Making a Defense

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

**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. {2} While all this fits with what Peter had in mind, I believe there was something deeper and wider behind his exhortation.

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

**The Old Testament Background**

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

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

Especially notable in the Old Testament is the controversy between Yahweh and the pagan gods, represented by the other nations, recorded in Isaiah chapters 40-55. “The debate is over the claims of Yahweh as Creator, the only true God and the Lord of history (40:25-31; 44:6-8; 45:8-11, 21),” says Trites.\(^{5}\) Yahweh brings charges and calls the nations to present their witnesses, and then calls Israel to be His witness. A representative passage, which I’ll leave you to look up for yourself, is Isa. 43:9-12.

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


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.


© 2013 Probe Ministries

---

**Answering the New Atheists - A Christian Addresses Their Arguments**

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

Is Faith Irrational?

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

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

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

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

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

Is this true? Do religious people have a blind faith? Certainly some religious people exercise blind faith. But is this true of all religions, including Christianity? Of course not. The enormous number of Christian books on topics ranging from apologetics to theology demonstrate that the Christian faith is based upon evidence.

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

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

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

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

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

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

One explanation that goes all the way back to Sigmund Freud is projection. He wrote that religious beliefs are “illusions, fulfillments of the oldest, strongest, and most urgent wishes of mankind.”\(^8\) In other words, we project the existence of God based on a human need. It is wish fulfillment. We wish there would be a God, so we assume that he exists.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Much of the criticism against religion revolves around violence. We do live in a violent world, and religion has often been the reason (or at least the justification) for violent acts. But the New Atheists are kidding themselves if they think that a world without religion would usher in a utopia where there is no longer violence, oppression, or injustice.

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

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

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

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

The New Atheists, however, still want to contend that religion is dangerous while refusing to accept that atheism has been a major reason for death and destruction. If you were to merely look at body count, the three atheistic regimes of the twentieth century (Hitler in Nazi Germany, Stalin in Russia, and Mao in China) are responsible for more than 100 million deaths.

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

Religion is not the problem; people are the problem. And removing religion and God from a society doesn’t make it less dangerous. The greatest death toll in history took place in the last century in atheistic societies.
**Is the Universe Just Right for Life?**

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

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

British astronomer Fred Hoyle remarked, “A commonsense interpretation of the facts suggests that a super intellect has monkeyed with physics, as well as chemistry and biology, and that there are no blind forces worth speaking about in nature.” {21}

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

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

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

Richard Dawkins admits that there is presently no naturalistic explanation for the find-tuning of the universe. But he is quick to add that doesn’t argue for the existence of God. And that is certainly true. We know about God and His character from revelation, not from scientific observation and experimentation. But we do see the evidence that the design of the universe implies a Designer.

**Are Science and Christianity in Conflict?**

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

Sam Harris says, “The conflict between religion and science is unavoidable. The success of science often comes at the expense of religious dogma; the maintenance of religious dogma always comes at the expense of science.” {25}
Richard Dawkins believes religion is anti-intellectual. He says: “I am hostile to fundamentalist religion because it actively debauches the scientific enterprise . . . . It subverts science and saps the intellect.” [26]

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

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

Alister McGrath challenges this idea that science and religion are in conflict with one another. He says, “Once upon a time, back in the second half of the nineteenth century, it was certainly possible to believe that science and religion were permanently at war. . . . This is now seen as a hopelessly outmoded historical stereotype that scholarship has totally discredited.” [28]

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

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

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

Notes

Is God Just a Human Invention? (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 2010).
3. Ibid.
Lessons from Camp Quest

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

- Encourage the children to have open minds and embrace scientific skepticism
- Provide a fun experience for the children where they could make friends among the community of non-believers. This objective was partially motivated by a desire to counter negative experiences some of the children had experienced with schoolmates who believed in God.
Let me begin by stating that I applaud the organizers and parents for taking positive steps to encourage their children to ask good questions and look for good answers. Even though I suspect that the event was slanted towards promoting an atheistic worldview, I believe all parents should assume an obligation to steer their children toward the truth as they see it. At the very least, they should equip their children to see through the illogical arguments of some enthusiastic proponent of a cultic religion (even if they think that I am just such a proponent!).

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

**Background**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Percent of Americans who are atheist or agnostic:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Adult Mosaics</td>
<td>18-22</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Could it be that our secular schools, culture and public square are creating their expected result—generations that are becoming more and more secular? It also appears that on average, once people reach the age of 18, their belief in God is pretty much set for life.

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

• Respect those who express doubts

• Understand that the Truth is not afraid of skepticism (or scientific inquiry)

• Don’t be intimidated by an unfriendly world.

**Respect Those Who Express Doubts**

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

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

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

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

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

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

If we teach our children to respect those with genuine questions about God, we receive a double benefit:
• Our children will be more willing to bring up questions that cause them to struggle.

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

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

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

“Our job isn’t to tell children what to think,” she said. “It’s about opening up their minds and learning how to ask good questions.”\(^7\)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

**Don’t Be Intimidated By An Unfriendly World.**

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

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

Just as freethinking adults need social support from groups like the NTCOF, our children need it even more. Many of our kids are ostracized at school or in their neighborhoods because their parents are freethinkers, or because they’re developing their own freethinking perspective. It can also be challenging to be a freethinking parent when most people assume that you’re immoral if you don’t teach your children to believe in a god. Camp Quest Texas provides a valuable resource for parents, plus it’s full of fun activities for kids that reinforce our freethinking values—science, critical thinking, ethics and religious tolerance.

