and show them no mercy" (7:2), and "[D]o not leave alive anything that breathes" (20:16). This passage bothers many (including myself) and may be an example of where Dawkins got his characterization. It is understandable to wonder how a good and loving God could instruct this.

To make sense of a tough passage like this one must understand the context, starting with who God is. God is not like any earthly ruler. He's not like Trump. He's not like Biden. He is Creator of all things and King of the Universe. That said, He

supplies life, and He can take life when He chooses, however He chooses. The next step is to think through whether His instruction was justified (as if it were up to us to define justice). There are occasions when we as humans may feel it is justified for people to take another's life, as in self-defense, to safeguard others, or in a just war. What we must understand about the Canaanites in this passage is that this was not some illogical imperative for them to be murdered. The Canaanites were malevolent. In their obscene paganism, they were spiritually dangerous. They were unspeakably wicked. God said to the Israelites, "It is not because of your righteousness or your integrity that you are going in to take possession of their land; *but on account of the wickedness of these nations*" (emphasis mine) (Deuteronomy 9:5).

The worst example of their wickedness is child sacrifice. Apologist Timothy Fox informs us, "They would burn their children alive in a fiery furnace as a sacrifice to the god Molech. Just that one act alone would be justification for their complete annihilation."{7} I wonder what Hume, who raised the problem of evil, would have to say to Dawkins about God dealing with and judging evil. One of the explanations God provided for wrecking the Canaanites was so that Israel would not embrace their malevolent ways. Dawkins may still object though and say, "What about the kids? How could a loving God instruct the Israelites to destroy harmless kids?" I do find this troubling as well, but as shown above, God can take life when He chooses, however He chooses. No one is promised a lengthy, peaceable life and to perish of old age. Furthermore, what if God saw that if these children were to mature, they would be just as evil and corrupt as their parents? What if ordering the death of children infected by their parents' wickedness is similar to an oncology surgeon cutting out small cancer cells along with the full-grown cells? That is a possibility. In addition, God does not appreciate the murder of the evil but patiently waits for repentance of sins (Ezekiel 18:23). In the case of the Canaanites, we see He will

only allow wickedness for so long though.

Another objection Dawkins has to the existence of God is science. His view is that you can either be scientific and sensible, or religious. He is either ignoring, or ignorant of, the fact that modern science arose out of a biblical worldview. Christians are responsible for developing the scientific perspective and method. Francis Bacon, astronomers Kepler and Galileo, and the brilliant mathematician and physicist Isaac Newton all believed in God. They all helped shape the development of modern science; they believed that since God was a God of order, they expected nature to be orderly. They also understood that one man's opinion could be faulty because of sin, and therefore others needed to verify what any one scientist said. Kepler even characterized his scientific perspective as "thinking God's thoughts after Him."

Dawkins thinks God and science do not mix. Yet two legendary experiments performed in 1916 and 1997 reveal this view is not as widely held as Dawkins and others make it seem. In 1916, American psychologist James Leuba conducted a study asking scientists if they believed in a God who actively communicates with humanity, no less than via prayer. 40 percent confirmed they did, 40 percent confirmed they did not, and 20 percent were not confident either way. Edward Larson and Larry Witham duplicated this study in 1997 using identical queries with scientists. They discovered the figures had not altered substantially. Even atheist philosopher Thomas Nagle disagrees with Dawkins's view of reality. Nagle even questions whether atheist naturalists think their moral instincts (yes morality has come up again), for example the belief that genocide is morally incorrect, are true instead of just the consequence of neurochemistry hardwired into humans. He writes:

> The reductionist project usually tries to reclaim some of the originally excluded aspects of the world, by analyzing them in physical—that is, behavioral or neurophysiological—terms; but it denies reality to what

> cannot be so reduced. I believe the project is doomed—that conscious experience, thought, value, and so forth are not illusions, even though they cannot be identified with physical facts.{8}

Science *cannot* explain all and *can* be consistent with religious faith. Therefore, it is unreasonable to think that an individual can only be a believer of science *or* a believer of God. It is also irrational to believe we came into the world by accident, or that because of the presence of evil in the world theism is not workable. In short, it is more reasonable to believe in theism than not to.

Notes

1. J.P. Moreland and William Lane Craig, *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview* (Inter-Varsity Press, 2003), 552.
2. Bertrand Russell, "The Free Man's Worship," The Independent Review 1 (Dec 1903), 415-24 Title of essay changed after 1910 to "A Free Man's Worship."
3. Timothy Keller, *The Reason for God* (New York: Penguin Books, 2016), 138.
4. From Leonard Bernstein's "The Joy of Music" (Simon and Schuster, 2004), 105.
5. C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity,* (New York: Macmillan, 1952), 105.
6. Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (Boston: Mariner Books, 2006), 51.
7. crossexamined.org/god-behaving-badly-destruction-canaanites/, accessed March 31, 2022.
8. Thomas Nagel, "The Fear of Religion," The New Republic (October 23, 2006).

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Answering the New Atheists – A Christian Addresses Their Arguments

Kerby Anderson counters the claim by popular new atheists that Christianity (along with other religions) is blind, irrational and without any evidence. Kerby demonstrates that contrary to the atheists' claims God is not an invention of mankind, that faith is not dangerous, and that science and Christianity support one another. From a Christian point of view, the new atheists are bringing out tired old arguments that don't stand up to rational scrutiny.

Is Faith Irrational?

Many of the best selling books over the last few years have been written by the New Atheists. I'd like to consider some of the criticisms brought by these individuals and provide brief answers. You may never meet one of these authors, but you are quite likely to encounter these arguments as you talk with people who are skeptical about Christianity.

 For our discussion, we will be using the general outline of the book *Is God Just a Human Invention?* written by Sean McDowell and Jonathan Morrow.{1} I would encourage you to read the book for a fuller discussion not only of the topics considered here but of many others as well.

You cannot read a book by the New Atheists without encountering their claim that religion is blind, irrational, and without any evidence. Richard Dawkins makes his feelings known by the title of one of his books: *The God Delusion*.

Why does he say that? He says religions are not evidentially based: "In all areas except religion, we believe what we believe as a result of evidence."{2} In other words, religious faith is a blind faith not based upon evidence like other academic disciplines. So he concludes that religion is a "nonsensical enterprise" that "poisons everything."{3}

Each of the New Atheists makes a similar statement. Dawkins states that faith is a delusion, a "persistent false belief held in the face of strong contradictory evidence."{4} Daniel Dennett claims Christians are addicted to blind faith.{5} And Sam Harris argues that "Faith is generally nothing more than the permission religious people give one another to believe things without evidence."{6}

Is this true? Do religious people have a blind faith? Certainly some religious people exercise blind faith. But is this true of all religions, including Christianity? Of course

not. The enormous number of Christian books on topics ranging from apologetics to theology demonstrate that the Christian faith is based upon evidence.

But we might turn the question around on the New Atheists. You say that religious faith is not based upon evidence. What is your evidence for that broad, sweeping statement? Where is the evidence for your belief that faith is blind?

Orthodox Christianity has always emphasized that faith and reason go together. Biblical faith is based upon historical evidence. It is not belief in spite of the evidence, but it is belief because of the evidence.

The Bible, for example, says that Jesus appeared to the disciples and provided "many convincing proofs, appearing to them over a period of forty days and speaking of □□the things concerning the kingdom of God" (Acts 1:3).

Peter appealed to evidence and to eyewitnesses when he preached about Jesus as "a man attested to you by God with mighty works and wonders and signs that God did through him in your midst, as you yourselves know" (Acts 2:22).

The Christian faith is not a blind faith. It is a faith based upon evidence. In fact, some authors contend that it takes more faith to be an atheist than to believe in God.{7}

Is God a Human Invention?

