Steve Cable continues to explore Probe’s 2020 survey on religious beliefs and practices, examining how people witness to their faith or not, and reasons for both sharing and for not trusting Christ.

1. How Often Do You Witness to Your Faith?

Let’s consider the topic of witnessing or sharing your faith with others. In our 2020 survey we asked two questions about this topic. The first question was: How often do you engage in intentional spiritual conversation with non-believers about your faith with a desire to see them accept it for themselves? With this question, we wanted to avoid casual mentions of your faith and discussions with no intent at conversion. The results as shown in the chart below are surprising.

Among Americans ages 18 through 39 who profess an affiliation with some religion, we find that less than 1 out of 5 (20%) of them strongly disagree with the statement that Muhammad, Buddha and Jesus all taught valid ways to God. Yet at the same time almost 6 out of 10 (60%) of them state that they share their faith with an unbeliever at least once a year with the intent of converting them to their belief.

So the majority of American believers (of any faith) must believe that at least for some people with different religious beliefs, it would be better for them to turn
from their current belief and accept the tenets of my faith. They want to do this even though they believe that there are multiple ways to God not beyond just their faith.

Looking at the detailed results, all religions except the Unaffiliated showed very similar results: over 20% (1 in 5) of those witnessed at least monthly and about half witnessed at least yearly. So, it would appear that there is a lot of witnessing going on with very few conversions.

Table 1 below shows several estimates as to how many people are the recipients of these “intentional spiritual conversations” in a given year. The different levels shown are based on different assumptions as to how often they share with the same person and how many people they share with in a year consistent with the responses to the survey. More details are provided in the endnotes.

Table 1 Potential
Number of People Shared with by American Adults Ages 18 through 55

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Religious Affiliation of Person Sharing with Intent to Convert</th>
<th>Potential number of individuals shared with in one year</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Low estimate (millions){1}</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Nominal estimate (millions){2}</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>High estimate (millions){3}</td>
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</table>
These results amazed me. If the nominal estimate was truly happening almost 60% of the population would have someone attempting to convert them every year. This topic deserves additional related questions to determine what level of sharing with the intent of conversion is actually happening in America. It may be that most people answering this question are only sharing with one or two family members such as their teenage children or a sibling. Or perhaps, many people think they would do this, but really they do not.

What makes this especially surprising is that Other Protestants and Catholics have a lot more people witnessing than they have holding a Basic Biblical Worldview or actually being involved in their religion. While only about one in ten (10%) strongly disagree with the statement that Mohammed, Buddha and Jesus all taught valid ways to God, over half (50%) of them are sharing their faith with the intent to convert at least once a year. And, one in five (20%) are sharing monthly or more. If you think that there are multiple ways to heaven, why would you want to go out of your way to convert someone to your religion. Of course, you could be sharing with an Unaffiliated person who needs to choose a valid religion.

Only 4.6% of Other Protestants and 0.7% of Catholics have a Basic Biblical Worldview, but almost half of them say they intentionally witness to their faith at least yearly. When they engage in a conversation with the intent of having this other person accept their faith for themselves, WHAT IS THIS FAITH THEY ARE TRYING TO GET THE OTHER PERSON TO ACCEPT? These results do suggest that most people desire more people to think like them when it comes to religion.
In a similar vein, less than 1 in 10 (10%) Catholics and Other Protestants say they pray daily, attend church at least monthly, read the Bible weekly and say their faith is important in their daily life. So, the question remains, “What are they witnessing to???”

In contrast, only 29% of Born Again Christians have a Basic Biblical Worldview while well over half of them report intentional witnessing at least once a year. But at least BAC’s have something to witness to. Those Born Again Christians with a Basic Biblical Worldview report that almost two thirds (63%) of them share their faith at least once a year. This level is only a few percentage points higher than that for Born Again Christians as a whole.

**How Should We Respond?**

If the number of people sharing their faith is actually consistent with the answers to this question, then we know that the percentage of people actually converting as a result of their witness is very small. Otherwise, we would have many people toggling back and forth between different professed religions.

Among Born Again Christians, we project they are sharing their faith with between 25 million and 100 million nonbelievers. However, they are sharing ineffectively with the number being shared with far exceeding the growth rate of evangelicals in America. So, pastors and parachurch organizations need to up their game in training their people to share the good news of Christ. BAC’s need to understand and practice the following:

1. Bathe their unsaved acquaintances in prayer asking God to bring to a clear feeling of need
2. Recognize their call to effectively share the gospel looking for opportunities to share
3. Understand how to build bridges spanning the gaps of understanding for those with different worldviews
4. Clearly explain the wonderful gift purchased for us through Jesus’ death and resurrection
5. Unapologetically ask for a response to the good news shared with others
6. Realize that they should not be discouraged by a lack of interest or the lack of a positive response.

## 2. What Keeps You From Communicating Your Religious Belief?

We also asked the question: “When I refrain from communicating my religious belief with someone, it’s usually because.”

1. They can get to heaven through their different religious belief. [Pluralism]
2. We shouldn’t impose our ideas on others. [Pluralism]
3. The Bible tells us not to judge others. [Pluralism]
4. It just doesn’t seem to be that important and I don’t want to risk alienating them. [Not confident]
5. I’m not confident enough in what I believe. [Not confident]
6. I’m waiting for a better opportunity. [Hesitant]

For the chart in Figure 2, we grouped these responses into three sets:

- **Pluralism** - There are other ways besides my way and I don’t need to impose my way on others (responses 1, 2 and 3)
- **Not confident** - Not confident that what I have to share is important to
them and/or not confident that what I believe is true (responses 4 and 5)
• **Hesitant** – No rush, I can probably find a better time (response 6)

As seen in the chart, the level of respondents selecting each set of reasons for refraining are consistent across all religious beliefs. At first glance, this may seem surprising. But in a culture where pluralism is a dominant part of all religious groups, it begins to make sense. And the pluralistic reasons were dominant, attracting around two thirds of the population across all religious groupings.

For Born Again Christians, lack of confidence in what they believe is less of an issue than for other groups. And we see that the Unaffiliated are much less likely to be hesitant waiting for a better time at around 5% of all Unaffiliated. But note that most of the other groups had less than 25% say that they were hesitant.

Looking at both of the charts, we see that (even with a lot of people saying they sometimes used excuses to avoid the subject) a majority of people of any religious group (not including the unaffiliated) share with someone with a desire to recruit them at least once a year. I would suspect that most of these people are sharing with a family member or close friend. However, we did not ask the question so that is only reasonable speculation.

**How Should We Respond?**

If you are a church leader or a person who desires to see Christians sharing the good news of Jesus with those who need to know, how should you respond to this data on self-identified barriers to sharing with others?

On the most common reasons (which indicate a belief that other people don’t really need to know about salvation through faith in Jesus), we need to make the exclusive role of Jesus Christ in any hope of salvation a recurring and prominent theme in our teaching. This is not a topic to tiptoe gingerly around. Rather, we need to boldly proclaim, “There is salvation in no other name under heaven other than the name of Jesus Christ.” God would not have planned from before the beginning of time to sacrifice himself on the cross for our salvation if there were any other means to reconcile sinful men and women to Himself. God will not force
reconciliation on us. We can choose to reject His grace. But as Paul tells us in Romans, “How are they to believe in one they have not heard of?” If we think we can slough off our responsibility to tell others, we do not understand the grace of God and our role as citizens of heaven living on this earth.

For those who do not feel confident in their ability, we need to provide training and practice environments for them to learn to share their faith experience. You are telling someone about the most important element of your life; the process that brought you out of death into true life. Help prepare them and put them in a position to share the good news with a mentor alongside them.

### 3. Why Have You Not Believed In Salvation Through Jesus Christ?

Finally, we wanted to know why people have not accepted the gift of salvation through Jesus Christ. This is really a question on the other side of witnessing. I am including it here, but it could easily be a separate topic.

The question asked was as follows: *What keeps you from believing that salvation is by faith in Jesus Christ alone?*

The following options were given to select from:

1. Don’t believe that God would take upon Himself the penalty for my sin.
2. Salvation is not a gift, it must be earned.
3. I am clearly as good as Christians I know so I should be accepted by God if they are.
4. There is no personal, creator God.
5. Another answer not listed here.
6. Never gave the question any thought.
7. Not applicable, I do believe.

The table below captures the range of answers to this question.

| Ages 18 – 39 |
The first thing to notice in this table is that less than half of Born Again Protestants selected “Not applicable, I do believe.” This result is odd since one of the questions required to be considered a Born Again Protestant is “The statement that best describes you own belief about what will happen to you after you die is ‘I will go to heaven because I confessed my sins and accepted Jesus Christ as my savior.’” Perhaps some of the Born Agains thought we wanted to know what was keeping them away before they surrendered to the lordship of Jesus Christ. Perhaps this is because some of them consider “confessed my sins and accepted” as something they did to earn their salvation. In that case, one could possibly consider answers 2, 5, 6 and 7 as consistent with Born Again Protestants. Although that would be somewhat of a stretch. That assumption still leaves 17% of BA Protestants whose answers are clearly inconsistent.

Other Protestants are most likely to say, “I never gave the question any thought” or “Salvation must be earned” with only 13% saying they do believe the statement about salvation through faith alone. Catholics are about the same as Other

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Born Again Protestant</th>
<th>Other Protestant</th>
<th>Catholic</th>
<th>Other Religion</th>
<th>Unaffiliated</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Don’t believe that God would take the penalty for my sin</td>
<td>4.1%</td>
<td>13.7%</td>
<td>16.3%</td>
<td>10.6%</td>
<td>5.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Salvation is not a gift, it must be earned</td>
<td>15.7%</td>
<td>20.1%</td>
<td>23.8%</td>
<td>22.0%</td>
<td>8.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am clearly as good as Christians I know</td>
<td>11.9%</td>
<td>10.6%</td>
<td>16.2%</td>
<td>12.9%</td>
<td>8.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There is no personal, creator God</td>
<td>1.0%</td>
<td>2.8%</td>
<td>2.7%</td>
<td>5.8%</td>
<td>23.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Another answer not listed here</td>
<td>6.9%</td>
<td>9.9%</td>
<td>9.3%</td>
<td>21.9%</td>
<td>28.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Never gave the question any thought</td>
<td>15.0%</td>
<td>29.7%</td>
<td>16.3%</td>
<td>12.7%</td>
<td>13.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not applicable, I do believe</td>
<td>45.4%</td>
<td>13.3%</td>
<td>15.5%</td>
<td>14.1%</td>
<td>12.5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Protestants in saying they believe in salvation through faith alone. The more frequent answers for Catholics being “it must be earned”, “I am clearly as good as Christians I know”, and “never gave the question any thought.”

The most common answer from the Unaffiliated is “another answer not listed here” followed by “there is no personal, creator God”. Those who claim that most “nothing in particulars” are really Christians find little support in that only one in five (20%) say that they do believe in salvation through faith in Jesus.

4. Christianity and Other Major World Religions

One of the things that drives our attitude toward and our approach to witnessing to our faith is how we think Christianity relates to other world religions. In part 2 of this series, we looked at some questions that dealt with believing that multiple religions could offer a workable road to an eternity with God. In this part we will look at what people believe distinguishes Christianity from other world religions if in fact anything does.

We asked our respondents the following question: “How does Christianity relate to other major world religions?” The respondents selected from the following choices:

1. Serves the same function with only minor differences
2. Focuses on living after the example of Jesus Christ
3. Teaches that reconciliation with God is a gift of God accessed by faith not by works
4. Promotes love for other people more deeply than other religions
5. Differs based on misconceptions about God and/or history
6. Not sure how it relates

Note that answers 1, 5 and 6 indicate an ignorance about the tenets of Christianity and/or the tenets of other major world religions. As noted earlier, Christianity teaches a way to reconciliation that is very different from other world religions and is not compatible with the reconciliation stories of those other religions.
Answers two and four reflect potential differences between Christianity and other world religions. We do want to follow Christ’s example and other world religions would not teach us to do that. Other religions could not promote loving other people more deeply that Christianity does, but some of them might argue that they also promote love for others.