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

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

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

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

Notes

3. Ibid.
Gabriel’s Vision: An Angelic Threat to the Resurrection?

An article in *TIME* magazine titled “Was Jesus’ Resurrection a Sequel?” opened with the statement, “A 3-ft.-high tablet romantically dubbed ‘Gabriel’s Vision’ could challenge the uniqueness of the idea of the Christian Resurrection.”¹ What exactly is this tablet and does it have any significant impact on the teaching of the resurrection of Christ?

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

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

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

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

This, in turn, undermines one of the strongest literary arguments employed by Christians over centuries to support the historicity of the Resurrection (in which they believe on faith): the specificity and novelty of the idea that the Messiah would die on a Friday and rise on a Sunday. Who could make such stuff up? But, as Knohl told *TIME*, maybe the Christians had a model to work from. The idea of a “dying and rising messiah appears in some Jewish texts, but until now, everyone thought that was the impact of Christianity on Judaism,” he says. “But for the first time, we have proof that it was the other way around. The concept was there before Jesus.” If so, he goes on, “this should shake our basic view of Christianity. … What happens in the New Testament [could have been] adopted by Jesus and his followers based on an earlier messiah story.” {4}

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

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

Church history scholar Ben Witherington states that the verb Kohl translates as rise could also mean “there arose.” So, instead of a resurrected messiah, the text refers to the appearing of a Messiah. {7} Since the words of line 80 are not clear, we cannot state conclusively the text is speaking of a messiah who dies and resurrects in three days.

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

This would not pose a major threat to Christianity. Many Christians have taught that the idea of a resurrected Messiah was never taught in Judaism. However, Christians have long taught that the Old Testament prophecies such as Isaiah 53 teach of a dying and resurrected Messiah. In fact, a few people are recorded being raised from the dead in the Old Testament (1 Kings 17, 2 Kings 13). Therefore, it should not be so surprising if there was a pre-Christian Jewish belief in a resurrected Messiah held by a minority of Jews.
Finally, Biema states that the “novelty” of the resurrection is one of the strongest literary arguments for the historicity of the resurrection. He also states that Christians’ belief in the resurrection is based on “faith.” I would disagree with Biema’s assertions. First, the historicity of the resurrection is not based on “faith” or belief without credible reasons. The belief in the resurrection is based on compelling historical evidence. Second, I do not believe the novelty of the resurrection is one of the strongest arguments for the resurrection. I rarely if ever have used it in an apologetic presentation. I believe the strongest arguments come from the historical evidence.

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

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

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

Notes

2. Ibid., 1.
3. Ibid., 1.
4. Ibid., 2.

© 2008 Probe Ministries
Resources Related to the Jesus Tomb Controversy

Outside Sources on the Supposed Jesus Family Tomb and Ossuary

• Hollywood Hype: The Oscars and Jesus’ Family Tomb, what do they share?

Blog post of Biblical scholar Darrell Bock. Stay up-to-date at his blog’s homepage: blogs.bible.org/bock.

• “No need to yell, only a challenge for some who need to step up and could”

Blog post of Biblical scholar Darrell Bock.

• “The Jesus Tomb? Titanic Talpiot tomb theory sunk from the start”

Blog post of Biblical scholar Ben Witherington. Stay up-to-date at his blog’s homepage: benwitherington.blogspot.com..

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

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

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

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

• Cruci-Fiction and Resuscitation by Russ Wise

If Jesus’ remains do inhabit a tomb anywhere, that demands an explanation of what really happened after his crucifixion. In 1997, a paid advertisement in a campus newspaper declaring Christ’s resurrection a hoax was deeply disturbing to its readers. This essay raises nine problems with the ad and addresses one aspect of the current debate in so doing.

• Evidence of Jesus’ Existence? by Rusty Wright

An ancient bone receptacle (ossuary) from Israel announced in 2002 contains the inscription, “James, son of Joseph, brother of Jesus.” It could be the earliest extra-biblical archaeological evidence of Jesus. This article notes the speculative nature of determining the authenticity of such
finds, even with the best of evidence. Yet, time after time, archeology attests to what even a Jewish expert describes as the “almost incredibly accurate historical memory of the Bible.”

- Jesus’ Resurrection: Fact or Fiction? by Rusty Wright

Resurrection evidences made clear and simple.

- Archaeology and the New Testament by Pat Zukeran

Numerous people, places and events described in the New Testament have been verified by archeology. Helpful section on Understanding Archaeology.

- Archaeology and the Old Testament by Pat Zukeran

Apologist Zukeran surveys the importance of archaeology with regard to its confirmation of biblical history. Includes sections entitled Historical Confirmation of Jesus, Accuracy of the Gospels, Confirmation Regarding the Crucifixion and more.

- Authority of the Bible by Pat Zukeran

Why take biblical accounts seriously in light of discoveries like the supposed tomb of Jesus’ family? This article explores why the Bible is the Word of God by examining Internal evidence (self-proclamation, the Holy Spirit, transforming ability, and unity) and External evidence (indestructibility, archeology, prophecy).

- “How Do We Know Christ Rose from the Dead? And Who Wrote the Bible?” by Jimmy Williams

Almost half of Probe’s nearly 1300 Web resources are responses to actual questions from visitors like you. This one answers the question, “How Do We Know Christ Rose from the Dead?” and “Who Wrote the Bible?”

© 2007 Probe Ministries

______________________________

Bridging to Common Ground:
Communicating Christ Across the Cultural Divide

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

Always Ready?