Human beings are religious. We are not only talking about people in the past who believe in God. Billions of people today believe in God. Why? The New Atheists have a few explanations for why people believe in God even though they say God does not exist.

One explanation that goes all the way back to Sigmund Freud is projection. He wrote that religious beliefs are "illusions,

fulfillments of the oldest, strongest, and most urgent wishes of mankind."{8} In other words, we project the existence of God based on a human need. It is wish fulfillment. We wish there would be a God, so we assume that he exists.

As Sean McDowell and Jonathan Morrow point out in their book, there are five good reasons to reject this idea. One objection is that Freud's argument begs the question. In other words, it assumes that there is no God and then merely tries to find an explanation for why someone would believe in God anyway.

The projection theory can also cut both ways. If you argue that humans created God out of a need for security, then you could also just as easily argue that atheists believe there is no God because they want to be free and unencumbered by a Creator who might make moral demands on them.

Perhaps the reasons humans have a desire for the divine is because that is the only thing that will satisfy their spiritual hunger. C.S. Lewis argued that "Creatures are not born with desires unless satisfaction for those desires exists. A baby feels hunger: well, there is such a thing as food. A duckling wants to swim: well, there is such a thing as water. Men feel sexual desires: well, there is such a thing as sex. If I find in myself a desire, which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world. Probably earthly pleasures were never made to satisfy it, but only arouse it, to suggest the real thing."{9}

Some atheists suggest that perhaps we are genetically wired to believe in God. One example would be the book by Dean Hamer entitled *The God Gene: How Faith is Hardwired into Our Genes*. It is worth noting that even the author thought the title was overstated and at least admitted that there "probably is no single gene."{10} Since the publication of the book, its conclusions have been shown to be exaggerated. Francis Collins served as the director of the Human Genome Project and has

plainly stated that there is no gene for spirituality.

Richard Dawkins believes that religious ideas might have survived natural selection as "units of cultural inheritance."{11} He calls these genetic replicators *memes*. Although he has coined the term, he is also quick to acknowledge that we don't know what memes are or where they might reside.

One critic said that "Memetics is no more than a cumbersome terminology for saying what everybody knows and that can be more usefully said in the dull terminology of information transfer."{12} Alister McGrath perceives a flaw: "Since the meme is not warranted scientifically, we are to conclude that there is a meme for belief in memes? The meme concept then dies the slow death of self-referentiality, in that, if taken seriously, the idea explains itself as much as anything else."{13}

There is another explanation that we can find in the Bible. Why do most people believe in a God? The writer of Ecclesiastes (3:11) observes that it is God who has "set eternity in the hearts of men."

Is Religion Dangerous?

The New Atheists contend that religion is not just false; it's also dangerous. Sam Harris believes it should be treated like slavery and eradicated.{14} Christopher Hitchens wants to rally his fellow atheists against religion: "It has become necessary to know the enemy, and to prepare to fight it."{15} Richard Dawkins is even more specific: "I am attacking God, all gods, anything and everything supernatural, wherever and whenever they have been invented."{16}

Much of the criticism against religion revolves around violence. We do live in a violent world, and religion has often been the reason (or at least the justification) for

violent acts. But the New Atheists are kidding themselves if they think that a world without religion would usher in a utopia where there is no longer violence, oppression, or injustice.

Sean McDowell and Jonathan Morrow point out in their book on the New Atheists that details matter when you are examining religion. Injustices by the Taliban in Afghanistan ought not to be used as part of the cumulative cases against religion in general or Christianity in particular. The fact that there are Muslim terrorists in the world today does not mean that all Muslims are dangerous. And it certainly doesn't mean that Christianity is dangerous.

Alister McGrath reminds us that "all ideals—divine, transcendent, human or invented—are capable of being abused. That's just the way human nature is. And that happens to religion as well. Belief in God can be abused, and we need to be very clear, in the first place, that abuse happens, and in the second, that we need to confront and oppose this. But abuse of an ideal does not negate its validity."{17}

Religion is not the problem. People are the problem because they are sinful and live in a fallen world. Keith Ward puts this in perspective:

> *No one would deny that there have been religious wars in human history. Catholics have fought Protestants, Sunni Muslims have fought Shi'a Muslims, and Hindus have fought Muslims. However, no one who has studied history could deny that most wars in human history have not been religious. And in the case of those that have been religious, the religious component has usually been associated with some non-religious, social, ethnic, or political component that has exerted a powerful influence on the conflicts.{18}*

The New Atheists, however, still want to contend that religion is dangerous while refusing to accept that atheism has been a

major reason for death and destruction. If you were to merely look at body count, the three atheistic regimes of the twentieth century (Hitler in Nazi Germany, Stalin in Russia, and Mao in China) are responsible for more than 100 million deaths.

Dinesh D'Souza explains that "Religion-inspired killing simply cannot compete with the murders perpetrated by atheist regimes." Even when you take into account the differences in the world's population, he concludes that "death caused by Christian rulers over a five-hundred-year period amounts to only 1 percent of the deaths caused by Stalin, Hitler, and Mao in the space of a few decades."{19}

Religion is not the problem; people are the problem. And removing religion and God from a society doesn't make it less dangerous. The greatest death toll in history took place in the last century in atheistic societies.

Is the Universe Just Right for Life?

The New Atheists argue that even though the universe looks like it was designed, the laws of science can explain everything in the universe without God. Richard Dawkins, for example, says that "A universe with a creative superintendent would be a very different kind of universe from one without."{20}

Scientists have been struck by how the laws that govern the universe are delicately balanced. One scientist used the analogy of a room full of dials (each representing a different physical constant). All of the dials are set perfectly. Move any dial to the left or to the right and you no longer have the universe. Some scientists have even called the universe a "Goldilocks universe" because all of the physical constants are "just right."

British astronomer Fred Hoyle remarked, "A commonsense

interpretation of the facts suggests that a super intellect has monkeyed with physics, as well as chemistry and biology, and that there are no blind forces worth speaking about in nature."{21}

McDowell and Morrow provide a number of examples of the fine tuning of the universe. First is the expansion rate of the universe. "If the balance between gravity and the expansion rate were altered by one part in one million, billion, billion, billion, billion, billion, billion, there would be no galaxies, stars, planets, or life."{22} Second is the fine tuning of ratio of the electromagnetic force to the gravitational force. That must be balanced to one part in 10 to the 40^{th} power. That is 1 with 40 zeroes following it.

Scientists also realize that planet Earth has extremely rare conditions that allow it to support life at a time when most of the universe is uninhabitable. Consider just these six conditions: (1) Life must be in the right type of galaxy, (2) life must be in the right location in the galaxy, (3) life must have the right type of star, (4) life must have the right relationship to the host star, (5) life needs surrounding planets for protection, and (6) life requires the right type of moon.{23}

Scientists (including the New Atheists) are aware of the many fine tuned aspects of the universe. They respond by pointing out that since we could only exist in a fine-tuned universe, we shouldn't be surprised that it is fine tuned. But merely claiming that we could not observe ourselves except in such a universe doesn't really answer the question why we are in one in the first place.

Richard Dawkins admits that there is presently no naturalistic explanation for the find-tuning of the universe.<a href="#text24>{24} But he is quick to add that doesn't argue for the existence of God. And that is certainly true. We know about God and His character from revelation, not from

scientific observation and experimentation. But we do see the evidence that the design of the universe implies a Designer.

Are Science and Christianity in Conflict?

The New Atheists believe that science and Christianity are in conflict with one another. They trust science and the scientific method, and therefore reject religion in general and Christianity in particular.