Teaching that reconciliation is a gift of God accessed by faith alone not through works is the greatest substantial difference between Christianity and other world religions. This teaching is significantly different than the teachings of Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, and others.

The results are charted in the graph to the right. First, notice the interesting result that only about 30% of Born Again Protestants selected ‘reconciliation is a gift’ while 40% selected following Jesus’ example or love others more deeply. As noted above, this second answer is not inconsistent with the concepts of Christianity but is not as fundamental as the first. However, selecting this answer over reconciliation is a gift’ is consistent with what we saw earlier: 70% of Born Again Christians are not exclusivists.[5]

Other Protestants and Catholics have less than one in five that selected ‘reconciliation is a gift’ and the total selecting answers 1 and 2 is slightly over one half. Thus, almost half of them selected answers showing ignorance of or disbelief.
in the basic tenets of Christianity.

The results for the Unaffiliated shows their total disregard for salvation by grace and any substantial difference between Christianity and other religions.

5. Summary of Key Results

Among Americans ages 18 through 39 who profess an affiliation with some religion, we find that less than 1 out of 5 (20%) of them strongly disagree with the statement that Muhammad, Buddha and Jesus all taught valid ways to God. Yet at the same time almost 6 out of 10 (60%) of them state that they share their faith with an unbeliever at least once a year with the intent of converting them to their belief.

So the majority of American believers (of any faith) must believe that at least for some people with different religious beliefs, it would be better for them to turn from their current belief and accept the tenets of my faith. They want to do this even though they believe that there are multiple ways to God beyond just their faith.

We also discovered that Born Again Christians are not really more likely that other religious groups to share their faith with the purpose to convert. Born Again Christians with a Biblical Worldview are only marginally more likely to share with the purpose to convert at least yearly as Born Again Christians as a whole (63% vs. 57%).

Amazingly, one could project that nominally about 212 million Americans a year would be the recipients of these spiritual conversations with the intent to convert. However, if almost all of these conversations were with the same person it might represent as few as 34 million Americans which could be primarily the children and relatives of the person sharing their faith. We cannot know for sure without asking more questions.

Conversely, when asked what makes them refrain from sharing their faith, almost 70% of Born Again Christians selected a reason that indicated they believed that
the other person did not really need to know; a universalist belief where all religious beliefs lead to heaven.

About one out of seven (14%) of adults under age 40 who are not Born Again Protestants believe that salvation is by faith in Jesus Christ alone. This small number is true for Other Protestants, Catholics and Other Religions. This same group of religious affiliates has about 1 in 3 who believe that salvation is a result of good works and is earned or rewarded on a curving scale.

Less than one in three, Born Again Christians selected the redeeming work of God through faith as the key difference between Christianity and other religions. And less than one in five Other Protestants and Catholics selected that answer. Instead, about three out of four (75%) selected love deeply, obey Jesus or Christianity is basically the same as the message of other religions.

**Notes**

1. Low Estimate: Calculated assuming that those sharing at least monthly on the average shared their faith 12 times per year and those sharing at least yearly but less than monthly shared on the average 1 times per year AND that they shared on the average with the same individual four times.

2. Nominal Estimate: Calculated assuming that those sharing at least monthly on the average shared their faith 18 times per year and those sharing at least yearly but less than monthly shared on the average 2 times per year AND that they shared on the average with the same individual three times.

3. High Estimate: Calculated assuming that those sharing at least monthly on the average shared their faith 24 times per year and those sharing at least yearly but less than monthly shared on the average 4 times per year AND that they shared on the average with the same individual two times.

4. Although most people selected only one answer, on this question they could select multiple answers

5. Exclusivists are those who believe that their religion is the only source of correct teaching concerning our relationship with God. When I get time, I will check out the relationship between those who are exclusivists and those who selected ‘reconciliation is a gift’
Atheism 2.0? Talking Back to a TED Talk

T.S. Weaver

In 2011, atheist Alain de Botton gave a now-famous TED talk “Atheism 2.0.” As part of a seminary class on apologetics, Probe intern T.S. Weaver was assigned to write a response to it, which we are honored to publish. First, here is a video of that TED talk:
Dear Mr. de Botton,

First, I want to say I admire your courage to share these ideas publicly and I do think you are a gifted orator. I am a Christian seminary student and have both many things I agree with and disagree with from your talk. I will try to touch on them in the order you bring them up in your talk.

To start with when you say, “Of course there’s no God . . . now let’s move on. That’s not the end of the story. That’s the very very beginning,” I can respect that because I agree that a truth claim regarding the existence of God is just the beginning. This truth claim informs our entire worldview and how we live. To me, knowing there is a God (the same conclusion to which avowed atheist Sir Antony Flew came) gives me meaning, purpose, knowledge of where we came from, where we are going, and how to live. I wonder from your perspective, though, how without a God, any of these key issues in life can be addressed. Without a God, where do we come from? What does life really mean? How do we differentiate between good and evil? What happens when we die?

Going further in your talk, I must say I too love Christmas carols, looking at churches, and turning the pages of the Old Testament. We have common ground
here, so again, we do not disagree on everything.

However, evaluating your view again, I do not see how you can be attracted to the “moralistic side” of religion without the existence of God. You say you are “stealing from religion;” that I agree with as well. I wonder if you have thought, if you are truly an atheist, how can there even be such things as morals? How can you define good? In relation to what? Where does this come from? If there is some moral law, have you thought about where it comes from? Do you think that implies there must be some sort of law giver? In the atheistic worldview what is the moral law and who is the law giver?

You go on to say, “There’s nothing wrong with picking out the best sides of religion.” That sounds nice, but I disagree. You must either adopt it all or nothing, otherwise you do not have a worldview that makes sense. There will be self-contradictions all throughout your view. A perfect example as I touched on above is your idea of “Atheism 2.0.” It is impossible to adopt a moralistic side because without God there are no morals. There is no reason to have a moralistic side. This is a contradiction. Have you considered this?

As your talk goes on, you say some remarkably interesting things I have not heard before, even from an atheist. Your claim the church in the early nineteenth century looked to culture to find morality, guidance, and sources of consolation is new to me. I would like to know how you came to this conclusion. Which denomination? Which church? What was your source of information? It is noticeably clear to me that the practice of the (Christian) church is to find all those things from Scripture and God. In fact, the Bible tells us in several places not to conform to culture. Here is one example from my favorite verse: “Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.” (Romans 12:2) So, your claim is the exact opposite of what I as a Christian know presently and have learned about church history.

Furthermore, does not this refute how you opened your talk when you said, “We have done secularism bad”? You even say the church replacing Scripture with culture is “beautiful” and “true” and “an idea that we have forgotten.” This is the very description of how atheists “have done secularism,” is it not? From my
understanding, atheism replaces Scripture with culture. Is this true, or am I missing something? If it is true, you have already done the reflection on how it is working and concluded it is “bad.” Yet you want to “steal from religion.” So, if your claim about church history is true, this is how it falls out: You think secularism has been done bad and want to instead steal morality from religion. And yet, religion (according to you) has gotten morality from culture (i.e., secularism). So, the very thing you would be stealing is what you yourself already called bad and would end up stuck with in the end anyway. Nothing has changed. Do you see how this is incoherent if it were true? Have you thought about this?

I do like your thoughts about the difference between a sermon (wanting to change your life) and a lecture (wanting to give you a bit of information). I also agree we need to get back to “that sermon tradition,” and we are in need of morality, guidance, and consolation, because like you said, “We are barely holding it together.” And I do mean “we” to cover both the atheist and the Christian alike. This is exactly what Christianity is about. We cannot “hold it together“ on our own. That is why we have a Savior, and we live dependently on God, the moral law giver. Now again, you cannot have morality without the moral law giver. Furthermore, if you get guidance from atheists preaching sermons are you not facing the same problem I wrote of in the earlier paragraph? Where is the guidance coming from? Culture? Have you considered this to be the blind leading the blind?

I also agree with your point about the value of repetition. I have so much information coming at me so fast that if I do not revisit it enough, almost none of it sticks. That is another reason I am repeating some of my points.

Now you mentioned one of the things you like about religion is when someone is preaching a rousing part of a sermon, we shout “Amen,” “Thank you Lord,” “Yes Lord,” “Thank you Jesus,” etc. Your idea of atheists doing this when fellow atheists are preaching passionate points is both clever and funny. However, as Rebecca McLaughlin (a Christian) pointed out in her book, Confronting Christianity, your examples of secular audiences saying, “Thank you Plato, thank you Shakespeare, thank you Jane Austen!” falls flat because of the examples you
chose. McLaughlin writes, “One wonders how Shakespeare, whose world was fundamentally shaped by Christianity, would have felt about being cast as an atheist icon. But when it comes to Jane Austen, the answer is clear: a woman of deep, explicit, and abiding faith in Jesus, she would be utterly appalled.”

Your point on art is amazingly fascinating. You say if you were a museum curator, you would make a room for love and a room for generosity. While this sounds beautiful, there is a problem. This will sound repetitive (helping us both learn and remember), but it is just like the morality dilemma you have presented earlier. If no God exists, what is love? What is generosity? How do you define it? Where does it come from? Why is it valuable? Why is anything valuable?

To beat the dead horse one more time (apologies) . . . In your closing statements you again you say all these things are “very good.” Well, what is good? How do you define it? In relation to what? Where does it come from? How do you know that? As you earlier confessed, you are stealing from religion. These stolen values have no grounding if atheism is true.

I know some of the issues I raised were not necessarily the purpose of your talk, but in all, I wonder if you have considered how the facts and implications you presented correspond to reality. Do you think all the assertions you made cohere? Do you find your idea of Atheism 2.0 logically consistent and rational? If you could give a follow up talk, could you offer any way to verify your claims empirically? Could you supply answers to the questions of origin, meaning, morality, and destiny?

Sincerely,

A Christian – T.S. Weaver
The Professor: Why Are You a Christian? - When Challenged, Can You Defend Your Faith in Christ

Dr. Ray Bohlin

Are our adults ready to give a defense of the gospel? When challenged, can they give a reasonable explanation of their faith? Dr. Bohlin presents a sobering view of this question based upon years of experience questioning high school and college-age students on the basis for their belief in Christ. By exposing their lack of cogent answers to questions they may be asked, he challenges them to spend time exploring the questions and developing biblical worldview-based answers.

The Professor

Over the last ten years, I have used a very effective technique to help teens realize their unpreparedness for the step toward college. It seems our young people are heading into public and even Christian colleges thinking they are ready for the challenge to their faith that higher learning can be.

Probe Ministries has sponsored a college prep conference since 1991 that was designed to help young people gain some insights and even some knowledge on how to address the intellectual challenges that college will provide.

If you remember the thousands of college radicals who protested and picketed in the ‘60s and ‘70s, they found their push for change was not very effective. Instead, many of them stayed in college, obtained Masters Degrees and PhDs.
After all, it was easier than getting a real job! As a result, they are now your children’s professors!

The college campus was an anti-Christian breeding ground several decades ago and now it is even worse. Christianity is not so much openly mocked as it is marginalized and deemed a false and mischievous mythology.

If you haven’t already heard some of these statistics, you need to hold onto your hat.

In 2007, LifeWay surveyed 23- to 30-year-olds and found that seventy percent had taken at least a one year break from church during their college years.\(^1\) Now, almost two-thirds of these return to some level of church attendance, but mainly to please family or friends who encouraged them to return. That means that most of our churched youth are making many of their life decisions, including marriage and career, apart from a church context. Even many who return carry numerous scars from bad choices during those years.\(^2\)

With this statistical background, it’s plain our young people need some preparation before going on to college or the military. But as most parents of teens know, just telling them they need this is less than likely to be convincing.

Enter the Professor. The technique I mentioned at the beginning is to impersonate an atheistic college professor doing research on the religious beliefs of young people. Sometimes the students know I am playing a role with them, but occasionally I play the professor and the students are none the wiser.

**A Simple Question**

When I step to the front of the room, I introduce myself as Professor Hymie Schwartz (a name borrowed from my late colleague Jerry Solomon who played this role far better than I do). I tell the group that, since I am conducting research on the religious beliefs of young people, their youth pastor, counselor, principal, teacher—whatever, has allowed me to visit with them.
I begin the conversation something like this: “Since this is a church or Christian school I presume you are all Christians. Is anyone not a Christian?” Of course no one raises their hand. But I am always aware that some may indeed not be believers and may not appreciate my questioning so I am always paying attention.