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

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

I spied a rack of religious booklets promoting an off-beat Asian religious group. Hey, I thought to myself, if you want authentic tofu-based cuisine, you have to mix with the diversity. No problem.

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

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

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

**Bad Thinking Means No Bridging or Burned Bridges**

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

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

They’re obviously not for us (biblical believers), but against us, so

The best way to deal with such people would be to confront them or ignore them (and I don’t prefer the latter).

Although confronting them outright would be wrong, it wouldn’t take long for the tolerant approach to necessarily give way to an uncomfortable, confrontational proclamation of truth, so bring it on!

Somebody’s got to reach these folks, and it’s apparent that sooner is better. These *are* the last days, after all. {1}
But building bridges with the eventual goal of sharing the gospel fruitfully—something I’ve worked at full-time for two decades—requires much more. More thought, compassion, understanding, wisdom and patience. The kind, writes Downs, modeled not by grain harvesters, but rather by fruit growers. This is biblical, but often ignored by Bible-believers.\(^2\)

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

This way of thinking assumes a vast conspiracy of God-haters. Although the caustic, outspoken atheism of Sam Harris and Richard Dawkins has risen to prominence recently, it is not the norm. Rather a muddled middle of persuadable unbelievers and confused born-agains is still a large part of the American scene.\(^4\) The us vs. them approach tends to be self-fulfilling, writes Downs. If approached as an enemy, defensiveness is understandably generated in those who don’t fit cleanly into our community. Even for announced enemies, like the T-shirt-wearing punk rockers, turning the other cheek while engaging with love can be a powerful witness.

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

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

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

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

**Becoming All Things to All People**

I first heard of Dale\(^7\) when he spoke to parents at our kids’ Christian school. I marvelled that he and his wife—both in their 40s—along with their three girls would pack up their middle-class home, leave a thriving youth pastorate in a Baptist church and take up residence in the grungiest, hippest part of Dallas, Texas. When I met with Dale down in Deep Ellum, I could feel the gaping divide between my suburban existence and the urban alternative, Bohemian art-music district scene he’d adopted.
When a couple of 20-something chicks interrupted our meal, I was annoyed that he left me hanging for some time. But Dale’s apology stopped me short in my own self-absorption. He and his wife had befriended one of the gals, a bartender, and were seeking to slowly, carefully build a relationship with her without scaring her off. And it was working. She had noticed the non-confrontational yet uncompromising difference in this loving Christian couple and asked about it. Now, when she introduces these Christian friends, she openly initiates conversations about spiritual things with rank unbelievers. There’s no threat felt, but plenty of curiosity.

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

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

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

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

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

What do you think of homosexuality?

After thoughtfully pausing, he deferred, Well, I’d prefer to not share that with you.

Why not?

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

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

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

Notes

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

© 2007 Probe Ministries

Bart Ehrman’s Complaint and the Reliability of the Bible

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

Introduction

While traditional Christian beliefs never seem to suffer from a shortage of critics, the diversity and intensity of the current group of antagonists is impressive. We have the so called “New Atheists,” mostly consisting of individuals from the scientific community, modern day Gnostics both in academia and of Da Vinci Code fame, as well as Scientologists, Jehovah’s Witnesses and other
groups too many to mention. However, one critic stands out, primarily because of his academic pedigree and the impact that his books are having in the popular culture and among Christians.

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

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

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

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

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

**Textual Variants and the Autographa**

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

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

Conservative Bible scholars argue that although there are many scribal errors and additions in the texts, even in the oldest texts, the vast majority of them do not change its meaning. In his book Reinventing Jesus, Daniel Wallace points out that the overwhelming majority of the differences or variants in the texts are insignificant, and he offers four categories of textual errors to help determine if a variant is both meaningful and viable.
The first category of variants, and by far the largest, is the least significant. They are mostly spelling differences, like the difference between the way we spell “color” and the way the British spell “colour.” This category also includes nonsense errors, scribal mistakes that result in words that either don’t exist, or the misspelling of a word that is similar to another. For example, in one early manuscript the Greek word kai was written instead of kurios (kai is the conjunction and; kurios means Lord). The first word makes no sense while the second is supported by many other manuscripts. None of the variants described here change the meaning of the NT text.

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

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

Some variants involve synonyms. In this case, the translation might actually be changed by exchanging one word for another but the meaning of the passage is not. These alterations often occurred because the Scriptures were being read in public. Some long passages didn’t identify the subject; for example the Gospel of Mark goes on for eighty-nine verses using only pronouns for Jesus. Church books called lectionaries would occasionally change a “he” to “Jesus” or “the Lord” or “teacher,” making a public reading easier. Eventually these changes found their way back into the NT manuscripts. Again, the meaning of the New Testament was not changed.

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

Textual Variants that Are Meaningful and Viable

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

Some manuscripts have Romans 5:1 using a Greek letter called an omicron to create the word echomen; others use an omega resulting in the word echōmen. Thus the passage could be saying either “We have peace” or “Let us have peace” with God, depending on this single disputed letter. But how different are the two results? The bottom line is that neither usage contradicts the overall message of the New Testament.
Another example is found in 1 John 1:4. Again, a single contested letter means the difference between the passage saying “Thus we are writing these things so that our joy may be complete,” or “Thus we are writing these things so that your joy may be complete.” The meaning is certainly affected by the change, but neither translation violates Christian doctrine. In fact, as Wallace argues “Whether the author is speaking of his joy or the readers’ joy, the obvious point of this verse is that the writing of this letter brings joy.”