Sam Harris says, "The conflict between religion and science is unavoidable. The success of science often comes at the expense of religious dogma; the maintenance of religious dogma always comes at the expense of science."{25}

Richard Dawkins believes religion is anti-intellectual. He says: "I am hostile to fundamentalist religion because it actively debauches the scientific enterprise . . . . It subverts science and saps the intellect."{26}

Are science and Christianity at odds with one another? Certainly there have been times in the past when that has been the case. But to only focus on those conflicts is to miss the larger point that modern science grew out of a Christian world view. In a previous radio program based upon the book *Origin Science* by Dr. Norman Geisler and me, I explain Christianity's contribution to the rise of modern science.{27}

Sean McDowell and Jonathan Morrow also point out in their book that most scientific pioneers were theists. This includes such notable as Nicolas Copernicus, Robert Boyle, Isaac Newton, Blaise Pascal, Johannes Kepler, Louis Pasteur, Francis Bacon, and Max Planck. Many of these men actually pursued science because of their belief in the Christian God.

Alister McGrath challenges this idea that science and religion are in conflict with one another. He says, "Once upon a time, back in the second half of the nineteenth century, it was

certainly possible to believe that science and religion were permanently at war. . . . This is now seen as a hopelessly outmoded historical stereotype that scholarship has totally discredited."{28}

The New Atheists believe they have an answer to this argument. Christopher Hitchens discounts the religious convictions of their scientific pioneers. He argues that belief in God was the only option for a scientist at the time.{29} But if religious believers get no credit for the positive contributions to science (e.g., developing modern science) because "everyone was religious," then why should their negative actions (e.g., atrocities done in the name of religion) discredit them? It is a double standard. The argument actually ignores how a biblical worldview shaped the scientific enterprise.{30}

The arguments of the New Atheists may sound convincing, but once you strip away the hyperbole and false charges, there isn't much left.

If you would like to know how to answer the arguments of the New Atheists, I suggest you visit the Probe Web page at www.probe.org and also consider getting a copy of the book by Sean McDowell and Jonathan Morrow. You will be able to answer the objections of atheists and be better equipped to defend your faith.

Notes

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2. Richard Dawkins, "The Faith Trap," 20 March 2010, bit.ly/fFvLlJ.
3. Ibid.
4. Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2008), 28.
5. Daniel Dennett, *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural*

Phenomenon (New York: Penquin, 2006), 230-231.
6. Sam Harris, *Letter to a Christian Nation* (New York: Vintage Books, 2008), 110.
7. Norman Geisler and Frank Turek, *I Don't Have Enough Faith to Be an Atheist* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2004).
8. Sigmund Freud, *The Future of Illusion* (New York: Norton, 1989), 38.
9. C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996), 119-122).
10. Quote of Dean Hamer in Barbara Bradley Hagerty, *The Language of God: A Scientist Presents Evidence for Belief* (New York: Free Press, 2006), 263.
11. Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, 316.
12. Victor Stenger, *God: The Failed Hypothesis* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus, 2007), 257.
13. David Berlinski, *The Devil's Delusion: Atheism and Its Scientific Pretension* (New York: Basic Books, 2009), 26-27.
14. Harris, *Letter to a Christian Nation*, 87.
15. Christopher Hitchens, *God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* (New York: Twelve, 2007), 283.
16. Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, 36.
17. Alister McGrath, "Challenges from Atheism," in *Beyond Opinion*, ed. Ravi Zacharias (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2007), 31.
18. Keith Ward, *Is Religion Dangerous?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 73.
19. Dinesh D'Souza, *What's So Great About Christianity* (Washington, D.C.: Regnery, 2007), 215.
20. Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, 78.
21. Quoted in Paul Davies, *The Accidental Universe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 118.
22. Mark Whorton and Hill Roberts, *Holman QuickSource Guide to Understanding Creation* ((Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing, 2008), 308.
23. Sean McDowell, "Is There Any Evidence for God? Physics and Astronomy," *The Apologetics Study Bible for Students*, gen. ed. Sean McDowell (Nashville: B&H Publishing, 2010).

24. Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, 188.
25. Harris, *Letter to a Christian Nation*, 63.
26. Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, 321.
27. "Origin Science," www.probe.org/origin-science/.
28. Alister McGrath and Joanna Collicutt McGrath, *The Dawkins Delusion* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2007), 46.
29. "The Jewish God, the Christian God, or No God?" Debate between Christopher Hitchens, Dennis Prager, and Dinesh D'Souza, 1 May 2008.
30. Nancy Pearcey and Charles Thaxton, *The Soul of Science* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1994).

Lessons from Camp Quest

In August of this year, the North Texas Church of Freethought (NTCOF) hosted Camp Quest Texas on a farm outside of Dallas. This eight–hour event for children of atheists, agnostics and other "free thinkers" included nearly 40 children between the ages of five and 15. According to a published report{1} , the day began with an exercise in making up creation myths based on the Apache story of fire before leading into activities with exotic animals, fossils and staged UFO sightings. The primary purposes of the event were twofold:

> • *Encourage the children to have open minds and embrace scientific skepticism*
>
> • *Provide a fun experience for the children where they could make friends among the community of non-believers. This objective was partially motivated by a desire to counter negative experiences some of the children had experienced with schoolmates who believed in God.*

Let me begin by stating that I applaud the organizers and parents for taking positive steps to encourage their children to ask good questions and look for good answers. Even though I suspect that the event was slanted towards promoting an atheistic worldview, I believe all parents should assume an obligation to steer their children toward the truth as they see it. At the very least, they should equip their children to see through the illogical arguments of some enthusiastic proponent of a cultic religion (even if they think that I am just such a proponent!).

The newspaper account of this event and an accompanying interview with the executive director of NTCOF can teach us several lessons as we evangelicals take on the task of raising younger generations.

Background

Before looking for takeaway lessons, let's investigate a little more background. Zachary Moore, the executive director for NTCOF, described their church this way:

"We're a church of freethinkers, which means that we try to understand the natural world by relying on reason and evidence. Like most people, we enjoy spending time with others who share our values and have similar interests. Forming a church just seemed like the natural thing to do, since many of us thought the only thing wrong with churches were the strange things they told you to believe in."{2}

At one time, Zachary considered himself a believer in Christianity. At some point, he came to the conclusion that the evidence did not support his belief in God. As he said,

"If Christianity were true, then I would want at least what Doubting Thomas got. If another theistic worldview were true, then I'd need something equivalent. I don't think it's too much to ask to be able to talk to a deity personally before

I'm asked to worship it."{3}

This question, "If God wants me to believe in Him, why doesn't He present me personally with overwhelming evidence?" is one of the classic hard questions raised against our faith. The purpose of this article is not to answer this question, but if you want more information you can find it at Probe.org (see related articles).

Zachary and the NTCOF represent a point of view that is heavily in the minority among Americans, but is growing move vocal as it grows numerically. Recent Pew Institute surveys indicate that the number of atheists, agnostics and others who claim no faith is less than 10% of the population. However, a 2007 Barna survey provides a revealing look inside that statistic.

The table below shows the number of people with "no faith" in each age demographic based on surveys taken in 1992 and 2007. The data reveals two important trends. First, the number of people claiming no faith in God in 2007 grows markedly higher with each younger generation, more than tripling from the 6% for those over 61 to 19% for those from 18–22. Second, the percentages for each generation have not changed significantly in the last fifteen years. We don't see more people turning to faith as they grow older. It appears that the skeptics remain skeptics as each generation ages.

Percent of Americans who are atheist or agnostic{4}:

Generation	Ages in 2007	1992 Survey	2007 Survey
Adult Mosaics	18-22	–	19%
Boomers	23-41	16%	14%
Busters	42-60	8%	9%
Elders	61+	4%	6%

Could it be that our secular schools, culture and public square are creating their expected result—generations that are becoming more and more secular? It also appears that on average, once people reach the age of 18, their belief in God is pretty much set for life.