At this point I simply call on someone, usually someone who isn’t really paying attention or is engrossed in conversation with a neighbor. “You! Are you a Christian?” No one has ever answered no. Upon receiving an affirmative answer, with hands casually stuck in my pockets, I demand, “Why?”

Students are paying attention now. This is for real. Now consider my question for yourself. If Peter warns us to always be ready to give an answer to anyone who asks to give a defense for the hope that we have, this is a pretty basic question. In our highly secular culture, if someone finds out you’re a Christian, they may indeed ask you why. Peter says you ought to have an answer.

But this simple question why is usually something our young people, and even their parents, have never really considered. Their Christian faith is certainly something they would claim is central to their lives, but the dumbfounded looks on their faces tells me repeatedly that this question is a new one.

It’s usually about this time that any parents sitting in the back are suddenly quite relieved I’m not talking to them!

By asking such questions, I can get them pretty riled up and confused. The point is not to have fun but to help them see that they need to be prepared and think a little about why Christianity is important to them and why they think it’s true.

“I Asked Jesus into My Heart!”

Having their Christianity questioned usually comes as a surprise and even shock. Rather than directly answering the question, they try to tell me how they became a Christian. It usually takes the form of confidently saying they asked Jesus into their heart.
The professor quickly fires back, “You asked Jesus into your heart?! That sounds pretty gross, really. What’s he doing in there with all that blood? Yuck!” That always gets a surprised reaction and a little befuddlement. The student typically tries to recover by saying something like, “No, I mean it’s like I trusted Jesus as my Savior.”

Again the professor will fire back quickly with a question like, “Why did you do that?” or “Savior? What did you need saving from?” I think you can see where this is going. It really is not difficult to pick something from what he or she said and challenge it. I either pretend I don’t understand what they said, forcing them to better explain themselves (which is rare), or I deliberately ask them why they think that way, or how they know that.

In answer to “How do you know that?” I am often told that “It says so in the Bible!” They usually can’t tell me where the Bible says that. I also ask if the Bible is true, and they say it is. But when I ask, “How do you know it’s true?” the blank stare reemerges.

Sometimes a student will say, “Because it’s the word of God!” Now I can really dig a little deeper. In response to further questioning, they usually can’t tell me where the Bible says it’s the Word of God nor can they tell me why the Bible is different from The Book of Mormon or the Qur’an. If there is a youth pastor or chaplain present there is usually an embarrassed look on their face or a head buried in their hands.

By this time the class is very tense and full of nervous laughter. When I reach a dead end with a student—for instance when they say, “I don’t know” with a very resigned and defeated voice—I look for one of the laughing students and ask, “What about you?” Of course that gets everybody’s attention again and off we go.

While I admit I have a little fun playing this role, it never ceases to break my heart at how ill-prepared our young people are to follow Peter’s advice to always be prepared with an answer. I have yet to find a student in ten years who is willing and able to go toe-to-toe with the professor.
“You’re a Narrow-Minded, Self-Righteous Bigot!”

Here are three other directions our conversations have frequently taken.

When I have challenged students to tell me why they think or believe Christianity is true, some will turn to their own subjective experience. Technically, there is nothing wrong with this, specifically when speaking to a Christian audience. But someone who doesn’t even believe in God will frequently find ways to truly make fun of this element.

A student may describe that Jesus speaks to them in their prayer time, to which I quickly ask what His voice sounds like or how they know it was Jesus and not indigestion. The blank stares usually resume at this point. We have become so comfortable in our Christian bubble sometimes that we frequently don’t see how unintelligible our language is to those outside the community of faith. It’s tough to share the gospel that way.

Sometimes a student will interject that they believe in Jesus because that’s what their family has taught them or it’s what they learned in church. I usually pounce on that pretty quickly and repeat that this student believes Christianity is true because their parents told them so. The student usually agrees. After commending them for honoring their parents I tell them that’s really pretty stupid. Pausing a second for the shock to register, I go on about the boy raised in India whose parents are Hindu and he respects his parents and believes Hinduism is true, so the boy in India and this student are both headed to heaven because they trusted their parents!

One time a student stammered around and eventually agreed with my statement as his youth pastor put his head in his hands.

Finally in talking about salvation I ask what happens to those who don’t believe in Jesus. Most will hesitatingly say they go to hell. The professor predictably rants, “Just because I don’t believe the same fairy tale as you, I’m going to hell?” When they predictably shake their head yes, I get down eye to eye and spit out, “You’re a narrow minded, self-righteous bigot!”
Always Be Ready to Give an Answer, with Gentleness and Respect

Students enjoy the interactive nature of this routine even though they are routinely embarrassed by their inability to handle the challenge. When Peter admonished all of us to always be ready to give an answer to everyone who asks us for a reason for the hope that we have, yet with gentleness and respect (1 Pet. 3:15), they fail miserably. Perhaps as a parent, you may be glad that I don’t do this with adult groups.

Often students will try to turn the conversation in their favor by asking the professor a question. I quickly dismiss that idea by simply answering that I’m asking the questions. But when we’re done, if time allows I attempt to leave them with hope by quickly summarizing how I, Dr. Ray Bohlin, Vice-President of Probe Ministries, would answer the same question.

Here’s the outline of my response. In a calm voice I quickly assert that I know there is a God. As a scientist I look principally at how marvelously our universe, galaxy, solar system, and planet are designed for complex life here on earth. The number of highly improbable coincidences rules out chance and strongly implies design. This is reinforced by the evidence from biology of the incredible complexity of life, particularly the coded information in DNA. This remarkable molecule with its accompanying system of transcription and translation screams for intelligence.

The fact that all people have some sense of right and wrong, even though we may disagree sometimes, tells us we are comparing our morality to some invisible standard outside ourselves that must come from a supreme Law Giver. I am convinced there is a supernatural God.

If this God exists, then has He spoken to man? I quickly tell about the uniqueness of Scripture, written by forty authors from eight countries over fifteen hundred years in three languages and all with a consistent and unique message of a God of love who ransomed us from our sins. Where we have archaeological evidence it consistently confirms the accuracy of biblical events. I am convinced the Bible is
the true and unique Word of God.

The Bible throughout is about Jesus, who repeatedly claimed to be the unique divine Son of God and offered his death and resurrection on behalf of mankind as proof. That Jesus bodily rose from the dead is the only rational conclusion of the evidence of the empty tomb. On top of that, my personal experience of the last thirty-seven years has shown me again and again the unique love and power of God.

So what about you? Why are you a Christian?

Notes

2. Youth Transition Network has researched this problem over the last ten years and has excellent resources, videos, research, and books and DVDs for purchase. Take a look at www.ytn.org.

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The Apologetics of Jesus: A Defense of His Deity

Dr. Patrick Zukeran
Dr. Zukeran shows us that the greatest defense of the deity of Jesus was made by Jesus Himself. Claiming to be God in the flesh, His words and His actions had to be an apologetic for His claim. People could see He was a man; He had to prove to them that He was also deity, God in the flesh.

Jesus was one of the greatest leaders, teachers, and remarkable individuals that ever lived, but few realize that Jesus was also the greatest apologist. Apologetics is the rational defense of Christianity. Christian apologists use reason and evidence to present a convincing case for Christianity, challenge unbelief, expose errors, and defend the message of the gospel. Apologetics was an essential part of Jesus’ ministry. If it was important in His ministry, it certainly should be in all ministries looking to impact the unbelieving world for Christ.

The Bible commands us in 1 Peter 3:15, “But set apart Christ as Lord in your hearts. Always be prepared to give an answer [apologia] to everyone who asks you the reason for the hope that you have.” We are commanded to provide a well-reasoned answer for our faith in Christ to an unbelieving world. Jesus commanded us to “love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind” (Mt. 22:37). Apologetics involves knowing why you believe and complies with Christ’s command of loving God with your mind.

There exists some misunderstanding among Christians as to whether apologetics is necessary. Some believe that our belief in Christ is based on “faith” and thus does not require solid reasons or evidence to support it. Therefore, in witnessing to unbelievers, some mistakenly suppose that apologetics is ineffective in leading anyone to faith. The call of the Christian is to simply present the gospel, and the Holy Spirit and the Scriptures will do the rest. However, this was not the example of Christ.

Christ made extraordinary claims to be the divine Son of God. He made such claims as being the source of life, forgiver of sins, the embodiment of truth, and authority over the Old Testament Law. Such claims were met with skepticism, doubt, and hostility. Jesus knew He was making remarkable claims, and He did not expect people to simply believe His message without good reasons. He was
not seeking or wanting people to exercise “blind faith.” Jesus understood that we are rational and moral beings, for we are created in the image of God who is a rational and morally perfect being. For this reason, we exercise our rational capacity and investigate the evidence before making decisions.

Christ knew He would have to make a convincing case to uphold His claims and He did. Throughout His ministry, Christ presented compelling reasons and evidence to uphold His claim to be the divine Son of God. Jesus’ apologetics included the testimony of witnesses, miracles, the resurrection, prophecy, reason, the use of parables and more. The apologetic methods of Jesus serve as a model for every believer who desires to engage and impact an unbelieving world for Christ.

The Testimony of Witnesses

A man ill for thirty-eight years lay beside the Pool of Bethesda along with a multitude of crippled individuals. Suddenly an unknown stranger walks up and asks him a strange question. “Do you want to get well?” As the lame man begins to explain his situation, the stranger orders the man to “Get up! Pick up your mat and walk!” Immediately, strength enters his legs and he rises and walks, carrying his mat as the stranger orders. Soon afterwards the Pharisees arrive and an examination ensues.

What should have been a moment of rejoicing turns into a serious interrogation. The Jewish leaders in John 5 confront Jesus seeking an opportunity and reason to kill Him. Instead of praising God in the healing of the lame man, the focus of the Jewish leaders is on the apparent violation of their Jewish tradition by Jesus.

Jesus responded saying, “My Father is always at His work to this very day, and I, too, am working.” (Jn. 5:17). The following verse states, “For this reason, the Jews tried all the harder to kill Him; not only was he breaking the Sabbath, but he was even calling God His own Father, making Himself equal with God.” (Jn. 5:18). In this chapter Jesus performed some remarkable feats and made some extraordinary claims. When questioned, Jesus gave an answer or an apologia, a defense of His work and character. In His answer, we see that He was the
greatest apologist and that apologetics was a key component in the ministry of Jesus.

In the passage that follows, Jesus presents one of the clearest and strongest cases regarding His nature as the divine Son of God. New Testament scholar Leon Morris states, “Nowhere in the Gospels do we find our Lord making such a formal, systematic, orderly, regular statement of His own unity with the Father, His divine commission and authority, and the proofs of His Messiahship, as we find in this discourse.”{1}

What was the apologetic method Jesus used in this instance? Jesus’ apologetic involved the testimony of witnesses. According to Jewish law, a testimony is valid only if there were at least two witnesses who could testify to the truth of an individual’s claims (Deut. 19:15). Jesus knew these men needed solid testimony to confirm His claims but also testimony that would convict them of their error regarding their understanding of His identity.

Jesus brings forth five witnesses that testify on His behalf; John the Baptist (5:32-35), His works (5:36), the Father (5:37), the Old Testament Scriptures (5:39-40), and Moses (5:41-46). There were no more authoritative witnesses than these. In a brilliant presentation, Jesus makes His case. The testimony of witnesses was part of the apologetics of Jesus.

**Apologetics in the Parables**

It is a well-known fact that Jesus was a great storyteller. His stories captivated the audience and taught a valuable lesson. The term “good Samaritan” and “the prodigal Son,” are recognized all over the world because of the unforgettable stories told by Jesus. One of the best ways to communicate truth is to illustrate it through stories which are also an effective way to penetrate into hardened hearts that would not be receptive to a direct gospel presentation. The parables of Christ are some of the most remarkable lessons ever taught. However, did you know that the parables of Christ were also powerful apologetic presentations of our Lord?