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

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

From One Fundamentalism to Another

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

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

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

It seems that Dr. Ehrman and others have fallen for what has been called the “Myth of Absolute Certainty.” This myth argues that as time goes by we are getting further and further from the words recorded in the original New Testament documents. Some use this myth to argue for the supremacy of the King James Version of the Bible. Others, like Ehrman, use it to argue for a position of complete despair, claiming that we can no longer pretend to have anything like an inerrant text.

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

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

**Notes**

3. Ibid., 59.  
4. Ibid., 62.  
7. Ibid.  
9. Ibid., 67.

© 2007 Probe Ministries, updated 2019

---

**The Da Vinci Code: Who is Jesus, Really?**

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

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

The novel raises healthy questions about Christian faith. The story’s fictitious British scholar, Sir Leigh Teabing, says, “...almost everything our fathers taught us about Christ is false.”\(^1\)  

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

**The Greatest Story Ever Sold?**

Teabing suggests that the greatest story ever told is, in fact, the greatest story ever sold,\(^2\) a monumental cover-up. Was Jesus’ divinity a clever fabrication?

University of North Carolina religion chair Bart Ehrman, not a theological conservative, found troubling Brown’s assertion that “All descriptions of...documents...in this novel are accurate.”\(^3\)
Ehrman says, “Most of the descriptions of ancient documents, in fact, are not factual—they’re part of his fiction. But people reading the book aren’t equipped to separate the fact from the fiction.”{4}

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

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

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

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

The Alternatives

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Notes

2. Ibid., p. 267; emphasis Brown’s.
3. Ibid., p. 1.
5. Ibid., p. 2.
6. Tacitus, *Annals*, xv. 44.

© Copyright 2006 Rusty Wright. Reprinted by permission.

---

**Probe Articles Answering The Da Vinci Code**

**Premier article:**

*Redeeming The Da Vinci Code*
Michael Gleghorn

**Secret Gospels?**

Gospel of Judas
Dr. Patrick Zukeran

The Gnostic Matrix
Don Closson

The Dead Sea Scrolls
Dr. Patrick Zukeran

**Was Jesus Truly, or Merely Declared, God?**

The Case for Christ
Dr. Ray Bohlin

Jesus’ Claims to be God
Sue Bohlin

The Deity of Christ
Don Closson

The Council of Nicea
Don Closson

Ancient Evidence for Jesus from Non-Christian Sources
Michael Gleghorn

The Self-Understanding of Jesus
Michael Gleghorn
Jesus' Resurrection: Fact or Fiction?
Rusty Wright

The Resurrection: Fact or Fiction?
Dr. Patrick Zukeran

The Uniqueness of Jesus
Dr. Patrick Zukeran

*The Da Vinci Code: Who Is Jesus, Really?*
Rusty Wright

**Can We Trust the Bible?**

Are the Biblical Documents Reliable?
Jimmy Williams

The New Testament: Can I Trust It?
Rusty Wright and Linda Raney Wright

The Historical Reliability of the Gospels
Dr. Patrick Zukeran

Authority of the Bible
Dr. Patrick Zukeran

The Christian Canon
Don Closson

The Historical Christ
Rick Wade

Archaeology and the New Testament
Dr. Patrick Zukeran

Archeology and the Old Testament
Dr. Patrick Zukeran

**Goddess Worship, Ancient Israel and the Church**

Christianity: The Best Thing That Ever Happened to Women
Sue Bohlin

Feminism
Sue Bohlin

Wicca: A Biblical Critique
Michael Gleghorn

Israel’s History Written in Advance
Rich Milne

Scripture and Tradition in the Early Church
Introduction to *The Da Vinci Code*

Dan Brown’s novel, *The Da Vinci Code*,{1} has generated a huge amount of interest from the reading public. About forty million copies have been sold worldwide.{2} And Ron Howard and Sony Pictures have brought the story to theatres.{3} To help answer some of the challenges which this novel poses to biblical Christianity, Probe has teamed up with EvanTell, an evangelism training ministry, to produce a DVD series called Redeeming *The Da Vinci Code*. The series aims to strengthen the faith of believers and equip them to share their faith with those who see the movie or have read the book.{4} I hope this article will also encourage you to use this event to witness to the truth to friends or family who have read the book or seen the movie.

Why so much fuss about a novel? The story begins with the murder of the Louvre’s curator. But this curator isn’t just interested in art; he’s also the Grand Master of a secret society called the Priory of Sion. The Priory guards a secret that, if revealed, would discredit biblical Christianity. Before dying, the curator attempts to pass on the secret to his granddaughter Sophie, a cryptographer, and Harvard professor Robert Langdon, by leaving a number of clues that he hopes will guide them to the truth.
So what’s the secret? The location and identity of the Holy Grail. But in Brown’s novel, the Grail is not the cup allegedly used by Christ at the Last Supper. It’s rather Mary Magdalene, the wife of Jesus, who carried on the royal bloodline of Christ by giving birth to His child! The Priory guards the secret location of Mary’s tomb and serves to protect the bloodline of Jesus that has continued to this day!

Does anyone take these ideas seriously? Yes; they do. This is partly due to the way the story is written. The first word one encounters in *The Da Vinci Code*, in bold uppercase letters, is the word “FACT.” Shortly thereafter Brown writes, “All descriptions of artwork, architecture, documents, and secret rituals in this novel are accurate.” {5} And the average reader, with no special knowledge in these areas, will assume the statement is true. But it’s not, and many have documented some of Brown’s inaccuracies in these areas.{6}

Brown also has a way of making the novel’s theories about Jesus and the early church seem credible. The theories are espoused by the novel’s most educated characters: a British royal historian, Leigh Teabing, and a Harvard professor, Robert Langdon. When put in the mouths of these characters, one comes away with the impression that the theories are actually true. But are they?