How should we respond to this trend of succeeding generations turning away from God? I believe the report on Camp Quest reveals some lessons we can take away and apply to this question. I want to consider three possible lessons:

- *Respect those who express doubts*
- *Understand that the Truth is not afraid of skepticism (or scientific inquiry)*
- *Don't be intimidated by an unfriendly world.*

Respect Those Who Express Doubts

Many of the children attending Camp Quest felt like they are living in a culture where it is taboo to ask the question, "Why should I believe in God?"

One fourteen year old boy "was at camp hoping to meet some nonbelievers his age. All his friends in Allen believe in God, he said, and he tries to keep his atheism a secret from them. 'They'd probably avoid me if they knew,' he said."{5}

"Another boy, 14, whose stepfather requested his anonymity, started home-schooling this year after enduring years of bullying for his open atheism."{6}

In my opinion, looking at the experience of the Quest campers gives startling insight into the issue of teenagers from Christian homes turning away from the church in their college years.

Consider a teenager from a Christian family who has questions

about the God they learned about in Sunday school. Where can they get some answers to the tough questions? They look around and see how their peers and parents react to other children who question the party line. They realize they may risk status with their peers if they ask these questions. So, at a time when they are around Christian adults on a regular basis who could help them deal with the tough questions and the evidence for God, they are intimidated into keeping silent. Once they leave the home for college or other vocations, they enter an environment where the primary people that claim to have answers to these questions are belittling Christianity as a crutch for people who believe in myths.

In other words, if the children of atheists are afraid to bring up their doubts in public, how much more do many children from Christian families feel forced to go through the motions while hiding their major doubts and concerns?

If we teach our children to respect those with genuine questions about God, we receive a double benefit:

- *Our children will be more willing to bring up questions that cause them to struggle.*

- *Our children will have opportunities to hear the questions of others who need to know Christ. If we model for our children a gentle and respectful response to peoples' questions/beliefs, their friends are more likely to be willing to share their questions with them.*

Understand That the Truth Is Not Afraid of Skepticism (or Scientific Inquiry)

Most parents at Camp Quest indicated that they did not want to dictate their children's beliefs, but clearly they wanted to impact the thought process. As one mother stated:

"Our job isn't to tell children what to think," she said.

“It’s about opening up their minds and learning how to ask good questions.”{7}

Just as we hope that the children at Camp Quest will ultimately ask the right questions about the purpose of life and their eternal destinies, we should encourage our children to examine the truth claims of Christianity. After all, Jesus told Pilate:

‘For this I have been born, and for this I have come into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth hears My voice.” John 18:37-38 (*NASU or New American Standard Updated*.)

Lies and hoaxes are afraid of skeptics. The Truth welcomes skeptics because it shines in the light of examination. If we are willing to examine the truth with our children, it will build their confidence in their faith.

Many teenagers in Sunday School and youth meetings learn the things that Christians do (and don’t do) and some things that Christians believe, but never learn about why we believe that the evidence for Christianity is strong and a biblical worldview answers the hard questions better than any other worldview. I suspect that many teenagers get the impression that their pastors and teachers are afraid of hard questions and want to avoid them. Perhaps in too many cases this suspicion is reality.

This reinforces what we have stated in prior articles on the subject of youth retention (see The Last Christian Generation, related articles). We need to:

- *Encourage students to ask tough questions and respect them for doing so.*

- *Equip parents and student leaders with solid answers for the tough questions.*

• Take the initiative and address these topics in Sunday school and youth meetings even before the students ask the questions.

• Point them to resources like Probe for those that want to go deeper into these topics.

• Expose them to Christian adults who are living out a mature biblical worldview

Don’t Be Intimidated By An Unfriendly World.

How many of us can identify with the following statement:

> *Just as evangelical adults need social support from their church, our children need it even more. Many of our kids are ostracized at school because their parents are evangelicals, or because they’re sharing their own faith at school. It can also be challenging to be an evangelical parent when most people assume that you’re intolerant and ignorant if you teach your children to believe in hell and in Jesus as the only way to heaven. Christian camps provide a valuable resource for parents, plus they are full of fun activities for kids that reinforce our values——faith in Christ, love for God and our neighbors, good morals, and a desire for others to receive eternal life.*

It rings true, doesn’t it? It is interesting to consider that the statement above is a slight modification of a statement made by Zachary Moore:

> *Just as freethinking adults need social support from groups like the NTCOF, our children need it even more. Many of our kids are ostracized at school or in their neighborhoods because their parents are freethinkers, or because they’re developing their own freethinking perspective. It can also be*

> *challenging to be a freethinking parent when most people assume that you're immoral if you don't teach your children to believe in a god. Camp Quest Texas provides a valuable resource for parents, plus it's full of fun activities for kids that reinforce our freethinking values – science, critical thinking, ethics and religious tolerance.{8}*

American society as a whole does not have a high regard for atheism. However, in many ways, our public sector and public schools are more supportive of the NTCOF than they are of evangelicals. This is the reality our children will become adults within. We need to encourage them through a community of like–minded believers while at them same time preparing them to stand up in an unsympathetic and sometimes hostile public square.

Youth groups and Christian camps are not refugee camps to protect our children from the world. They need to focus on equipping them and encouraging them to stand for the Truth in whatever cultural setting they encounter.

You may not be excited about the prospect of a Church of Freethought. However, their experience and reactions may help expose some our inadequacies in preparing our children to stand firm in their faith in this world. Let's make sure that our children know that we are open to their hard questions and are prepared with real answers.

"For he who comes to God must believe that He is and that He is a rewarder of those who seek Him" Heb 11:6-7 (*NASU*).

Notes

1. Avi Selk, "Secular kids' camp in Collin County aims to provide questions, not answers," *Dallas Morning News*, August 31, 2009.

2. Rod Dreher, "A church for skeptics," *Dallas Morning News*,

August 31, 2009.

3. Ibid.

4. Barna Group, "Atheists and Agnostics Take Aim at Christians", June 11, 2007, www.barna.org/barna-update/article/12-faithspirituality/102-atheists-and-agnostics-take-aim-at-christians.

5. Selk.

6. Ibid.

7. Ibid.

8. Dreher.

Related Articles:

- The Answer is the Resurrection
- The Last Christian Generation

Gabriel's Vision: An Angelic Threat to the Resurrection?

An article in *TIME* magazine titled "Was Jesus' Resurrection a Sequel?" opened with the statement, "A 3-ft.-high tablet romantically dubbed 'Gabriel's Vision' could challenge the

uniqueness of the idea of the Christian Resurrection."{1} What exactly is this tablet and does it have any significant impact on the teaching of the resurrection of Christ?

About a decade ago a stone tablet about three feet in height owned by a Swiss-Israeli antiques collector received the attention of historians. This tablet contained eighty-seven lines in Hebrew text written, not engraved, on the stone. Experts date the tablet to the late first century B.C. or a little later. The origin of the tablet is unknown. Some surmise that it came from the Transjordan region and other scholars think this may have been a part of the Dead Sea Scrolls collection.

The tablet contains an apocalyptic prediction of the end of the world spoken by a person named Gabriel. Other scholars believe the name refers to the angel Gabriel. There are several parts of the message that are missing or difficult to decipher.