Through the use of these stories, Jesus makes a declaration and a defense of His
ministry and claims. The images He selects are used in the Old Testament and later Jewish literature in reference to God. Jesus uses these images and applies them often to Himself. Philip Payne states, “Out of the fifty-two recorded narrative parables, twenty depict Him in imagery which in the Old Testament typically referred to God. The frequency with which this occurs indicates that Jesus regularly depicted Himself in images which were particularly appropriate for depicting God.” {2}

By applying these images to Himself Jesus indicates his self-understanding as the divine Son of God and was communicating this truth to His audience. Payne identifies ten prominent images used in the parables in which images used in reference to God in the Old Testament Jesus applies to Himself. {3} Jesus’ repeated use of such images indicates He wanted His audience to recognize His divinity and that He was carrying out the very will of God in His ministry on earth.

Here are a few examples where Christ declares His divinity in the gospels. The image of the rock is used to describe God, especially in the Psalms (Ps. 19:14, 28:1, 42:9, 61:2, 62:2, 71:3, 78:35). In the parables of Jesus, He states that those who build their lives upon His teachings have built their lives upon “a rock” (Matt. 7:24-26 and Lk. 6:46-49). In Psalm 23 and Ezekiel 34, God is portrayed as a shepherd. In John 10 Jesus identifies Himself as the good shepherd. In another parable, Jesus uses the example of a bridegroom. In Isaiah 49, 54, Jeremiah 2, and Hosea, God is pictured as a bridegroom. In Mk. 2:19, Matt. 9:15, and Lk. 5:34-35, Jesus identifies Himself as the bridegroom. The parables were powerful stories Jesus used to communicate truth but they were also part of the apologetics of Jesus.

**The Use of Reason**

Jesus commanded us to “Love the Lord your God with all your . . . mind” (Mt. 22:37). Jesus exemplified what it meant to love God with “all your mind.” He was the greatest thinker who ever set foot upon the earth. Philosopher Dallas Willard states,
We need to understand that Jesus is a thinker, that this is not a dirty word but an essential work, and that his other attributes do not preclude thought, but only insure that he is certainly the greatest thinker of the human race: ‘the most intelligent person who ever lived on earth.’ He constantly uses the power of logical insight to enable people to come to the truth about themselves and about God from the inside of their own heart and mind.\(^4\)

Jesus understood that we are created in the image of God. Our creator is a reasonable and rational being. We are thus endowed with the capacity for reason and rationality. In Isaiah 1:18, God invited Israel saying, “Come now let us reason together.” God wanted the people of Israel to use their ability to reason and consider the consequences of their behavior.

Jesus showed Himself to be a brilliant apologist who used the laws of logic to reveal truth, demolish arguments, and point out error. The communication of truth and discerning error requires the use of reason. Since our faith is a reasonable faith, reason was part of the apologetics of Jesus.

An example of the use of reason is found in Matthew 12:22-28. Here the Pharisees accuse Jesus of casting out demons by the power of the Devil. Through the use of reason, Jesus showed their accusation to be false. The argument He used is the argument known as *reductio ad absurdum* [Latin for “reduction to the absurd”]. This is an argument that demonstrates if the primary premise is supposed to be true, then it leads to a contradiction that is absurd. One would then inevitably have to conclude that the original premise is false.

Jesus responded stating that “Every kingdom divided against itself will be ruined and every city or household divided against itself will not stand. If Satan drives out Satan, he is divided against himself. How then can his kingdom stand? And if I drive out demons by Beelzebub, by whom do your people drive them out?” Jesus points to the illogical nature of their accusation and further points to the testimony of His miracles that confirm His authority being from God.
Apologetics of Miracles

Something had gone terribly wrong. The Messiah had arrived but the Kingdom, which would be characterized by liberty, freedom, and the just rule of God, had not arrived. Instead, John the Baptist found himself in prison awaiting execution. Confused and discouraged, John sent his disciples to Jesus to ask Him, “Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?” (Lk. 7:20). Jesus responds by pointing to the testimony of His miracles: “Go back and report to John what you hear and see. The lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor.” (Lk. 7:22-23). When asked by John if He was indeed the Messiah, Jesus defends His claim by pointing to the testimony of His miracles. Miracles represent another component in the apologetics of Jesus.

A miracle is a special act of God that interrupts the normal course of events. Natural laws describe what occurs regularly by natural causes, but miracles describe what happens rarely, by supernatural causes. A miracle is an act of God designed to confirm the word of God through a messenger of God.\[5\]

Throughout the Old Testament, God used miracles to confirm His message and His messenger. Christ’s miracles demonstrated that what He claimed about Himself was true and that God’s confirming hand was on the message He preached. Jesus performed a vast array of miraculous signs that demonstrated His divine authority over every realm of creation.

When friendly as well as hostile audiences questioned Jesus, He defended His claims with the testimony of miracles (Mk. 2:1-12, Jn. 2, and 10:22-42). Many who witnessed Christ’s miracles made the connection. Nathaniel, witnessing the omniscience of Christ, responded exclaiming, “Rabbi, you are the Son of God; you are the King of Israel.” (Jn. 1:49). Nicodemus in his evening visit meets Jesus saying, “Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the miraculous signs you are doing if God were not with him.” (Jn. 3:2).

When Christ establishes His kingdom, all creation will be subject to Him. Sin,
sickness, death, and disease will be overcome and the subjects of the kingdom will never be in want. The miracles of Christ reflect His divine character and demonstrate the King of the Kingdom has arrived.

Apologetics was an essential component of Christ’s ministry and should be an important part of any ministry looking to engage this lost world for Christ. The Bible commands us to defend our faith, and Christ set the supreme example for us to follow.

To learn more about the apologetics of Jesus and gain valuable practical lessons from His examples, check out the online store at Probe.org and purchase a copy of the in depth book, *The Apologetics of Jesus* written by Norman Geisler and myself.

Notes

3. Ibid., 313-17.

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**Is Jesus the Only Way? - Part 2**

Paul Rutherford
Paul Rutherford explains how reason, Christ’s resurrection, and the Bible all testify that Jesus is the only way to heaven.

I can’t drive around town seven days straight without passing at least one car with a bumper sticker that reads, “Coexist” on the back. You know the one. It spells the word using symbols associated with the world’s faiths, ancient and modern.

The popularly held mantra is that “all religions are equally valid ways to heaven.” This is what’s called pluralism. So is there room in this brave new world for the words of an ancient and historically respected faith?

Jesus once said, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” (John 14:6) That sounds offensive and inflammatory today. I will remind you that Jesus said it, not me.

Even more important is the truth question. It is perhaps even more offensive! Are Jesus’ words true?

I fully acknowledge even the question itself may strike you as antiquated, out of date. Perhaps I sound to you like an eccentric, soured-up, fuddy-duddy. I may be. But if the words of Jesus are true, then far more than your offended sense of style is at stake here. Far, far more.

So listen up. And take note because this crazy sounding first-century Jewish rabbi
made some crazy-big statements about the nature of man, the nature of reality, and how to live the good life, here, now, and forever. Does that at least sound appealing to you? If even just for the sake of a little controversy?

Explore with me the words of this rabbi. In this article we’ll think through three reasons you should agree with him. And maybe you’ll even find eternal life in the process. If you’re a long-time listener to Probe radio, or a regular listener, this may sound familiar. I have another program exploring the position that Jesus is the only way to God. This one is part two. In this one I give you three reasons Jesus is in fact the only way to heaven. In the previous program, I defended Jesus’ statement against three lines of criticism. So in the next sections I’ll explain how reason, the resurrection, and the Word all testify that Jesus is the only way to heaven.

Jesus the Only Way Because of Reason

Western culture today is more pluralistic and secular than ever before. This means at least in one small part, that people believe multiple religions lead to heaven. Western culture has been moving this way for some decades. Now it has reached mainstream. Pop culture increasingly accepts this. It is therefore so much more important to consider this exclusive claim Jesus made. He said, “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except by me.” (John 14:6)

This is an increasingly unpopular teaching. Before I defend it, allow me to clarify. It was made by the Lord Jesus himself. I didn’t make it up. I am merely defending it.

So today I want to talk about how it is reasonable to believe this statement—why it is that you should yourself believe Jesus is the only way to heaven.

Today’s reason is logic itself. I will base this conclusion on two points: first, that the belief in one God is more logically defensible than believing in multiple creator gods; and second, that the belief in Jesus Christ as God is more reasonable than claims to deity made by others.
The first point is that believing in one creator God is more reasonable than believing in multiple. The god Aristotle believed in (the unmoved mover) was eternally simple. That is, at the root of all things is ultimately one thing—one cause, one source, one origin to which all other things owe their existence. This position beautifully avoids the difficulty of what philosophers call *reductio ad absurdum*—or the problem of infinite regression—or the problem of which came first, the chicken or the egg? The search for the first, original, or ultimate source, does not continue on and on forever. It cannot.

The second point is that Jesus is the most reasonable candidate for divinity. I respect the Buddha. But he never claimed to be God. Neither did Mohammad. Jesus was very clear. He claimed to be God.

Consider His teachings. They have not been surpassed in excellence in the two millennia that have passed since He walked the earth. Consider His actions. History’s best biographies about the man Jesus, record Him loving His enemies, healing the sick, and showing compassion to outcasts. Jesus’ life exemplified extraordinary moral rectitude.

I conclude, therefore, that it is more reasonable to believe Jesus is the only way to God given that it is more reasonable to believe in only one creator God, and given that Jesus has the best case for divinity among man’s founders of faith.

**Jesus the Only Way Because of the Resurrection**

We have a saying in American culture that nothing is certain but death and taxes. So if the taxman doesn’t come to call, the grim reaper will eventually. Death finds each of us, so we must face our own mortality.

By the best historical accounts Jesus also died and was buried, just like so many of His human brothers before Him. But Jesus, on the other hand, experienced something unique, declaring Him God above all others.

I speak, of course, of resurrection. Jesus Christ is the only person ever to have raised up Himself from the dead of his own volition, and by His own power.
This one point may be the most compelling of the three I offer this week. It is perhaps the most intuitive case for Jesus being the only way to Heaven. If Jesus really died and raised Himself from the dead, then His power exceeds those of any other man before Him, or after, for that matter. Surely He must be God.

No other religious figure can make that claim. In a class by Himself, Jesus reigns over all the founders of world religions. Muhammad’s burial site is a common tourist destination in Saudi Arabia for contemporary pilgrims. Buddha’s cremation site is in northern India. No such site exists today in contemporary Israel for Jesus. His body has no confirmed remains.

The tomb is empty. That much is clear. Records indicate He definitely died and was buried. The empty tomb demands an explanation. Resurrection makes the most sense. Jesus is the only way because He is the only one who has died and raised himself up to new life.

We have several excellent articles at our website devoted to just this topic. Go check them out for more detail. Jesus is who He said he is, “The way, the truth, and the life.” (John 14:6) So the question is, do you want some? Believe in Jesus today by faith.

**Jesus the Only Way Because the Word Declares It**

Western culture today increasingly accepts the belief that multiple religions are equally valid and they are all ways to eternal life. I propose to you today another reason to believe something diametrically opposed to this—namely that the Jesus Christ revealed in the Bible, is the only way to eternal life. As the gospel writer John quoted Him, He is, the way, the truth, and the life (14:6). No one comes to the Father except through Him.

This third and final line of reasoning that Jesus is the only way to eternal life, springs from the Bible—from the very word of God itself.
You may not accept the Bible as God’s word. That’s ok. Just hear me out. Let me explain how this line of reasoning at least makes sense. Then after you’ve heard it, you can judge for yourself if it’s true or not.

So first, the Bible claims to be God’s word (2 Timothy 3:16). If we therefore assume the very commonly held conception that God is good and perfect, then that includes the words He speaks as well. So if He speaks good words, then those words must be true. They must accurately describe reality.

The Bible also makes this claim. Jesus in a famous prayer to the Father asks him to sanctify His disciples with the truth before stating, “Your word is truth.” (John 17:17) It’s a profound statement.

So if God’s word is true, and God says in His word that Jesus is, in fact, the only way to God—that none can come to Him except by Jesus, then that means it’s true. See how simple that is?