In this article, I’ll argue that most of what the novel says about Jesus, the Bible, and the history of the early church is simply false. I’ll also say a bit about how this material can be used in evangelism.

**Did Constantine Embellish Our Four Gospels?**

Were the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, which were later to be officially recognized as part of the New Testament canon, intentionally embellished in the fourth century at the command of Emperor Constantine? This is what Leigh Teabing, the fictional historian in *The Da Vinci Code*, suggests. At one point he states, “Constantine commissioned and financed a new Bible, which omitted those gospels that spoke of Christ’s human traits and embellished those gospels that made Him godlike” (234). Is this true?

In a letter to the church historian Eusebius, Constantine did indeed order the preparation of “fifty copies of the sacred Scriptures.”{7} But nowhere in the letter does he command that any of the Gospels be embellished in order to make Jesus appear more godlike. And even if he had, it would have been virtually impossible to get faithful Christians to accept such accounts.

Before the reign of Constantine, the church suffered great persecution under Emperor Diocletian. It’s hard to believe that the same church that had withstood this persecution would jettison their cherished Gospels and embrace embellished accounts of Jesus’ life! It’s also virtually certain that had Constantine tried such a thing, we’d have lots of evidence for it in the writings of the church fathers. But we have none. Not one of them mentions an attempt by Constantine to alter any of our Gospels. And finally, to claim that the leaders of the fourth century church, many of whom had suffered persecution for their faith in Christ, would agree to join Constantine in a conspiracy of this kind is completely unrealistic.

One last point. We have copies of the four Gospels that are significantly earlier than Constantine and the Council of Nicaea (or Nicea). Although none of the copies are complete, we do have nearly complete copies of both Luke and John in a codex dated between A.D. 175 and 225—at least a hundred years before Nicaea. Another manuscript, dating from about A.D. 200 or earlier, contains most of John’s Gospel.{8} But why is this important?

First, we can compare these pre-Nicene manuscripts with those that followed Nicaea to see if any
embellishment occurred. None did. Second, the pre-Nicene versions of John’s Gospel include some of the strongest declarations of Jesus’ deity on record (e.g. 1:1-3; 8:58; 10:30-33). That is, the most explicit declarations of Jesus’ deity in any of our Gospels are already found in manuscripts that predate Constantine by more than a hundred years!

If you have a non-Christian friend who believes these books were embellished, you might gently refer them to this evidence. Then, encourage them to read the Gospels for themselves and find out who Jesus really is.

But what if they think these sources can’t be trusted?

**Can We Trust the Gospels?**

Although there’s no historical basis for the claim that Constantine embellished the New Testament Gospels to make Jesus appear more godlike, we must still ask whether the Gospels are reliable sources of information about Jesus. According to Teabing, the novel’s fictional historian, “Almost everything our fathers taught us about Christ is false” (235). Is this true? The answer largely depends on the reliability of our earliest biographies of Jesus—the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John.

Each of these Gospels was written in the first century A.D. Although they are technically anonymous, we have fairly strong evidence from second century writers such as Papias (c. A.D. 125) and Irenaeus (c. A.D. 180) for ascribing each Gospel to its traditional author. If their testimony is true (and we’ve little reason to doubt it), then Mark, the companion of Peter, wrote down the substance of Peter’s preaching. And Luke, the companion of Paul, carefully researched the biography that bears his name. Finally, Matthew and John, two of Jesus’ twelve disciples, wrote the books ascribed to them. If this is correct, then the events recorded in these Gospels “are based on either direct or indirect eyewitness testimony.”

But did the Gospel writers intend to reliably record the life and ministry of Jesus? Were they even interested in history, or did their theological agendas overshadow any desire they may have had to tell us what really happened? Craig Blomberg, a New Testament scholar, observes that the prologue to Luke’s Gospel “reads very much like prefaces to other generally trusted historical and biographical works of antiquity.” He further notes that since Matthew and Mark are similar to Luke in terms of genre, “it seems reasonable that Luke’s historical intent would closely mirror theirs.” Finally, John tells us that he wrote his Gospel so that people might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing they might have life in His name (20:31). While this statement admittedly reveals a theological agenda, Blomberg points out that “if you’re going to be convinced enough to believe, the theology has to flow from accurate history.”

Interestingly, the disciplines of history and archaeology are a great help in corroborating the general reliability of the Gospel writers. Where these authors mention people, places, and events that can be checked against other ancient sources, they are consistently shown to be quite reliable. We need to let our non-Christian friends know that we have good grounds for trusting the New Testament Gospels and believing what they say about Jesus.

But what if they ask about those Gospels that didn’t make it into the New Testament? Specifically, what if they ask about the Nag Hammadi documents?
The Nag Hammadi Documents

Since their discovery in 1945, there’s been much interest in the Nag Hammadi texts. What are these documents? When were they written, and by whom, and for what purpose? According to Teabing, the historian in The Da Vinci Code, the Nag Hammadi texts represent “the earliest Christian records” (245). These “unaltered gospels,” he claims, tell the real story about Jesus and early Christianity (248). The New Testament Gospels are allegedly a later, corrupted version of these events.