The connection to the resurrection of Christ is found in line 80. Jewish scholar Israel Kohl, an expert in Talmudic and biblical languages at Jerusalem's Hebrew University, believes that the line begins with the words "In three days" and includes some form of the verb "to live."{2} He believes that this text refers to a first century Jewish rebel named Simon who was killed by the Romans in 4 B.C. Kohl believes the translation reads, "In three days, you shall live. I Gabriel command you."{3}

Time magazine writer David Van Biema writes that if Kohl's translation is correct, it would somehow undermine the historicity of resurrection. He states,

> *This, in turn, undermines one of the strongest literary arguments employed by Christians over centuries to support the historicity of the Resurrection (in which they believe on faith): the specificity and novelty of the idea that the*

> *Messiah would die on a Friday and rise on a Sunday. Who could make such stuff up? But, as Knohl told TIME, maybe the Christians had a model to work from. The idea of a "dying and rising messiah appears in some Jewish texts, but until now, everyone thought that was the impact of Christianity on Judaism," he says. "But for the first time, we have proof that it was the other way around. The concept was there before Jesus." If so, he goes on, "this should shake our basic view of Christianity. … What happens in the New Testament [could have been] adopted by Jesus and his followers based on an earlier messiah story."{4}*

Biema states that one of the strongest arguments for the resurrection was that it was a unique concept introduced by Christianity. The belief in the resurrection is based on "faith." The defense Christians gave for the resurrection is that it was not believed by the Jews and therefore could not have been made up by the Christians. This discovery would then undermine one of the strongest arguments for the resurrection of Christ.

What implications does this discovery have, and is it a devastating blow to the resurrection as Biema asserts? First, Kohl contends that the words of line 80 should be translated as, "In three days you shall live." But the exact words of that line are not known. Hebrew scholars remain uncertain regarding line 80 because in crucial places there are a lot of missing words. The Israeli scholar who first worked on the tablet is Ada Yardeni. Yardeni's translation of the text shows indeed there are key words missing. The English translation reads, "…from before You, the three si[gn]s(?), three …[….](line 79). In three days …, I, Gabri'el …[?], (line 80).{5} Yardeni considers the words in line 80 to be indecipherable.{6}

Church history scholar Ben Witherington states that the verb Kohl translates as rise could also mean "there arose." So,

instead of a resurrected messiah, the text refers to the appearing of a Messiah.{7} Since the words of line 80 are not clear, we cannot state conclusively the text is speaking of a messiah who dies and resurrects in three days.

Second, I do not find this discovery a threat to the resurrection. Even if Kohl's translation is correct, it does not affect the evidence for and the teaching on the resurrection. If Kohl's translation is correct, it would highlight the debate in Jewish belief regarding the Messiah. The popular notion was teaching of a Davidic Messiah who would overthrow the nation's enemies and establish the Davidic Kingdom. However, some Jewish schools although a minority, held to a belief in a suffering Messiah. If Kohl's translation is correct, this tablet would show this suffering Messiah would rise from the dead in three days.

This would not pose a major threat to Christianity. Many Christians have taught that the idea of a resurrected Messiah was never taught in Judaism. However, Christians have long taught that the Old Testament prophecies such as Isaiah 53 teach of a dying and resurrected Messiah. In fact, a few people are recorded being raised from the dead in the Old Testament (1 Kings 17, 2 Kings 13). Therefore, it should not be so surprising if there was a pre-Christian Jewish belief in a resurrected Messiah held by a minority of Jews.

Finally, Biema states that the "novelty" of the resurrection is one of the strongest literary arguments for the historicity of the resurrection. He also states that Christians' belief in the resurrection is based on "faith." I would disagree with Biema's assertions. First, the historicity of the resurrection is not based on "faith" or belief without credible reasons. The belief in the resurrection is based on compelling historical evidence. Second, I do not believe the novelty of the resurrection is one of the strongest arguments for the resurrection. I rarely if ever have used it in an apologetic presentation. I believe the strongest arguments come from the

historical evidence.

What are those evidences? First, the Gospels represent an accurate historical account of the life of Christ written in the lifetime of the eyewitnesses. The internal evidence, archaeology, manuscript evidence, quotes from the early Church Fathers, and ancient non-Christian historical works affirm the first century date and historical accuracy of the gospels (See my article on The Historical Reliability of the Gospels.)

In studying the resurrection, there are several facts agreed upon by historians of various persuasions. First, the tomb of Christ was known and was found empty. Second, there is the transformation of the Apostles from cowards to men who boldly proclaimed the resurrection of Christ in the face of their enemies. Third, the preaching of the Resurrection originates in Jerusalem, the most hostile place to preach such a message. Fourth, we have a massive Jewish societal transformation. Thousands of Jews abandon key tenets of Jewish faith and accept the teachings of Christ. Fifth, the origin of the church was built on the proclamation of the resurrection. Any explanation of the empty tomb must account for these facts, and the resurrection remains the most reasonable explanation. All other attempts have failed as alternative explanations (See my article Resurrection: Fact or Fiction.)

These remain the strongest arguments for the resurrection, not the novelty of a resurrected Messiah. Even if Kohl's translation is proven to be correct, it does not affect any of these facts. There is still compelling evidence for the resurrection of Christ. Kohl's translation would highlight the controversy among pre-Christian Jews regarding the two concepts of the coming Messiah. His translation would simply add the idea that the minority view regarding the suffering Messiah included a belief by some Jews in a Messiah who would die and resurrect three days later.

Notes

1. David Van Biema, "Was Jesus' Resurrection a Sequel?" *TIME,* 7 July 2008, www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1820685,00.html?xid=newsletter-weekly.
2. Ibid., 1.
3. Ibid., 1.
4. Ibid., 2.
5. Ada Yardeni's translation, www.bib-arch.org/news/dssinstone_english.pdf 6. Gary Habermas, "'Gabriel's Vision' and the Resurrection of Jesus," July 2008, www.garyhabermas.com/articles/gabrielsvision1/gabrielsvision.htm.
7. Biema, 2.

Resources Related to the Jesus Tomb Controversy

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• Christian Newswire: Ten reasons why the Jesus tomb claim is bogus.

• Remains of the Day: Scholars dismiss filmmakers' assertions that Jesus and his family were buried in Jerusalem.

• The Jesus Family Tomb? From respected scholarly apologetics site, *Leadership University*.

Probe Articles on Christ's Resurrection, Biblical Archaeology and the Bible

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• Archaeology and the New Testament by Pat Zukeran

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• Archaeology and the Old Testament by Pat Zukeran

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• "How Do We Know Christ Rose from the Dead? And Who Wrote the Bible?" by Jimmy Williams

Almost half of Probe's nearly 1300 Web resources are responses to actual questions from visitors like you. This one answers

the question, “How Do We Know Christ Rose from the Dead?” and “Who Wrote the Bible?”

Bridging to Common Ground: Communicating Christ Across the Cultural Divide

Have you ever felt like an alien in your own culture? What was your reaction to the people in that other group? The other day, mine was negative, then a bit hopeful. It all left me very humbled, but ready once more to build bridges and sow spiritual seed over shared common ground.

Always Ready?

There I was, in a vegetarian restaurant, talking to the Chinese owner about my motivations for patronizing this rare refuge for vegans, vegetarians and other people far removed from my day-to-day world. I just like to eat healthier sometimes, I weakly offered. After all, when I recently found it closed, I had sauntered to the Texas-style barbeque joint in the same shopping center feeling little irony.

Not so for most of the old man’s clientele. They just seemed to fit the veggie-eaters mold. I felt conspicuously out of place as I mingled in the buffet line with pony-tailed guys, gals with their hair in doo-rags, Indian and Chinese immigrants. Yet there I stood, representing white middle-America in my Tommy Bahama knock-off shirt and dress slacks.

I spied a rack of religious booklets promoting an off-beat

Asian religious group. Hey, I thought to myself, if you want authentic tofu-based cuisine, you have to mix with the diversity. No problem.

But I wasn't prepared for the group of youths who walked in next, sporting dreadlocks, torn Goth stockings, studded leather boots and T-shirts that would offend the most tough-minded. The "F" word assaulted me in a slogan scrawled across the back of several wearing the official T-shirt for the punk band P*ssChrist.