But this statement is also made in another part of the Bible, Acts 4:12. Peter and John have been arrested and are being examined by the Jewish leaders. Peter declares Jesus to them and explains, “There is no other name under heaven, given among men, by which we must be saved.”

I fully admit this line of reasoning rests on you acknowledging the authority of the Bible—in which case you may not have needed to be convinced in the first place. But if you had not already been convinced of the truth of God’s word, I am very sincerely relying on the power of the Spirit at work in you to believe this truth. (Isaiah 55:11)

**Conclusion**

In this article we considered the truth of a controversial claim. It might be one of the most hotly contested claims in religion today—that Jesus Christ is the only way to heaven.

This is not popular these days in America, Europe, anywhere in the English speaking West, or the non-English speaking West. To hear responses to criticisms
against the claim, check out part one of this two part series.

Jesus was Himself no stranger to controversy. He died a criminal’s death at the hands of His enemies. He was killed and buried. The Jewish and Roman leaders were smugly satisfied they’d dispatched this unquiet voice.

But when Jesus’ enemies attempt to end his earthly ministry, they unknowingly ushered in a spiritually unending ministry of atonement and reconciliation. By his death Jesus paid the price of sin—death—satisfying the just wrath of God. Jesus made peace with God on your behalf. Believe in Him by faith today and you can have peace with God. Would you like to have peace with him? Tell Him right now. Use your voice or pray silently. But tell Him. Go ahead.

The only thing required of you to receive eternal life is to believe Jesus is Lord. One of Jesus’ most famous sayings is, “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.” (John 3:16)

Confess this belief with your mouth that Jesus Christ is God and believe in your heart that God has raised up his Son from the dead. And you can be saved. (Romans 10:9)

Jesus is the only way to God because there is no other way to get to God but by Jesus. Mankind is imperfect. You are dead in your transgressions and sins. The only way to satisfy God’s holy wrath is to give Him what is due: death. Jesus died that death for you. He’s the only one who could ever have paid your debt. And He did.

Human reason leads us to this beautiful conclusion that Jesus is the only way. God has declared it himself clearly in his divinely inspired book—the Bible. His resurrection seals it.

If you believed this for the first time today you are now heir to an eternal throne. Pick up a Bible and read Jesus’ life story in the book of John. Tell a friend who’s a Christian. Make plans to join them at their church Sunday. Keep praying and
reading the Bible. You can discover the wonderful adventure of life in Jesus Christ, the only way to God.

Notes

1. Metaphysics, Lambda.
2. Matthew 27; Mark 15; Luke 23; John 19
3. Matthew 28; Mark 16; Luke 24; John 20

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The Answer Is the Resurrection

Steve Cable

Steve Cable shows us that the resurrection is the key apologetic for those seeking to evangelize. As we share our faith, understanding the evidence for the resurrection helps prepare us to answer questions raised by a seeker after the truth.
Making a Defense for Your Living Hope

A key verse for our ministry at Probe is 1 Peter 3:15 where Peter writes, “Sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts, always being ready to make a defense to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you, yet with gentleness and reverence.”

I want to encourage you to make this verse a motivator for your own walk as an ambassador for Christ. You might say, “I am not equipped to make a defense. Surely, this verse is talking to pastors and people like the researchers at Probe.” A deeper look at Peter’s letter shows us that this is not the case. Peter makes it clear that these instructions are for all Christians. In addition, Peter wrote this verse in the imperative tense, meaning that it is a command, not a suggestion.

Okay. I want to be ready to give an account for the hope that is in me, but I need to be clear on what that hope is. Fortunately, Peter answers that for us in chapter 1 where he writes, “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His great mercy has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to obtain an inheritance which is imperishable and undefiled and will not fade away, reserved in heaven for you.”

So, our hope is a living hope for an eternal inheritance reserved for us in heaven. If I am to make a defense for this hope of eternal life, I need to be able to explain why I believe that the source of this hope has both the capability and the motivation to follow through on this offer.

How do we get this living hope? Our hope comes “through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead”! Jesus’ resurrection is the basis for our hope. If Jesus is not resurrected from the dead, we are of all men most to be pitied. So, any defense of the hope that is within us begins with explaining why someone should believe in the resurrection. The empty tomb is the cornerstone to answering most other objections raised up against the gospel.
In the remainder of this article, we will look at evidence for the resurrection and how a defense of the resurrection is the foundation for answering many of the objections raised against Christianity.

**Evidence for Jesus’ Resurrection**

Giving an account for our belief in Jesus’ resurrection is the key to defending the hope within us. Several books have been written on this topic, and you can find a list of them in the transcript of this radio program on our Web site. The evidence for the resurrection as an historical event is so strong that even Dr. Antony Flew, until recently a noted proponent of atheism, had to admit, “The evidence for the resurrection is better than for claimed miracles in any other religion. It’s outstandingly different in quality and quantity, I think, from the evidence offered for the occurrence of most other supposedly miraculous events.” [5]

One help to remembering the overwhelming evidence is to think of the ten A’s attesting to Jesus’ resurrection:

1. **Accurate predictions.** Both the Old and New Testaments contain predictions of Jesus’ death and resurrection. Numerous times in the Gospels, Jesus told his disciples and the Jewish authorities that He would rise to life after three days in the earth. In John 2, at the very beginning of His ministry, Jesus told this to the Jewish leaders. It made such an impression on the disciples, that verse 22 tells us, “So when He was raised from the dead, His disciples remembered that He said this; and they believed the Scripture and the word which Jesus had spoken.”

2. **Attesting miracles.** Jesus’ resurrection was not a sudden miraculous cap to an otherwise unremarkable life. Jesus had consistently demonstrated His authority over the material universe from turning water into wine, to walking on the water, to healing the sick, to raising Lazarus from the dead. His resurrection is consistent with the power He demonstrated during His earthly ministry.

3. **Agonizing death.** Jesus had numerous opportunities to avoid a fatal confrontation with the Jewish leaders and Roman authorities. No one is going to
go through a Roman scourging and crucifixion as a hoax. Jesus submitted to the cross because it was necessary to pay for our sins and He knew that He had the authority to conquer death.

4. Angry authorities. After word of Jesus’ resurrection began to spread, the Jewish authorities wanted to put a stop to people believing in Him. Producing the body of Jesus would have been the best way to do this. Even with support from the Roman authorities, they were never able to produce a body.

5. Absent body. The chief priests set a guard around Jesus’ tomb to make sure the body was not stolen by his disciples. Those guards knew their lives could be at stake if they failed in their duty, but on the third day Jesus was gone. Once they regained their senses, the guards “reported to the chief priests all that had happened.”[^6] Why did they take this risk? Because they knew that there was no body to recover. No one has ever found any credible evidence that the body of Jesus was anywhere to be found on this earth.

6. Amazed disciples. After Jesus’ arrest, most of His disciples fled. It is clear from their reaction that they despised the cross and were not anticipating the resurrection. Two of his disciples did not recognize the risen Jesus even as He was teaching them the Scriptures related to Himself.[^7] Their skepticism and shock showed that they clearly were not part of some preplanned hoax.

7. Agreeing eyewitnesses. After His resurrection, Jesus appeared to over five hundred people. They testified to His resurrection. We do not have a record of anyone disputing their testimony, saying “I was there with them and it was a hoax.”

8. Apostolic martyrs. People don’t die for something they know to be a hoax. Yet, many of these eyewitnesses accepted death rather than deny the resurrection of Jesus.

9. Agnostic historians. Contemporary, non-Christian historians reported that Jesus was reputed to have risen from the dead and that his followers were willing to die rather than recant their belief in Jesus.
10. **Attesting Spirit.** Over the centuries, the Holy Spirit continues to convict unbelievers and assure believers that Jesus is the risen Son of God.

We don’t have to believe in the resurrection in *spite* of the facts. Instead, we believe in the resurrection in *light* of the facts. If you can defend your belief in the resurrection, then you are already positioned to respond to other questions people may have about your faith. In fact, you can respond to objections by asking, “Do you believe in the resurrection of Jesus?” If the answer is no, then you may want to focus on the evidence for the resurrection as a foundation for addressing their other concerns.

**Tearing Down Objections Through the Resurrection**

The evidence for Jesus’ resurrection is the key to making a defense for our living hope. Let’s consider some common objections to Christianity, and see how the resurrection can be the starting point for a reasoned response.

1. **Is there a God still active in this universe?**

   *Jesus’ resurrection* shows there is a power that transcends the physical universe. A transcendent God is the only power that can override decay and death. As the apostle Peter wrote, “[God] raised [Jesus] from the dead and gave Him glory, so that your faith and hope are in God.”{8}

   Jesus’ resurrection declares God’s active involvement in this world. He planned it from the beginning and He performed it at the appointed time.{9}

2. **What difference does God make to my life?**

   *Jesus’ resurrection* shows that He lives into eternity and that we have the prospect of life beyond this world.{10} Knowing we have a soul that continues beyond this world impacts our perspective on life. As Paul points out, “If the dead are not raised, let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die.”{11}
But if the dead are raised, then we need to live with eternity in mind. It becomes a top priority to know the one who controls eternity, God.

3. Is the Bible really God’s revelation? Every religion has their holy books.

*Jesus’ resurrection* confirms that Jesus is the source of truth. He knows which holy book is actually a revelation from God. Jesus affirmed the inspiration of the Old Testament. He promised that the Holy Spirit would lead the apostles as they shared His teaching through the New Testament. The Gospel of John states, “So when He was raised from the dead, His disciples remembered that He said this; and they believed the Scripture and the word which Jesus had spoken.”{12}

If Jesus’ resurrection caused His disciples to believe the Bible, it is certainly sufficient to cause me to believe.

4. I am too insignificant for God to love.

*Jesus’ resurrection* shows the depth of God’s love for you. Without the crucifixion there would be no resurrection. His crucifixion cries out “God loves you!” Romans tells us that “God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.”{13}

Being singled out for God’s love makes you very significant in His universe.

5. How can anyone know the truth about life and death?

*Jesus’ resurrection* gives Him firsthand knowledge. He has been beyond death and returned. His knowledge transcends this physical universe. Jesus gives us an eyewitness for eternal life. He told Pilate, “My Kingdom is not of this world. . . . For this I have been born, and for this I have come into the world, to testify to the truth.”{14}

Jesus testifies to the truth regarding eternal life. We can trust His testimony because of the resurrection.

6. Why should I believe that Jesus is God’s divine Son?
Jesus’ resurrection conquered the grave. No mortal can claim victory over decay and death.

He said that “I and the Father are one.” His victory over death confirms His claim, crying out through the ages “He is God!” As Paul proclaims in Romans, “[Jesus] was declared the Son of God with power by the resurrection from the dead.”

7. Aren’t there many ways to God? Can Jesus be the only way?

Jesus’ resurrection puts Jesus in a class by Himself. His crucifixion and victory over death clearly show that He is the only way to God. If there were multiple ways, Jesus would not have gone to the cross. He allowed himself to be subjected to death because it was necessary for our redemption. In addition, Jesus clearly stated that no one comes to the Father except through Him.

8. How can I possibly be forgiven for my sins?

Jesus’ resurrection validates His claim to have victory over sin and death. The ultimate result of sin is death, and Jesus conquered death. In Romans chapter 10 we learn “that if you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved.”

Belief in Jesus’ resurrection is a central part of saving faith.

9. Why should I believe God is involved in His creation? I don’t see God making much difference in this world.

Jesus’ resurrection demonstrates God’s active involvement in this world. He predicted it, He planned it, He performed it. Peter writes, “[you are redeemed] with precious blood, as of a lamb unblemished and spotless, the blood of Christ. For He was foreknown before the foundation of the world, but has appeared in these last times for the sake of you.”

10. How can a loving God allow all of the evil in this world?

Jesus’ resurrection demonstrates a loving God redeeming a world degraded by
If there were no evil, Jesus would not have had to conquer death through the cross. If God was not loving, He would not have sent Jesus into the world to redeem us. Looking at His death and resurrection, we know without a doubt that there is evil in this world, yet we are still loved by a God with power over death. Evil and love coexist because God valued us enough to create us in His image with a genuine capability to choose to turn our backs on Him. Making us unable to choose evil would have made us unable to love removing the greatest attribute of His image.