The only difficulty with Teabing’s theory is that it’s wrong. The Nag Hammadi documents are not “the earliest Christian records.” Every book in the New Testament is earlier. The New Testament documents were all written in the first century A.D. By contrast, the dates for the Nag Hammadi texts range from the second to the third century A.D. As Darrell Bock observes in Breaking The Da Vinci Code, “The bulk of this material is a few generations removed from the foundations of the Christian faith, a vital point to remember when assessing the contents.”

What do we know about the contents of these books? It is generally agreed that the Nag Hammadi texts are Gnostic documents. The key tenet of Gnosticism is that salvation comes through secret knowledge. As a result, the Gnostic Gospels, in striking contrast to their New Testament counterparts, place almost no value on the death and resurrection of Jesus. Indeed, Gnostic Christology had a tendency to separate the human Jesus from the divine Christ, seeing them as two distinct beings. It was not the divine Christ who suffered and died; it was merely the human Jesus—or perhaps even Simon of Cyrene. It didn’t matter much to the Gnostics because in their view the death of Jesus was irrelevant for attaining salvation. What was truly important was not the death of the man Jesus but the secret knowledge brought by the divine Christ. According to the Gnostics, salvation came through a correct understanding of this secret knowledge.

Clearly these doctrines are incompatible with the New Testament teaching about Christ and salvation (e.g. Rom. 3:21-26; 5:1-11; 1 Cor. 15:3-11; Tit. 2:11-14). Ironically, they’re also incompatible with Teabing’s view that the Nag Hammadi texts “speak of Christ’s ministry in very human terms” (234). The Nag Hammadi texts actually present Christ as a divine being, though quite differently from the New Testament perspective.

Thus, the Nag Hammadi texts are both later than the New Testament writings and characterized by a worldview that is entirely alien to their theology. We must explain to our non-Christian friends that the church fathers exercised great wisdom in rejecting these books from the New Testament.

But what if they ask us how it was decided what books to include?

The Formation of the New Testament Canon

In the early centuries of Christianity, many books were written about the teachings of Jesus and His apostles. Most of these books never made it into the New Testament. They include such titles as The Gospel of Philip, The Acts of John, and The Apocalypse of Peter. How did the early church decide what books to include in the New Testament and what to reject? When were these decisions made, and by whom? According to the Teabing, “The Bible, as we know it today, was collated by . . . Constantine the Great” (231). Is this true?

The early church had definite criteria that had to be met for a book to be included in the New Testament. As Bart Ehrman observes, a book had to be ancient, written close to the time of Jesus. It had to be written either by an apostle or a companion of an apostle. It had to be consistent with the
orthodox understanding of the faith. And it had to be widely recognized and accepted by the church.\(\) Books that didn’t meet these criteria weren’t included in the New Testament.

When were these decisions made? And who made them? There wasn’t an ecumenical council in the early church that officially decreed that the twenty-seven books now in our New Testament were the right ones.\(\) Rather, the canon gradually took shape as the church recognized and embraced those books that were inspired by God. The earliest collections of books “to circulate among the churches in the first half of the second century” were our four Gospels and the letters of Paul.\(\) Not until the heretic Marcion published his expurgated version of the New Testament in about A.D. 144 did church leaders seek to define the canon more specifically.

Toward the end of the second century there was a growing consensus that the canon should include the four Gospels, Acts, the thirteen Pauline epistles, “epistles by other ‘apostolic men’ and the Revelation of John.”\(\) The Muratorian Canon, which dates toward the end of the second century, recognized every New Testament book except Hebrews, James, 1 and 2 Peter, and 3 John. Similar though not identical books were recognized by Irenaeus in the late second century and Origen in the early third century. So while the earliest listing of all the books in our New Testament comes from Athanasius in A.D. 367, there was widespread agreement on most of these books (including the four Gospels) by the end of the second century. By sharing this information “with gentleness and respect” (1 Pet. 3:15), we can help our friends see that the New Testament canon did not result from a decision by Constantine.

Who Was Mary Magdalene? (Part 1)

Mary Magdalene, of course, is a major figure in The Da Vinci Code. Let’s take a look at Mary, beginning by addressing the unfortunate misconception that she was a prostitute. Where did this notion come from? And why do so many people believe it?

According to Leigh Teabing, the popular understanding of Mary Magdalene as a prostitute “is the legacy of a smear campaign . . . by the early Church.” In Teabing’s view, “The Church needed to defame Mary . . . to cover up her dangerous secret—her role as the Holy Grail” (244). Remember, in this novel the Holy Grail is not the cup used by Jesus at the Last Supper. Instead it’s Mary Magdalene, who’s alleged to have been both Jesus’ wife and the one who carried His royal bloodline in her womb.

How should we respond to this? Did the early church really seek to slander Mary as a prostitute in order to cover up her intimate relationship with Jesus? The first recorded instance of Mary Magdalene being misidentified as a prostitute occurred in a sermon by Pope Gregory the Great in A.D. 591.\(\) Most likely, this wasn’t a deliberate attempt to slander Mary’s character. Rather, Gregory probably misinterpreted some passages in the Gospels, resulting in his incorrectly identifying Mary as a prostitute.