I have to admit, I wavered between repulsion and compassion, amusement and offense. Then I began to fantasize about striding right up the large table of vegan-gothic-anti-social kids and introducing myself. I imagined chatting, asking about the band their shirts represent, then moving on to the fact that not all Christ-followers are hypocritical haters—see, I'm talking to you!

My two-fold goal in my little daydream, admittedly: to challenge their perception of an establishment-looking right-wing Christian guy like me and to test their own assumed sensibilities regarding acceptance, tolerance and diversity. After all, I judged, can they themselves show tolerance for a fellow who represents a polar opposite worldview and set of values? Or will they be found out as just another brand of bigot? All of this I dreamed up perhaps without even finding out their names! I never went over to their table.

Bad Thinking Means No Bridging or Burned Bridges

Upon reflection, I saw how off-guard I was spiritually and how deeply my gut reactions represent some questionable thinking, even unbiblical attitudes. I would probably have come off as, well, a hypocritical hater, despite the better intentions I mixed in with my prejudices. That drove me to prayer and back to a book that is still worth reading: *Finding Common Ground:*

How to Communicate with Those Outside the Christian Community—While We Still Can by Tim Downs.

My response revealed several unhelpful presuppositions about people on the other side of the cultural divide and how to deal with them that still have roots in my soul, although I should know better. My private syllogism went like this:

> *They're obviously not for us (biblical believers), but against us, so*
>
> *The best way to deal with such people would be to confront them or ignore them (and I don't prefer the latter).*
>
> *Although confronting them outright would be wrong, it wouldn't take long for the tolerant approach to necessarily give way to an uncomfortable, confrontational proclamation of truth, so bring it on!*
>
> *Somebody's got to reach these folks, and it's apparent that sooner is better. These are the last days, after all.{1}*

But building bridges with the eventual goal of sharing the gospel fruitfully—something I've worked at full-time for two decades—requires much more. More thought, compassion, understanding, wisdom and patience. The kind, writes Downs, modeled not by grain harvesters, but rather by fruit growers. This is biblical, but often ignored by Bible-believers.{2}

As a member of an out-of-balance evangelical Christian subculture, I have unconsciously bought into a worldview that overvalues the spiritual harvest at the expense of spiritual sowing. In so doing, I am implicated in a scorched-earth mentality that neither tends the spiritually unready nor makes allowance for future crops.{3} I repent, and not for the first time.

This way of thinking assumes a vast conspiracy of God-haters. Although the caustic, outspoken atheism of Sam Harris and

Richard Dawkins has risen to prominence recently, it is not the norm. Rather a muddled middle of persuadable unbelievers and confused born-agains is still a large part of the American scene.{4} The us vs. them approach tends to be self-fulfilling, writes Downs. If approached as an enemy, defensiveness is understandably generated in those who dont fit cleanly into our community. Even for announced enemies, like the T-shirt-wearing punk rockers, turning the other cheek while engaging with love can be a powerful witness.

Another evangelical myth, according to Downs, is the *certainty* that we're experiencing the final harvest.{5} Indeed, the coarsening of the culture is a mainstay and we are promised that, in the End Times, things will go from bad to worse. That's sure how it looks, increasingly. Also, we conservative Christians, who shared the heady age of the Moral Majority, are now being blended with every other social group into a stew of diversity where no group is a majority—and we sound like jilted lovers, says Downs. We need to ask, How much of the spiritual fruit*less*ness in America might we be contributing to by our own perceptions and resultant attitudes?

To act out of such worldview-level angst and fail to prepare to reach future generations is dereliction. Picking low-hanging fruit, if you will, and plowing under the remaining vines is neither loving nor wise. It's certainly not God's way, thankfully.

If I'd waltzed up to that table of vegetarian punkers the other day, I'd have likely displayed the attitude Downs critiques and confesses having owned: I'll proclaim the truth. What they do with it is their business. In other words, 'Id walk away self-justified, ineffective—and likely having done harm rather than God's purposes. My commitment to justice would have overridden my practice of love.{6}

To make any genuine impact for Christ among a crowd so foreign

to me as these youths would require more than mere personal chutzpah and a bag of evangelistic and apologetic "tricks." I'd need to wade humbly into their world, eyes wide open and skin toughened, expecting no respect (initially at least), hoping realistically only for long-term results. I could not be effective in my current state—from dress to time commitments to my mindset. To be missional about it long-term, I'd need to be surely called of God and make a monumental life-change, like a missionary I met here in town.

Becoming All Things to All People

I first heard of Dale{7} when he spoke to parents at our kids' Christian school. I marvelled that he and his wife—both in their 40s—along with their three girls would pack up their middle-class home, leave a thriving youth pastorate in a Baptist church and take up residence in the grungiest, hippest part of Dallas, Texas. When I met with Dale down in Deep Ellum, I could feel the gaping divide between my suburban existence and the urban alternative, Bohemian art-music district scene he'd adopted.

When a couple of 20-something chicks interrupted our meal, I was annoyed that he left me hanging for some time. But Dale's apology stopped me short in my own self-absorption. He and his wife had befriended one of the gals, a bartender, and were seeking to slowly, carefully build a relationship with her without scaring her off. And it was working. She had noticed the non-confrontational yet uncompromising difference in this loving Christian couple and asked about it. Now, when she introduces these Christian friends, she openly initiates conversations about spiritual things with rank unbelievers. There's no threat felt, but plenty of curiosity.

The Apostle Paul wrote, "I have become all things to all men, so that I may by all means save some."{8} To use the hackneyed phrase, "Walk a mile in their shoes"—even if the shoes are foul (some punkers don't do hygiene) or not your style.

When I researched the band with the sacriligious name on the T-shirts, I was introduced to a subculture that not only was foreign to me, but one that actively alienates itself from the larger culture. Part of a movement called *anarcho-crust punk*, this particular band is known for blasphemous rants. Counter-cultural lifestyle, vile language, themes of death, filth and anti-religious, anti-conservative and anti-capitalist identity politics all mark this underworld of dark lostness.

To bridge across cultural canyons—even such a radical one—to begin on common ground with those outside the Christian community, we need to:

> *adopt a bridging mentality—think of outreach as a process and pass your perspective on*
>
> *avoid fueling intolerant stereotypes and show genuine, biblical tolerance*
>
> *don't burn bridges—avoid unnecessary confrontation but rather persuade by modeling uncompromising love and concern along with truth*
>
> *remember from where you fell and recall who the Enemy really is—our struggle is not against flesh and blood{9}*
>
> *cultivate, sow, harvest and begin again. Patiently use art and subtle, effective communications{10}*
>
> *relate genuinely: share your own foibles, ask sincerely about their anger and pain*
>
> *wait on God's timing, but don't fail to offer the gospel and help them grasp faith*

For those called to go native to bridge across cultural divides, one couple reaching out in the London music-arts district serves as a model. In a four-hour conversation with a Londoner deep into the local scene—a definite unbeliever who

knew of the couple's Christian commitments—the husband was asked:

> *What do you think of homosexuality?*
>
> *After thoughtfully pausing, he deferred, Well, I'd prefer to not share that with you.*
>
> *Why not?*
>
> *Because I believe my view on that will offend you and I don't want to do that; you're my friend.*[{11}]

Compromise? Wimpiness? No. Curiosity caused the non-Christian to ask again some time later, to which the believer responded gently, "As I said, I don't want to offend you, but since you asked again. . ." His reply led to Jesus Christ Himself. His biblical response evoked a thoughtful, "Oh—now I'm glad you warned me. That is very different from my opinion." The message was heard and respected. The relationship, still intact, grew in breadth and depth and led to a fuller witness.