Once someone accepts the resurrection, many other barriers to accepting Christ are torn down. Whatever the question, the answer is the resurrection of Jesus Christ our Lord.

May what John said of the disciples be true of us as well: “So when He was raised from the dead, . . . they believed the Scripture and the word which Jesus had spoken.”

Notes

1. Scripture references are taken from the NASB95.
2. 1 Peter 1:1-2, 3:8.
3. 1 Peter 1:3-4.
4. 1 Corinthians 15:17-19
5. Gary Habermas, “My Pilgrimage from Atheism to Theism: An Exclusive Interview with Former British Atheist Professor Antony Flew.” Available from the Web site of Biola University at www.biola.edu/antonyflew/.
8. 1 Peter 1:21.
9. 1 Peter 1:18-21.
10. 1 Cor. 15:54-57.
11. 1 Cor. 15:32.
15. Rom 1:4-5.
17. James 1:15; 1 Cor. 15:54-57.
19. 1 Peter 1:18-20.

**Resources on Evidence for Jesus’ Resurrection**


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In His H.A.N.D.S.: How We Can Know That Jesus is God

Don Closson

Don Closson explains the five lines of evidence that Jesus is God from the book Putting Jesus in His Place.

Jesus Shares the Honor Given to God

Defending the deity of Christ can be a source of anxiety for some believers. Perhaps it is because our defense often consists only of a couple of proof texts which are quickly challenged by Jehovah’s Witnesses and others. Even worse, some Christians themselves are troubled by passages that seem to teach that Jesus is something less than God, that He is inferior to the Father in some significant way. They are fine with Jesus being the suffering servant, the Messiah who died for our sins, but less sure of His role in creation or as a member of the triune everlasting “I Am” of the Old Testament.

A recent book by Robert Bowman and Ed Komoszewski titled Putting Jesus in His Place is a great confidence builder for those wrestling with this key doctrine. The book offers five lines of evidence with deep roots in the biblical material. The book is organized around the acronym H.A.N.D.S. It argues that the New Testament teaches that Jesus deserves the honors only due to God, He shares the attributes that only God possesses, He is given names that can only be given to
God, He performs deeds that only God can perform, and finally, He possesses a seat on the throne of God.

Let’s look at the first line of evidence for the deity of Christ, that Jesus deserves the honor that should only be given to God. To honor someone is to acknowledge “their place in the scheme of things—to speak about them and to behave toward them in a manner appropriate to their status and position.”[1] As creator of the universe God deserves the highest level of honor and glory, since nothing can claim a higher degree of status or position. As a result, the Old Testament teaches that only God deserves the honor and glory that is part of human worship and He will not share this honor with anything else. In Isaiah 42 God declares that “I am the LORD; that is my name! I will not give my glory to another or my praise to idols” (Isaiah 42:8).

So how does Jesus fit into this picture? In John 5 Jesus declares that the Father has entrusted judgment to the Son so that “all may honor the Son just as they honor the Father.” He adds that “He who does not honor the Son does not honor the Father” (John 5:22, 23). Referring to his pre-existence with the Father before creation, Jesus says, “And now, Father, glorify me in your presence with the glory I had with you before the world began” (John 17:5). In these passages, Jesus is claiming the right to receive the same honor and glory due to the Father; in effect, He is claiming to be God in the same way that the Father is God.

**Jesus Shares the Attributes of God**

If Jesus is honored in the New Testament in a manner reserved only for God, it follows that one who is given the honor and glory reserved for God is also worthy of worship. So it’s not surprising that the book of Hebrews tells us that Jesus is to be worshipped by the angels or that in Matthew’s Gospel the apostles worshipped him when he came to them walking on water (Hebrews 1:6; Matthew 14:33). Perhaps the most stirring image of Jesus being worshipped is in Revelation where every creature in heaven and on earth sing praises to the Father and to the Lamb, giving them both honor and glory and reporting that the four living creatures and the elders fell down and worshipped Him (Revelation 5:13-14).
The New Testament also teaches that Jesus shares divine attributes that only God possesses. When this claim is made, Muslims, Jehovah’s Witnesses and others protest by pointing out that Jesus exhibited the very human attributes of hunger, fatigue, and pain. This valid observation does not conflict with the traditional Christian teaching that Jesus possessed two essential natures—one divine and one human. There is no reason to assume that one set of attributes cancels out the other. It should be added that although Jesus shares a divine nature with the Father, He does not share the same properties within the Godhead or trinity. The Father sent Jesus into the world; Jesus died on the cross and assumed the role of our permanent high priest.

Jesus clearly states in John 14 that to see him is to see the Father; both are equally God (John 14:10). In Colossians, Paul goes to great lengths to argue that all of God’s divine attributes are present in Christ. He writes that Jesus is “the image of the invisible God” and that “. . . God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him (Colossians 1:15, 19). He summarizes the same idea by adding that “in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form” (Colossians 2:9). The writer of Hebrews concurs in the opening paragraph of that book, saying that “the Son is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being” (Hebrews 1:3).

Jesus shares the Father’s attribute of pre-existing the created universe and His own physical incarnation. John’s Gospel tells us that Jesus was with the Father in the beginning when the universe was created, and Paul adds that Jesus is before all things (John 1:1-3; Colossians 1:16-18). In other words, Jesus has always existed and is unchanging. He has been given all authority on heaven and earth (Matt. 28:18). He deserves the honor, praise, glory, and worship of all creation.

**Jesus Shares the Names Given to God**

Those who question the deity of Christ complain that the New Testament just doesn’t teach it, that it doesn’t come right out and say that Jesus is God. Is this really the case?

The New Testament uses two key words for God: *theos*, the general Greek word
for deity, and *kurios*, usually translated as “lord.” *Theos* is the word most often used to designate God the Father and is also used a number of times in direct reference to Jesus, especially in the Gospel of John. John begins his book with the familiar proclamation that Jesus, the Word, was with God (*theos*) in the beginning, and that the Word (Jesus) was God (*theos*). Later in the chapter, John adds that “No one has ever seen God, but God (*theos*) the One and Only, who at the Father’s side, has made him known” (John 1:18). Jesus, the Word, is described by John as being with God in verse one, and at the Father’s side in verse eighteen, and in both cases is given the title *theos* or God.

The Gospel John also contains the confession by Thomas that Jesus is his Lord (*kurios*), and God (*theos*). John makes sure that we understand that Thomas was talking about Jesus by writing “Thomas said to Him,” that is, to Jesus, “‘My Lord and my God.’”

Paul uses *theos* in reference to Jesus a number of times. In Romans 9:5 he describes Jesus as “Christ, who is God (*theos*) over all.” And in Titus he writes that we are waiting for our “blessed hope—the glorious appearing of our great God (*theos*) and Savior, Jesus Christ (2:13).” Peter portrays himself as a servant of Christ who is writing to those through whom “the righteousness of our God (*theos*) and Savior Jesus Christ have received a faith as precious as ours (2 Peter1:1).”

All four gospels begin with John the Baptist’s ministry of “preparing the way of the Lord” as fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophecy in Isaiah 40:3. The prophet wrote, “In the desert prepare the way for the LORD; make straight in the wilderness a highway for our God.” The Hebrew word translated LORD in this verse is the unspoken special word for God used by the Jews consisting of four consonants called the *tetragrammaton*. The New Testament Gospels are applying the word Lord to Jesus in the same way that the Old Testament referred to Yahweh as LORD.
Jesus Does the Deeds that Only God Can Do

It was universally recognized by the Jews of Jesus’ day that “God created the heavens and the earth (Genesis 1:1; cf. Isaiah 37:16).” So it might be surprising to some that the New Testament also gives Jesus credit for creation. Paul teaches in Colossians that Jesus created “all things.” To make sure that no one misunderstands his point, he adds that “all things” includes “things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together” (Colossians 1:16-17). Paul wanted to be clear: Jesus is the creator God of the universe.

While Jesus’ role in creation is enough to establish his divine nature, He also exhibited supernatural divine power during His ministry on earth. Unlike the Old Testament prophets and New Testament apostles, Jesus did not have to petition a higher power to heal or cast out demons. He had inherent divine power to accomplish his will. Other than giving thanks, Jesus did not pray before performing miracles. In fact, the apostles reported that some demons obeyed them only when they invoked Jesus’ name. There were a number of occasions when Jesus realized that power had gone out from Him even without His intention to heal (Luke 6:19; Mark 5:30; Luke 8:46).

Jesus not only healed and cast out demons, but also had direct power over nature. When the disciples were frightened on a boat, He “rebuked the winds and the waves, and it was completely calm” (Matthew 8:26). When thousands were following him without food, He fed them miraculously (Matthew 14:20-21).

The New Testament teaching that salvation is possible through Jesus Christ alone would also have serious implications for Jewish readers. The Old Testament teaches that God is the only source of salvation. For instance, Psalm 62 teaches that “My soul finds rest in God alone; my salvation comes from Him. He alone is my rock and my salvation.” How then does one explain the numerous references claiming Jesus to be the source of salvation? Matthew points out that Mary will call her son Jesus because he will save his people from their sins (Matthew 1:21). Jesus declares of himself that “God did not send his Son into the world to
condemn the world, but to save the world through Him (Jn. 3:17).” There are also instances where Jesus directly forgives the sins of individuals, thus attracting hostile attention from the Jews (Luke 7:47-49; Mark 2:5-7).

The Psalmist writes that it is the Lord God “who will redeem Israel from all its iniquities” and that “Salvation belongs to the Lord.” John summarizes nicely when he writes, “Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!”

**Jesus Has a *Seat* on God’s Throne**

Our last line of argument for the deity of Jesus Christ refers to his claim to have a place on the very throne of God. From this throne, Jesus rules over creation and will judge all of humanity. He literally possesses all authority to rule.

Jesus made this claim clear during His questioning by the high priest Caiaphas the night of his capture. Caiaphas asked him, “Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed One?” (Mark 14:61) If Jesus wasn’t God, this would have been a great opportunity for Him to clear up any misconceptions. But instead of denying His divinity, Jesus says “I am,” admitting to being God’s unique Son, and goes on to say, “you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven” (Mark 14:62). The high priest’s response was dramatic; he tore his clothes and declared that those present had heard blasphemy from the lips of Jesus. They understood that Jesus was making a direct claim to being God, for only God could sit on the throne of the mighty one.

In His response to the high priest, Jesus draws from a number of Old Testament passages. The book of Daniel describes this “Son of Man” as having an everlasting dominion that will never be destroyed (Daniel 7:13-14). The passage adds that the Son of Man has been given authority to rule over all people and nations, and that men of every language will worship him. He is also described as coming with the clouds of heaven, imagery that is used a number of times in the Old Testament to indicate divine presence. Exodus describes a pillar of cloud that designated God’s proximity to the Jews, while the book of Psalms and the prophet Isaiah both picture God riding on clouds in the heavens (Psalm 104:3; Isaiah 19:1). The point
here is that Jesus is connecting Himself to this “Son of Man” who will sit at the right hand of the Father, have everlasting dominion and authority, and will be worshipped by all men. This kind of language can only be used to describe God.

The New Testament makes it clear that there is nothing not under the authority and power of Jesus. John writes that the Father put all things under His power (John 13:3). Paul adds that the Father seated Jesus at His right hand in the heavenly realms, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion and above every name that is named (Ephesians 1:20-21). Jesus sits on the judgment seat, He sent the Holy Spirit, He forgives sinners, and is our perfect eternal high priest (2 Corinthians 5:10; Acts 2:33; 7:59-60; Hebrews 7-10).

The New Testament provides multiple lines of evidence to make the case that Jesus is God. The only question remaining is whether or not we will worship him as a full member of the triune Godhead, the only eternal, self-existing, creator God of the universe.

Note

1. Robert M. Bowman and J. Ed Komoszewski, Putting Jesus In His Place (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2007), 31.

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Making a Defense

Rick Wade
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.

Introduction

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. 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. 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).”

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.
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.


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.