For instance, he may have identified the unnamed sinful woman in Luke 7, who anointed Jesus’ feet, with Mary of Bethany in John 12, who also anointed Jesus’ feet shortly before His death. This would have been easy to do because, although there are differences, there are also many similarities between the two separate incidents. If Gregory thought the sinful woman of Luke 7 was the Mary of John 12, he may then have mistakenly linked this woman with Mary Magdalene. Interestingly, Luke mentions Mary Magdalene for the first time at the beginning of chapter 8, right after the story of Jesus’ anointing in Luke 7. Since the unnamed woman in Luke 7 was likely guilty of some kind of sexual sin, if Gregory thought this woman was Mary Magdalene, then it wouldn’t be too great a leap to infer she was a prostitute.
If you’re discussing the novel with someone who is hostile toward the church, don’t be afraid to admit that the church has sometimes made mistakes. We can agree that Gregory was mistaken when he misidentified Mary as a prostitute. But we must also observe that it’s quite unlikely that this was part of a smear campaign by the early church. We must remind our friends that Christians make mistakes—and even sin—just like everyone else (Rom. 3:23). The difference is that we’ve recognized our need for a Savior from sin. And in this respect, we’re actually following in the footsteps of Mary Magdalene (John 20:1-18)!

Who Was Mary Magdalene? (Part 2)

What do our earliest written sources reveal about the real Mary Magdalene? According to Teabing, Mary was the wife of Jesus, the mother of His child, and the one whom He intended to establish the church after His death (244-48). In support of these theories, Teabing appeals to two of the Gnostic Gospels: The Gospel of Philip and The Gospel of Mary [Magdalene]. Let’s look first at The Gospel of Mary.

The section of this Gospel quoted in the novel presents an incredulous apostle Peter who simply can’t believe that the risen Christ has secretly revealed information to Mary that He didn’t reveal to His male disciples. Levi rebukes Peter: “If the Saviour made her worthy, who are you . . . to reject her? Surely the Saviour knows her very well. That is why he loved her more than us” (247).

What can we say about this passage? First, we must observe that nowhere in this Gospel are we told that Mary was Jesus’ wife or the mother of His child. Second, many scholars think this text should probably be read symbolically, with Peter representing early Christian orthodoxy and Mary representing a form of Gnosticism. This Gospel is probably claiming that “Mary” (that is, the Gnostics) has received divine revelation, even if “Peter” (that is, the orthodox) can’t believe it. Finally, even if this text should be read literally, we have little reason to think it’s historically reliable. It was likely composed sometime in the late second century, about a hundred years after the canonical Gospels. So, contrary to what’s implied in the novel, it certainly wasn’t written by Mary Magdalene—or any of Jesus’ other original followers.

If we want reliable information about Mary, we must turn to our earliest sources—the New Testament Gospels. These sources tell us that Mary was a follower of Jesus from the town of Magdala. After Jesus cast seven demons out of her, she (along with other women) helped support His ministry (Luke 8:1-3). She witnessed Jesus’ death, burial, and resurrection, and was the first to see the risen Christ (Matt. 27:55-61; John 20:11-18). Jesus even entrusted her with proclaiming His resurrection to His male disciples (John 20:17-18). In this sense, Mary was an “apostle” to the apostles. This is all the Gospels tell us about Mary. We can agree with our non-Christian friends that she was a very important woman. But we must also remind them that there’s nothing to suggest that she was Jesus’ wife, or that He intended her to lead the church.

All this aside, someone who’s read The Da Vinci Code might still have questions about The Gospel of Philip? Doesn’t this text indicate that Mary and Jesus were married?

Was Jesus Married? (Part 1)

Undoubtedly, the strongest textual evidence that Jesus was married comes from The Gospel of Philip. So it’s not surprising that Leigh Teabing, should appeal to this text. The section of this Gospel quoted in the novel reads as follows:
And the companion of the Saviour is Mary Magdalene. Christ loved her more than all the disciples and used to kiss her often on her mouth. The rest of the disciples were offended by it and expressed disapproval. They said to him, “Why do you love her more than all of us?” (246).

Now, notice that the first line refers to Mary as the companion of the Savior. In the novel, Teabing clinches his argument that Jesus and Mary were married by stating, “As any Aramaic scholar will tell you, the word companion, in those days, literally meant spouse” (246). This sounds pretty convincing. Was Jesus married after all?

When discussing this issue with a non-Christian friend, point out that we must proceed carefully here. The Gospel of Philip was originally written in Greek. Therefore, what the term “companion” meant in Aramaic is entirely irrelevant. Even in the Coptic translation found at Nag Hammadi, a Greek loan word (koinonos) lies behind the term translated “companion”. Darrell Bock observes that this is “not the typical . . . term for ‘wife’” in Greek. Indeed, koinonos is most often used in the New Testament to refer to a “partner.” Luke uses the term to describe James and John as Peter’s business partners (Luke 5:10). So contrary to the claim of Teabing, the statement that Mary was Jesus’ companion does not at all prove that she was His wife.

But what about the following statement: “Christ loved her . . . and used to kiss her often on her mouth”?

First, this portion of the manuscript is damaged. We don’t actually know where Christ kissed Mary. There’s a hole in the manuscript at that place. Some believe that “she was kissed on her cheek or forehead since either term fits in the break.” Second, even if the text said that Christ kissed Mary on her mouth, it wouldn’t necessarily mean that something sexual is in view. Most scholars agree that Gnostic texts contain a lot of symbolism. To read such texts literally, therefore, is to misread them. Finally, regardless of the author’s intention, this Gospel wasn’t written until the second half of the third century, over two hundred years after the time of Jesus. So the reference to Jesus kissing Mary is almost certainly not historically reliable.

We must show our non-Christian friends that The Gospel of Philip offers insufficient evidence that Jesus was married. But what if they’ve bought into the novel’s contention that it would have been odd for Jesus to be single?