Our London-based missionary took care, as a vinedresser, not to bruise the unripe fruit. His eventual impact with the life-changing good news of Christ was made possible by the patience and love he balanced with the hard truth. He and his wife, an accomplished musician, now have high-level contacts in this London subculture.

I'm taking mental notes and rereading Down's important book for some really useful and specific strategies for bridging to common ground with those alien to me.

Notes

1. *Finding Common Ground: How to Communicate with Those Outside the Christian Community…While We Still Can*, Tim Downs, (Moody Press: Chicago, 1999), Chapter 3, "Calling Down Fire," pages 33ff.

2. Ibid, 46.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid, 44.
5. Ibid, 47. See also: End Time Anxieties.
6. Ibid, 38.
7. Not his real name.
8. I Corinthians 9:22 (NASB).
9. Ephesians 6:12 (NASB).
10. Downs, T., op. cit., 66-71.
11. Based on second-hand account without attempt to check details of the conversation. The meaning was clear: by waiting and building credibility, the door to sharing more opened where none likely would have otherwise.

Bart Ehrman's Complaint and the Reliability of the Bible

The academician and former evangelical Dr. Bart Ehrman now claims we cannot trust the biblical documents. Don Closson responds with reasons why we can.

Introduction

While traditional Christian beliefs never seem to suffer from a shortage of critics, the diversity and intensity of the current group of antagonists is impressive. We have the so called "New Atheists," mostly consisting of individuals from the scientific community, modern day Gnostics both in academia and of *Da Vinci Code* fame, as well as Scientologists, Jehovah's Witnesses and other groups too many to mention. However, one critic stands out, primarily because of his

academic pedigree and the impact that his books are having in the popular culture and among Christians.

Bart Ehrman is a product of evangelicalism's center. Educated at Moody Bible Institute and Wheaton College, he knows how conservative Christians think because he used to be one. His recent book *Misquoting Jesus* has been called "one of the unlikeliest bestsellers" of the year, and with it he has managed to bring to the public's attention the obscure world of New Testament textual criticism.

Having professed faith in Christ while in high school, Ehrman went off to college with a simple trust in the New Testament text, a trust that included verbal, plenary inspiration. In other words, he believed that God had inspired and preserved every word of the Bible. By the time Ehrman began doing graduate work at Princeton, he was having serious reservations about the text and its source. He now considers himself an agnostic and writes books that question most of what his fellow classmates at Moody and Wheaton believe.

How did a bright, well-educated evangelical become so disillusioned? Even Dr. Ehrman's detractors acknowledge his credentials and intelligence. One book that attempts to refute his views says that he is "known for his indefatigable scholarship and provocative opinions."{1} The provocative opinions will be the focus of this article.

Just what is Ehrman's complaint regarding the New Testament text? His first point is that we do not have the original manuscripts of the New Testament, and the Greek copies that we do have were made too long after the originals. He also says that these Greek manuscripts contain more variants, or places where the manuscripts are different, than there are words in the entire New Testament itself. Finally, he complains that the Gospels were not written by Matthew, Mark, Luke, or John, and that, whoever the real authors of these texts were, they were not eyewitnesses to the life and ministry of Jesus. As

Ehrman sees it, these facts create an insurmountable problem for Christians.

Our focus will be on Dr. Ehrman's assertion that the variants in the New Testament text have corrupted it to the point that it cannot trusted to communicate God's truth to us today.

Textual Variants and the Autographa

Ehrman begins his critique with the fact that we do not have the original documents, called autographs, of the New Testament Gospels, letters, and other documents. Nothing new here; this is acknowledged by virtually everyone. But he goes on to add that the copies we do have, even the earliest copies, aren't accurate representations of the originals, and, as a result, what the NT authors wrote has been lost. Ehrman and others note that the approximately 5,700 Greek NT manuscripts we possess differ from one another in as many as 400,000 places even though there are only around 138,000 words in the NT. Ehrman writes, "How does it help us to say that the Bible is the inerrant word of God if we don't have the words that God inerrantly inspired, but only the words copied by the scribes—sometimes correctly but sometimes (many times!) incorrectly?"{2}

The important question is, Do the manuscripts available today accurately convey the truth that God wanted to communicate to those in the first century? I believe that they do, and so do many others.

Conservative Bible scholars argue that although there are many scribal errors and additions in the texts, even in the oldest texts, the vast majority of them do not change its meaning. In his book *Reinventing Jesus,* Daniel Wallace points out that the overwhelming majority of the differences or variants in the texts are insignificant, and he offers four categories of textual errors to help determine if a variant is both

meaningful and viable.

The first category of variants, and by far the largest, is the least significant. They are mostly spelling differences, like the difference between the way we spell “color” and the way the British spell “colour.” This category also includes nonsense errors, scribal mistakes that result in words that either don’t exist, or the misspelling of a word that is similar to another. For example, in one early manuscript the Greek word *kai* was written instead of *kurios* (*kai* is the conjunction *and*; *kurios* means *Lord*). The first word makes no sense while the second is supported by many other manuscripts. None of the variants described here change the meaning of the NT text.

The use of articles provides another source of variants. Some NT manuscripts use the definite article with a proper name and sometimes they don’t. For instance, for Luke 2:16 some manuscripts have “the Mary” but in others we find just “Mary.” Although Greek may use the definite article with proper names, English does not, so in either case they will be translated just “Mary.”

Another type of variant is called transposition, where two manuscripts have different word orders for the same passage but the meaning isn’t changed. Greek uses different endings on verbs and nouns rather than word order to convey meaning. In English, “Paul loves God” has a different meaning than “God loves Paul.” But in Greek, even if the word order is different, the meaning isn’t if the correct suffixes are used. Differences in word order can be used to change the emphasis of a passage but not the meaning. So two manuscripts might have different word orders but translate into English the same way.

Some variants involve synonyms. In this case, the translation might actually be changed by exchanging one word for another

but the meaning of the passage is not. These alterations often occurred because the Scriptures were being read in public. Some long passages didn't identify the subject; for example the Gospel of Mark goes on for eighty-nine verses using only pronouns for Jesus. Church books called lectionaries would occasionally change a "he" to "Jesus" or "the Lord" or "teacher," making a public reading easier. Eventually these changes found their way back into the NT manuscripts. Again, the meaning of the New Testament was not changed.

Another category of manuscript differences are those that might actually change the meaning of a passage, but it's fairly easy to show that the variant does not go back to the original wording of the text. For example, a late medieval manuscript has for 1 Thessalonians 2:9 "the gospel of Christ" instead of "the gospel of God" that is found in almost all other manuscripts. This is a meaningful difference, but it is not viable. As Daniel Wallace argues, "There is little chance that one late manuscript could contain the original wording when the textual tradition is uniformly on the side of another reading."{3}

Textual Variants that Are Meaningful and Viable

The last group of variants or differences in the New Testament Greek texts are those that are both meaningful—in other words, they actually change the meaning of the text—and viable—in the sense that they cannot easily be explained away by looking at other manuscript evidence or external factors. This is by far the smallest group of variants or differences in the manuscripts, making up less than one percent of the total. Let's look at a couple of examples.

Some manuscripts have Romans 5:1 using a Greek letter called an *omicron* to create the word *echomen*; others use an *omega* resulting in the word *echōmen*. Thus the passage could be

saying either “We have peace” or “Let us have peace” with God, depending on this single disputed letter. But how different are the two results? The bottom line is that neither usage contradicts the overall message of the New Testament.