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**


4. Ibid., 46.

5. Ibid., 45.

6. Ibid., 139.

7. Ibid., 133.

Steve Cable examines the faulty reasoning and interpretation of the Bible in Kurt Eichenwald’s Newsweek article “The Bible: So Misunderstood It’s a Sin.”

Dissecting the Bible by Focusing on Nits

Recently, New Testament scholar, Dr. Daniel Wallace, addressing our strong confidence in our modern translations, mentioned others presenting a false view of this situation. One example, The Bible: So Misunderstood It’s a Sin by Kurt Eichenwald[1], appeared in Newsweek. This article presents arguments intended to undermine the New Testament. Let’s evaluate some of these arguments to be better equipped in sharing the truth.[2]

Eichenwald begins by parroting negative stereotypes about American evangelicals. Adding rigor to his rant, he states, “A Pew Research poll in 2010[2] found that evangelicals ranked only a smidgen higher than atheists in familiarity with the New Testament and Jesus’s teachings.”[4]
He referred to a table showing the average number of questions out of twelve answered correctly. However, only two of the twelve related to the New Testament and none to Jesus’s teachings. \[5\] Two questions are not enough to evaluate someone’s knowledge of the New Testament, but, for the record, the two questions were “Name the four gospels” and “Where, according to the Bible, was Jesus born?” 53% of those professing to be born again answered these correctly versus 20% of atheists. Apparently to Eichenwald, a “smidgen higher” must mean almost three times as many.

Eichenwald spends two pages bemoaning the translation problems in the New Testament. But as pointed out by Dr. Wallace and others, his critique really serves to highlight the excellence of today’s translations. The areas he points out as having questionable additions in the text are clearly marked in all of today’s popular translations \[6\] and if removed make no difference in the overall message of the New Testament (i.e. the woman caught in adultery in John and snake handling in Mark).

He also lists three short passages, claiming they did not appear in earlier Greek copies. Upon examination, we find that one of those passages does not appear in modern translations. The other two do appear in the translations. Why? Because they appear in numerous early Greek manuscripts. \[7\] Once again his scholarship is found wanting.

All scholars agree there are variations between ancient manuscripts from different areas but they do not change the message. As Wallace points out, “We are getting closer and closer to the text of the original. . . . The New Testament has more manuscripts that are within a century or two of the original than anything else from the Greco-Roman world. If we have to be skeptical . . . , that skepticism . . . should be multiplied one thousand times for other Greco-Roman literature.” \[8\]

**Supposed Biblical Contradictions**

Eichenwald continues attacking the Bible with nine different topics he claims...
reveal contradictions in the biblical record. Let’s examine three of them to see if his arguments have substance.

First, he claims there are three different creation models, stating that “careful readers have long known that the two stories of Genesis 1 and 2 contradict each other.”

However, a clear-headed examination sees chapter 1 describing the overall creation while chapter 2 talks about the creation of Adam and Eve. As commentators explain, “what follows Genesis 2:4 is not another account of creation but a tracing of events from creation through the fall and judgment.”

In his third creation model “the world is created in the aftermath of a great battle between God and . . . a dragon . . . called Rahab.”

Reading the relevant verses shows no creation story but rather the creature Rahab representing Egypt. Job 9:13 says “under (God) the helpers of Rahab lie crushed.” Some speculate this could relate to the Babylonian Creation Epic. Even if this speculation were true, rather than a third creation story one would say this reference tells us God destroys all idols raised up by others.

Eichenwald’s claim of three different creation models is an illusion.

His second claim states the Gospel of John was written “when gentiles in Rome were gaining dramatically more influence over Christianity; that explains why the Romans are largely absolved from responsibility for Jesus’s death and blame instead is pointed toward the Jews,” implying the other gospels put much of the blame on the Romans.

Examining his claim, in Luke we read, “The chief priests . . . were trying to find some way to execute Jesus.” While the Roman governor did not find Jesus guilty of anything worthy of death. In Acts, Peter squarely places the responsibility onto the Jewish leaders and nation. We find similar verses in Matthew and Mark. All the gospels place the blame on the Jewish nation. There is no shift in perspective in
In a third supposed contradiction Eichenwald writes, “As told in Matthew, the disciples go to Galilee after the Crucifixion and see Jesus ascend to heaven; in Acts, written by Luke, the disciples stay in Jerusalem and see Jesus ascend from there.”

The gospel of Matthew ends saying nothing about Jesus ascending to heaven. In Acts, Luke says the Lord was with His disciples over a forty-day period and could have easily traveled from Jerusalem to Galilee and back.

Not surprisingly, his other six so-called “contradictions” all fail to hold up when one examines the Scriptures.

Faulty Interpretation Part 1

Eichenwald wants to show that what we think the Bible teaches about homosexuality is not what God intended. He begins by pointing out “the word homosexual didn’t even exist until . . . 1,800 years after the New Testament was written . . . these modern Bibles just made it up.”

But this could be said of many English words used today. A respected dictionary of New Testament words defines the Greek word he questions as “a male engaging in same-gender sexual activity, a sodomite . . .”

He then tells us not to trust 1 Timothy when it lists homosexuality as a sin because “Most biblical scholars agree that Paul did not write 1 Timothy.”

The early church fathers from the second century on and many contemporary scholars do not agree it is a forgery. Regardless, the same prohibition appears in other epistles and not just in Timothy.

Eichenwald points out Romans, Corinthians and Timothy discuss other sins in more detail than homosexual behavior. He writes, “So yes, there is one verse in Romans about homosexuality . . . and there are eight verses
condemning those who criticize the government.”

Most people understand that explaining our relationship to the government is more complex than forbidding homosexuality which is clearly understood.

He claims people are not banished for other sins such as adultery, greed, and lying.

But if you proclaimed you practice those actions regularly and teach them as truth, your church is going to remove you from any leadership position. They should still encourage you to attend worship services out of a desire to see God change your heart. Mr. Eichenwald would be surprised to learn that most evangelical churches handle issues with homosexuality in the same way.

Then he declares, “plenty of fundamentalist Christians who have no idea where references to homosexuality are in the New Testament . . . always fall back on Leviticus.”

Personally, I have never run into another church member who was unfamiliar with the New Testament, but knew the details of Leviticus.

In summary, Eichenwald believes we should declare homosexuality is not a sin and those who practice it should be honored as leaders within the church. He does not suggest that we treat any other sins that way. He does not present a cogent argument that the New Testament agrees with his position. He is saying that we should ignore biblical teaching. But, we really do love those struggling with homosexual behavior and we want to help them gain freedom from those lusts just as much as someone struggling with opposite sex issues.

**Faulty Interpretation Part 2**

To strengthen his position on homosexuality, Eichenwald calls out “a fundamental conflict in the New Testament - arguably the most important one in the Bible.” As Christians, are we to obey the Mosaic Law or ignore it?
He claims, “The author of Matthew made it clear that Christians must keep Mosaic Law like the most religious Jews, . . . to achieve salvation.” He says this is contrary to Paul’s message of salvation through grace not works.

What a mistaken understanding. In Matthew, Jesus explains that to enter God’s kingdom “our righteousness must surpass that of (the most religious Jews).” We must not get angry, call people names, or lust even once. In fact, “You are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.” Jesus clearly taught we cannot be good enough. Only through His sacrifice can we be made righteous.

In Acts 15, some believers with Pharisaical backgrounds brought the Mosaic Law up to the apostles. Peter told them, “Why do you put God to the test by placing upon the neck of the disciples a yoke which neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear? . . . we are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, in the same way as (the Gentiles) also are.” The apostles and the whole church agreed to send the Gentiles word that they were not required to follow the Law.

Eichenwald is right: we are not required to follow the Law. The New Testament is very careful to identify actions and attitudes which are sin so may try to avoid them. This truth is why sexual sins are specifically mentioned in the New Testament. Even in Acts 15, the apostles tell Gentile Christians to abstain from fornication, a term covering all sexual activity outside of marriage.

Eichenwald also castigates us for disobeying the biblical teaching about government. He says Romans has “eight verses condemning those who criticize the government.” Pat Robertson sinned by stating, “We need . . . to pray to be delivered from this president.”

Actually, Romans says, “Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. . . . the person who resists such authority resists the ordinance of God.” We are not required to say good things about the government, but rather to obey the law. Our Bill of Rights states that “Congress shall make no law . . . abridging the freedom of speech.” So, if we do not voice our opinions about our government, we are not availing ourselves of the law established by our
governing authorities.

**Faulty Interpretation Part 3**

As we examine popular arguments against the Bible, we will conclude by looking at prayer. In his *Newsweek* article, Kurt Eichenwald castigates a Houston prayer rally saying, “(Rick) Perry . . . boomed out a long prayer asking God to make America a better place . . . babbling on . . . about faith and country and the blessings of America.” He claimed Perry “heaped up empty phrases as the Gentiles do.”

In reality, Perry prayed succinctly for about two minutes with no empty phrases.

Eichenwald explains, Perry is just an example of our error. Most Christians are disobeying by praying in front of people. Jesus told us, “Whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to stand and pray . . . so that they may be seen by others.”

But someone can speak a prayer before others without being a hypocrite. Jesus does tell us to make our prayers a personal conversation with our God. But Jesus prayed often before synagogue attenders, in front of His disciples, and before over 5,000 people. Those times, although numerous, were less than the time He spent praying alone as should be true for us.

Eichenwald states we should repeat the Lord’s prayer verbatim.

But in Matthew, Jesus gave an example of how to pray, not a set of words to repeat meaninglessly. The New Testament contains many prayers offered by the apostles and none repeat the words from the Lord’s prayer. If Eichenwald were there to instruct them, the apostles would not have sinned so grievously.

Eichenwald claims the only reason anyone could pray in front of a large crowd, or on television, is “to be seen.” This claim does not make sense; the people he is judging can build themselves up without having to resort to prayer.
In this article we have seen that critics use an incomplete, shallow examination of Scripture to claim it is not accurate and our application is faulty. In every case, we have seen that these claims leak like a sieve.

Dan Wallace concludes, “But his numerous factual errors and misleading statements, his lack of concern for any semblance of objectivity, his apparent disdain for . . . genuine evangelical scholarship, and his uber-confidence about more than a few suspect viewpoints, make me wonder. . . . Eichenwald’s . . . grasp of genuine biblical scholarship (is), at best, subpar.”

If Eichenwald’s article represents the best arguments discrediting the Bible, one rejoices in our firm foundation. However, realizing many readers of such pieces don’t know their flimsy nature, one is saddened by the potential impact on a society inclined to ignore the Bible.

Notes

2. There are numerous web postings placed after release of Eichenwald’s article. Two you may find interesting that deal with areas of the article not addressed herein are as follows: Daniel B. Wallace, “Predictable Christmas fare: Newsweek’s Tirade against the Bible,” blogpost December 2014; and Darrell Bock, “Darrell Bock Responds to Kurt Eichenwald’s Newsweek Article on the Bible,” blogpost December 2014.
5. The 12 questions are as follows:

   1. What is the first book of the Bible? (Open-ended)
   2. What are the names of the first four books of the New Testament, that is, the four Gospels?
   3. Where, according to the Bible, was Jesus born? Bethlehem, Jerusalem,
Nazareth or Jericho?
4. Which of these is NOT in the Ten Commandments? Do unto others . . ., no adultery, no stealing, keep Sabbath?
5. Which figure is associated with remaining obedient to God despite suffering? Job, Elijah, Moses or Abraham?
6. Which figure is associated with leading the exodus from Egypt? Moses, Job, Elijah or Abraham?
7. Which figure is associated with willingness to sacrifice his son for God? Abraham, Job, Moses or Elijah?
8. What is Catholic teaching about bread and wine in Communion? They become body and blood, or are symbols?
9. Which group traditionally teaches that salvation is through faith alone? Protestants, Catholics, both or neither?
10. Was Mother Teresa Catholic, Jewish, Buddhist, Hindu or Mormon?
11. What is the name of the person whose writings and actions inspired the Reformation? Luther, Aquinas or Wesley?
12. Who was a preacher during the First Great Awakening? Jonathan Edwards, Charles Finney or Billy Graham?