**Was Jesus Married? (Part 2)**

The two most educated characters in *The Da Vinci Code* claim that an unmarried Jesus is quite improbable. Leigh Teabing says, “Jesus as a married man makes infinitely more sense than our standard biblical view of Jesus as a bachelor” (245). Robert Langdon, Harvard professor of Religious Symbology, concurs:

> Jesus was a Jew, and the social decorum during that time virtually forbade a Jewish man to be unmarried. According to Jewish custom, celibacy was condemned. . . . If Jesus were not married, at least one of the Bible’s Gospels would have mentioned it and offered some explanation for His unnatural state of bachelorhood (245).

Is this true? What if our non-Christian friends want a response to such claims?

In his excellent book *Breaking The Da Vinci Code*, Darrell Bock persuasively argues that an unmarried Jesus is not at all improbable. Of course, it’s certainly true that most Jewish men of Jesus’ day did marry. It’s also true that marriage was often viewed as a fundamental human
obligation, especially in light of God’s command to “be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth” (Gen. 1:28). Nevertheless, by the first century there were recognized, and even lauded, exceptions to this general rule.

The first century Jewish writer, Philo of Alexandria, described the Essenes as those who “repudiate marriage . . . for no one of the Essenes ever marries a wife.”{32} Interestingly, the Essenes not only escaped condemnation for their celibacy, they were often admired. Philo also wrote, “This now is the enviable system of life of these Essenes, so that not only private individuals but even mighty kings, admiring the men, venerate their sect, and increase . . . the honors which they confer on them.”{33} Such citations clearly reveal that not all Jews of Jesus’ day considered marriage obligatory. And those who sought to avoid marriage for religious reasons were often admired rather than condemned.

It may be helpful to remind your friend that the Bible nowhere condemns singleness. Indeed, it praises those who choose to remain single to devote themselves to the work of the Lord (e.g. 1 Cor. 7:25-38). Point your friend to Matthew 19:12, where Jesus explains that some people “have renounced marriage because of the kingdom of heaven” (NIV). Notice His conclusion, “The one who can accept this should accept it.” It’s virtually certain that Jesus had accepted this. He had renounced marriage to fully devote Himself to the work of His heavenly Father. What’s more, since there was precedent in the first century for Jewish men to remain single for religious reasons, Jesus’ singleness would not have been condemned. Let your friend know that, contrary to the claims of The Da Vinci Code, it would have been completely acceptable for Jesus to be unmarried.

Did Jesus’ Earliest Followers Proclaim His Deity?

We’ve considered The Da Vinci Code’s claim that Jesus was married and found it wanting. Mark Roberts observed “that most proponents of the marriage of Jesus thesis have an agenda. They are trying to strip Jesus of his uniqueness, and especially his deity.”{34} This is certainly true of The Da Vinci Code. Not only does it call into question Jesus’ deity by alleging that He was married, it also maintains that His earliest followers never even believed He was divine! According to Teabing, the doctrine of Christ’s deity originally resulted from a vote at the Council of Nicaea. He further asserts, “until that moment in history, Jesus was viewed by His followers as a mortal prophet . . . a great and powerful man, but a man nonetheless” (233). Did Jesus’ earliest followers really believe that He was just a man? If our non-Christian friends have questions about this, let’s view it as a great opportunity to tell them who Jesus really is!

The Council of Nicaea met in A.D. 325. By then, Jesus’ followers had been proclaiming His deity for nearly three centuries. Our earliest written sources about the life of Jesus are found in the New Testament. These first century documents repeatedly affirm the deity of Christ. For instance, in his letter to the Colossians, the apostle Paul declared, “For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form” (2:9; see also Rom. 9:5; Phil. 2:5-11; Tit. 2:13). And John wrote, “In the beginning was the Word . . . and the Word was God . . . And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us” (1:1, 14).

There are also affirmations of Jesus’ deity in the writings of the pre-Nicene church fathers. In the early second century, Ignatius of Antioch wrote of “our God, Jesus the Christ.”{35} Similar affirmations can be found throughout these writings. There’s even non-Christian testimony from the second century that Christians believed in Christ’s divinity. Pliny the Younger wrote to Emperor Trajan, around A.D. 112, that the early Christians “were in the habit of meeting on a certain fixed day . . . when they sang . . . a hymn to Christ, as to a god.”{36}

If we humbly share this information with our non-Christian friends, we can help them see that
Christians believed in Christ’s deity long before the Council of Nicaea. We might even be able to explain why Christians were so convinced of His deity that they were willing to die rather than deny it. If so, we can invite our friends to believe in Jesus for themselves. “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16).

If you want your church to be equipped to take advantage of such opportunities, consider our new study series, Redeeming The Da Vinci Code, available at Probe.org.

Notes

5. For more information see Geisler and Nix, A General Introduction to the Bible, 390.
7. Ibid., 39-40.
8. Ibid., 40.
11. For example, The Coptic Gospel of Thomas (saying 1), in Ehrman, Lost Scriptures, 20.
16. Ibid., 95-96.
17. Ibid., 96.
19. Ibid., 116-17.
22. An “apostle” can simply refer to “one sent” as an envoy or messenger. Mary was an “apostle” in this sense, since she was sent by Jesus to tell the disciples of His resurrection.
23. For more information see Bock, Breaking the Da Vinci Code, 16-18.
26. Ibid., 21.
27. Ibid., 20.
30. Ibid., 44.
© 2006 Probe Ministries