Another example is found in 1 John 1:4. Again, a single contested letter means the difference between the passage saying “Thus we are writing these things so that *our* joy may be complete,” or “Thus we are writing these things so that *your* joy may be complete.” The meaning is certainly affected by the change, but neither translation violates Christian doctrine. In fact, as Wallace argues “Whether the author is speaking of his joy or the readers’ joy, the obvious point of this verse is that the writing of this letter brings joy.”{4}

The largest textual variant in the New Testament is found in the last chapter of Mark’s Gospel. What many consider to be the best and earliest manuscripts end at verse eight. However, the vast majority of manuscripts add twelve more verses to the text. While scholars continue to debate where the actual ending is to the book of Mark, the point is that no doctrinal teaching or truth is affected by the dispute.

Although Dr. Ehrman can point to places in the NT text where scribes either purposely changed the text or allowed errors to creep in, Christian doctrine is not in peril. In his book *Misquoting Truth,* Timothy Jones writes, “In every case in which two or more options remain possible, every possible option simply reinforces truths that are already clearly present in the writings of that particular author and in the New Testament as a whole; there is no point at which any of the possible options would require readers to rethink an essential belief about Jesus or to doubt the historical integrity of the New Testament.”{5}

From One Fundamentalism to Another

What might be driving the current criticism of the New Testament?

There is an old saying that one should not "throw out the baby with the bathwater." I feel that this is exactly what Bart Ehrman has done in his book *Misquoting Jesus*. He first assumes that for the New Testament to be reliable it must be perfectly transmitted across the centuries; ninety-nine percent just won't do. He then highlights textual variants that have been known by New Testament scholars for decades and declares that whatever truth was in the Scriptures has been lost forever.

Ehrman seems to have gone from one form of fundamentalism to another. In his earlier state he held to an idealistic view of the New Testament that was unrealistic and unnecessary. Later, when his ideal view was shattered by his study of the Greek text, he went over to an opposite, equally unnecessary view that the text was of little or no value. As Wallace explains, "It seems that Bart's black and white mentality as a fundamentalist has hardly been affected as he slogged through the years and trials of life and learning, even when he came out on the other side of the theological spectrum. He still sees things without sufficient nuancing, he overstates his case, and he is entrenched in the security that his own views are right."{6} He adds that "Bart Ehrman is one of the most brilliant and creative textual critics I've ever known, and yet his biases are so strong that, at times, he cannot even acknowledge them."{7}

It seems that Dr. Ehrman and others have fallen for what has been called the "Myth of Absolute Certainty."{8} This myth argues that as time goes by we are getting further and further from the words recorded in the original New Testament documents. Some use this myth to argue for the supremacy of the King James Version of the Bible. Others, like Ehrman, use it to argue for a position of complete despair, claiming that

we can no longer pretend to have anything like an inerrant text.

It's important to realize that we not only have virtually all the documents that were used for the translation of the King James Bible, but we now have one hundred times the number of Greek manuscripts that were available when the King James Bible was written, and over four hundred of these manuscripts predate the earliest ones available to its King James authors.{9}

If, in its most basic sense, inerrancy means to tell the truth, we have a New Testament text that is more than capable of accurately conveying the truth that God intended for the church in the first century and today.

Notes

1. J. Ed Komoszewski, M. James Sawyer, and Daniel B. Wallace, *Reinventing Jesus*, (Kregel Publications, 2006), 110.
2. Bart Ehrman, *Misquoting Jesus*, (HarperCollins, 2005), 7.
3. Ibid., 59.
4. Ibid., 62.
5. Timothy Paul Jones, *Misquoting Truth* (IVP, 2007), 55.
6. Daniel Wallace, "The Gospel according to Bart," found at bible.org/article/gospel-according-bart on September 24, 2019.
7. Ibid.
8. *Reinventing Jesus*, 66.
9. Ibid., 67.

The Da Vinci Code: Who is Jesus, Really?

The Da Vinci Code, the blockbuster novel that's now a major motion picture, makes some controversial claims: Jesus of Nazareth, a mere mortal, married Mary Magdalene and fathered her child. Their descendants live today.

Dan Brown's novel is an entertaining, artfully designed thriller filled with mystery, intrigue, and suspense. The film generally follows the novel's storyline. Reviews have been mixed. I enjoyed the film and feel that moviegoers are in for an adventure if they can follow the action and detail.

The novel raises healthy questions about Christian faith. The story's fictitious British scholar, Sir Leigh Teabing, says, "…almost everything our fathers taught us about Christ is *false*."{1}

Teabing says that the Roman emperor Constantine had history rewritten to cast Jesus as divine rather than mortal and convened the famous Council of Nicaea to debate Jesus divinity. He says the council upgraded Jesus to divine by a close vote.

The Greatest Story Ever *Sold?*

Teabing suggests that the greatest story ever told is, in fact, the greatest story ever *sold,*{2} a monumental cover-up. Was Jesus' divinity a clever fabrication?

University of North Carolina religion chair Bart Ehrman, not a theological conservative, found troubling Brown's assertion that "All descriptions of…documents…in this novel are accurate."{3}

Ehrman says, "Most of the descriptions of ancient documents,

in fact, are not factual—they're part of his fiction. But people reading the book aren't equipped to separate the fact from the fiction."{4}

Ehrman notes that Constantine called the Council of Nicaea (325 C.E.) not to debate whether Jesus was divine but rather what precisely that meant: Had he always existed as divine, or was he created as divine?{5} The council overwhelmingly affirmed the former.

Dan Brown gets an A-/B+ for dramatic writing but a C-/D for historical accuracy. Still, what do we really know about Jesus?

Tacitus, a Roman historian writing around 115-117 C.E., refers to Jesus' execution under Pontius Pilate.{6} The Talmud, a collection of Jewish laws and commentary, mentioned in the late first or second century a tradition that Jesus was hanged on Passover Eve.{7}

Jesus' contemporary biographers indicated that he claimed deity. For instance, one records a trial at which religious leaders asked, "Are You the Son of God, then?" Jesus' response: "Yes, I am."{8} Accusing him of blasphemy, leaders said he deserved to die.{9}

The Alternatives

What are the alternatives? If his claim was true, he would be the Lord. If it was false and he knew it, he was lying. If he didn't know it was false, he had serious delusions, perhaps paranoid schizophrenia or paranoia proper.

Jesus claim to deity sets him apart from great moral teachers. Either he was a liar, or a lunatic, or the Lord.

Was he a liar? If so, he died for that lie. Few, if any, would willingly die for something they knew was a hoax. Would you? Both believers and skeptics have considered Jesus a paragon of

virtue.

Was Jesus a lunatic? His teachings about love, forgiveness, respect, and interpersonal relationships are often used as a basis for mental health today. He had a genuine concern for others, a cool response under pressure, and a great love for his enemies as he said from the cross, Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.{10} If Jesus was insane, what must we be?

If he was not a liar and not a lunatic, were left with the alternative that he was the Lord, as he claimed. Evidence for his resurrection supports this claim.{11}

The Da Vinci Code touches many emotional chords. Clergy sex scandals have engendered mistrust. People like conspiracy theories. Feminist themes resonate with many. Deep hunger for spiritual experience is prevalent.

Who is Jesus, really? Why not examine the evidence and decide for yourself?

Notes

1. Dan Brown, *The Da Vinci Code* (New York: Doubleday, 2003), p. 235; emphasis Brown's.
2. Ibid., p. 267; emphasis Brown's.
3. Ibid., p. 1.
4. Deborah Caldwell (interviewer), "Unpacking 'The Code': What's true in Dan Brown's *'Da Vinci Code'* and what's pure historical fiction?", p. 1, Beliefnet.com, http://www.beliefnet.com/story/167/story_16783_1.html.
5. Ibid., p. 2.
6. Tacitus, *Annals*, xv. 44.
7. Sanhedrin (43a); in F.F. Bruce, *Jesus & Christian Origins Outside the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), pp. 55-56.
8. Luke 22:70 NASB.
9. Matthew 26:65-66.

10. Luke 23:34 NASB.
11. www.WhoIsJesus-really.com.