6. Check your footnotes and the italics applied to the story of the woman caught in adultery and the last few verses of the Gospel of Mark.
8. Wallace.
9. Ibid, paragraph .
11. Ibid, paragraph 66.
12. Eichenwald, paragraph 51.
17. Eichenwald, paragraph 52.
18. Ibid, paragraph 68.
20. Eichenwald, paragraph 70.
22. In Daniel Wallace, Intro to 1st Timothy, Dr. Wallace writes, “In sum, although the evidence against the authenticity of the pastorals is as strong as any evidence against the authenticity of any NT book, it still cannot overthrow the traditional view. The traditional view, however, must be modified by the substantial linguistic evidence against authenticity: an amanuensis (possibly Luke) had great freedom in writing these letters for the apostle Paul.”
23. See the Watermark Community Church story: www.watermark.org/statement.
24. Eichenwald, paragraph 80.
25. Eichenwald, paragraph 81.
26. Eichenwald, paragraph 82.
30. For example in Mt 5:xx, Luke x:xx, John x:xx, Romans x:xx, Ephesians x:xx, Phil x:xx, 1 Peter x:xx, 1 John x:xx.
32. Eichenwald, paragraph 77.
33. Romans 13:1,2.
34. Amendment 1 to the Constitution of the United States of America.
35. Houston 2011.
36. John chapter 17.
38. Wallace, paragraph ??.

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Gospel Truth or Fictitious Gossip?

Dr. Michael Gleghorn

Dr. Michael Gleghorn provides good reasons to believe that the stories about Jesus were reliably preserved by his followers before being recorded in the Gospels.

Forgetting What Lies Behind?

It was late at night and the university library was about to close. I was feverishly working to complete a project for one of my classes. A bell sounded, indicating it was time to shut down and leave the building. As I and a few other students began shutting down our computers to go home for the night, a security guard suddenly began yelling at us to leave the building immediately! Apparently we weren’t moving quickly enough, and the guard, probably tired from a long day at work, was quite irritated. We told her we would leave as soon as we could, but it would take us a few minutes to pack up. Annoyed, she wrote down our names and threatened to report us to the administration. We, in turn, returned the favor, taking down her name and saying that we would report how rudely we were treated.

When I got back to my apartment, I immediately wrote down what had happened. I wanted to be sure that if I was contacted by the administration, I would have an accurate report of the evening’s events. Knowing how fallible human memory can be, I wanted to write everything down while it was still fresh in my mind. Most people would say this was a wise thing to do.
But it raises an interesting question about the New Testament Gospels. Although liberal and conservative scholars differ a bit over when these documents were written, most would agree that the earliest Gospel (probably Mark) was written anywhere from twenty to forty years after Jesus’ death. And the latest, the Gospel of John, probably dates to around sixty years after Jesus’ death.

But why did they wait so long to write their accounts? Some scholars say this was plenty of time for Jesus’ followers to distort and embellish their Master’s original words and deeds. Consequently, they insist, by the time the ministry of Jesus was recorded in the Gospels, it had already reached a form that was partly fictional. In short, the oral tradition which lies behind the Gospels is alleged to have been corrupted before the Gospel writers ever “put pen to papyrus.” In the words of the Jesus Seminar:

The Jesus of the gospels is an imaginative theological construct, into which has been woven traces of that enigmatic sage from Nazareth—traces that cry out for . . . liberation from . . . those whose faith overpowered their memories. The search for the authentic Jesus is a search for the forgotten Jesus.

Is this true? Did the faith of Jesus’ earliest followers really overpower their memories of what Jesus said and did? Is our faith in the Gospels well-placed—or misplaced? In the remainder of this article we’ll see that there are good reasons to believe that the Gospel writers told us the “Gospel truth” about Jesus!

Why the Wait?

Do the New Testament Gospels accurately preserve for us the things which Jesus said and did? Many liberal scholars don’t think so. They maintain that the oral tradition upon which the Gospels are based became quickly corrupted by the early church. If they’re right, then some of what we read about Jesus in the Gospels never really happened. As some of the fellows of the Jesus Seminar put it:

Scholars of the gospels are faced with a . . . problem: Much of the lore recorded in the gospels and elsewhere in the Bible is folklore, which means
that it is wrapped in memories that have been edited, deleted, augmented, and combined many times over many years.\(^\text{(3)}\)

This raises some important questions for us to consider. How carefully was the oral tradition about the words and deeds of Jesus transmitted in the early church? Does the evidence indicate whether or not it was corrupted before the Gospels were written? And why on earth did the Gospel writers wait so long to write their accounts?

Let’s begin with that last question. Why did the Gospel writers wait so long to record the ministry of Jesus? Let me offer two responses to this question. First, compared with other ancient biographies that are generally considered reliable, the Gospels were written relatively soon after the events they narrate. The Gospels were written anywhere from twenty to sixty years after the death of Jesus. Although this may initially seem like a long time, it’s still well within the lifetime of eyewitnesses who could either confirm or contradict these accounts of Jesus’ public ministry. By contrast, “The two earliest biographies of Alexander the Great were written . . . more than four hundred years after Alexander’s death . . . yet historians consider them to be generally trustworthy.”\(^\text{(4)}\) Comparatively speaking, then, the Gospel writers really didn’t wait long at all to write their accounts.

Secondly, however, we may not even be looking at this issue correctly. As the authors of the recent book, *Reinventing Jesus*, point out:

> It might be better to ask, Why were the Gospels written at all? If we think in categories of delay, then this presupposes that the writing of the Gospels was in the minds of these authors from the beginning. However, this is almost certainly not the case. What was paramount in the apostles’ earliest motives was oral proclamation of the gospel.\(^\text{(5)}\)

In the early years of the church the story of Jesus was being told and retold by eyewitnesses of these events. But still, some might ask, might these “events” have become gradually embellished with the story’s retelling, so that what’s recorded in the Gospels is no longer trustworthy?
To Tell the Old, Old Story

How accurately was the oral tradition about Jesus’ life and ministry preserved before being written down? Was it corrupted by his earliest followers prior to being recorded in the Gospels? Many liberal scholars think so. But there are good reasons to think otherwise.

In the first place, we must remember that “the interval between Jesus and the written Gospels was not dormant.” In fact, this period was filled with a tremendous amount of activity. The earliest followers of Jesus told and retold his story wherever they went. This is important, for as a recent book on Jesus observes:

If the earliest proclamation about Jesus was altered in later years, then surely first-generation Christians would know about the changes and would object to them. It would not even take outsiders to object to the “new and improved Christianity,” since those who were already believers would have serious problems with the differences in the content of their belief.

Not only this, but New Testament scholar Craig Blomberg lists many other reasons for believing that this oral tradition was accurately transmitted by Jesus’ earliest followers. First, Jesus’ followers believed that He “proclaimed God’s Word in a way which demanded careful retelling.” Second, over ninety percent of his teachings contained “poetic elements which would have made them easy to memorize.” Third, “the almost universal method of education in antiquity, and especially in Israel, was rote memorization, which enabled people accurately to recount quantities of material far greater than all of the Gospels put together.” And fourth, “written notes and a kind of shorthand were often privately kept by rabbis and their disciples.” Although we can’t be sure that any of Jesus’ disciples kept written notes of His teachings, it’s at least possible that they did.

Finally, we must bear in mind that the Gospels are not the product of merely one person’s memories of the events of Jesus’ life. Instead, the oral tradition which lies behind the Gospels is based on numerous eyewitness reports. This is extremely important, for as the authors of Reinventing Jesus remind us, the
disciples’ “recollections were not individual memories but collective ones—confirmed by other eyewitnesses and burned into their minds by the constant retelling of the story. . . . Memory in community is a deathblow to the view that the disciples simply forgot the real Jesus.” {9}

What About the Differences?

Thus, there are excellent reasons for believing that the first Christians accurately preserved and transmitted the stories about Jesus before they were recorded in the New Testament Gospels. But if this is so, then how do we explain the fact that the sayings of Jesus and his disciples are sometimes worded differently in different Gospels?

To cite just one example, consider the different ways in which the Gospel writers record the dialogue between Jesus and his disciples on the occasion of Peter’s famous confession at Caesarea Philippi. Jesus begins by asking his disciples a question, but Matthew, Mark, and Luke each word the question differently. Matthew records Jesus asking, “Who do people say the Son of Man is?” (Matt. 16:13).{10} But in Mark the question reads a bit differently, “Who do people say I am?” (Mark 8:27). And in Luke it’s a bit different still, “Who do the crowds say I am?” (Luke 9:18).

Not only is the precise wording of Jesus’ question different in each of these Gospels, but the wording of Peter’s response is as well. In Matthew, Peter answers, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God” (16:16). But in Mark he simply says, “You are the Christ” (8:29), and in Luke, “The Christ of God” (9:20).

Now clearly these are not major differences. In each case the gist of what’s said is the same. But we must also acknowledge that in each case the details are different. What’s going on here? If the stories about Jesus were accurately preserved before being recorded in the Gospels, then why are there these subtle, yet real, differences in the words attributed to Jesus and Peter in each of these three accounts? Or to put this question in the words of Darrell Bock, how are we to understand such sayings in the Gospels—are they live, jive, or memorex?{11}
On the one hand, the view which says such sayings are merely unhistorical “jive” just doesn’t do justice to the evidence we’ve already considered regarding how carefully the oral tradition about the life of Jesus was transmitted by his earliest followers. Nor does this view adequately account for both the internal and external evidence for the historical reliability of the Gospels.{12}

On the other hand, the “memorex” view, which holds that the Gospel accounts of Jesus’ spoken words represent the exact words He spoke on the occasions reported, doesn’t seem to square with the actual evidence of the Gospels themselves. The Gospel writers do, as we saw above, report the words of Jesus and his disciples differently, and this is so even in cases where we can be quite confident that the incident occurred only once.

This leaves us with only one more option to consider.

A “Live” Option

Dr. Darrell Bock has persuasively argued for what he calls a “live” option in explaining the differences between the Gospel accounts.{13} He describes this option this way:

Each Evangelist retells the . . . words of Jesus in a fresh way . . . while . . . accurately presenting the “gist” of what Jesus said. . . . [T]his approach . . . recognizes the Jesus tradition as “live” in its dynamic and quality. We clearly hear Jesus . . . but . . . there is summary and emphasis in the complementary portraits that each Evangelist gives . . . .{14}

In other words, the Gospel writers are not always giving us Jesus’ exact words, but they are always giving us his genuine voice. This distinction is absolutely necessary. For one thing, it helps explain the observed differences among Jesus’ sayings in the Gospels. It also sits well with the fact that most of these sayings had already been translated by the time they were first recorded. You see, most of Jesus’ original teaching would have been done in Aramaic, the dominant language of first-century Palestine. The Gospels, however, were written in Greek. Since
“most of Jesus’ teaching in the Gospels is already a translation,” we’re not reading his exact words even when we’re reading the Gospels in Greek. Finally, Jesus’ longest speeches can be read in a matter of minutes. Yet “we know that Jesus kept his audiences for hours at a time (e.g., Mark 6:34-36).” It seems evident, then, “that the writers gave us a . . . summarized presentation of what Jesus said and did.”

But if the “live” option is correct, and the Gospels don’t always give us Jesus’ exact words, does this mean that their reports of Jesus’ teaching are untrustworthy? Not at all. The way in which the Gospel writers recorded the words and deeds of Jesus was totally consistent with the way in which responsible histories were written in the ancient world. As Dr. Bock observes, “the Greek standard of reporting speeches required a concern for accuracy in reporting the gist of what had been said, even if the exact words were not . . . recorded.”

This is exactly what a careful study of the Gospels reveals about the way in which their authors reported the words of Jesus. Although these writers lived before the invention of audio recorders, they nonetheless strove to honestly and reliably record the gist of Jesus’ teachings. We can therefore read these documents with confidence that they are telling us the “Gospel truth” about Jesus in a fresh and dynamic way.

Notes

6. Ibid., 29.
7. Ibid., 30.
10. All biblical citations are from the New International Version (NIV).
14. Ibid., 77.
15. Ibid.
16. Ibid., 77-78.
17. Ibid., 79.
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