

Tactics for an Ambassador: Defending the Christian Faith

Most Christians equate evangelism with conflict: an all-out assault on the beliefs and values of others. In our relativistic, live-and-let-live culture, even the most motivated believer feels like he's committing a crime by entering into a spiritual discussion. Are there ways to take the anxiety out of evangelism?

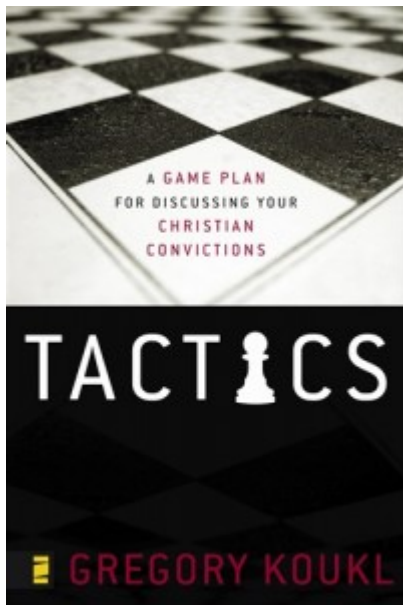
The idea of doing Christian apologetics, a fancy word for defending the Christian faith, has lost some luster among church goers. The word conjures up images of conflict, anxiety, and even anger. But most of all, it generates thoughts of inadequacy and lack of confidence among those called to "give an answer" (1 Pet. 3:15) for the hope we have in Christ. Most people are trying to avoid conflict and the emotional fatigue that comes with defending a controversial set of beliefs that are often ridiculed in our culture.

We live in an era that values diversity and tolerance above all other virtues. Anyone claiming to have true knowledge about important things like the nature of God, good and evil, or the purpose of human existence will be accused of intolerance and a mean spirited attempt to impose their beliefs on their neighbors. You are allowed to believe almost anything today, as long as you don't claim that it is true in any universal sense.



Part of the reason that Christians in American churches do so little evangelism is that they are convinced that it constitutes a spiritual invasion, an attack on the beliefs of a friend or neighbor who will resist this apologetic assault with everything he or she has to offer. They also believe that they will have failed miserably unless every encounter ends

with someone trusting in Christ. It's either total victory or utter defeat, and there are no innocent bystanders.



Gregory Koukl's book *Tactics* helps to give Christians the right perspective on evangelism and apologetics.^[1] He argues that the D-day invasion model for evangelism is counterproductive, and that seeing oneself as an ambassador for Christ makes more sense. We need fewer frontal assaults and more embassy meetings. The skills necessary to be a successful ambassador are quite different from those of an infantryman. Persuasion rather than conquest motivate the ambassador, and

one's style of communication can be as important as the content being conveyed.

According to Koukl, an effective ambassador for Christ must master three skill-sets. First, a Christian ambassador should possess a clear understanding of the message being offered by his sovereign King. Second, he needs to exhibit a personal character that reinforces the message he's been charged with, not distract from it. Finally, an ambassador needs sufficient wisdom to know how to communicate his message in a manner that draws people into dialogue and then to keep the conversation going. This kind of wisdom translates into specific tactics for communicating the gospel of Jesus Christ to a culture that has been preconditioned against the message.

Why Do We Need Tactics?

In his second letter to the church in Corinth, Paul says that we are Christ's ambassadors and that God has entrusted us with a message of reconciliation to a lost world (2 Cor. 5:20). But, although we have good news to share, Christians often don't feel capable or confident to share it.

Being tactical has to do with the way one arranges his or her resources. The effective tactician knows when to be aggressive and when to hold back and gather information. Commanders on a battlefield don't unleash every weapon available at the beginning of a conflict, nor do ambassadors immediately unveil all of their arguments.

Apologists know that one of their most important tactics is the well placed question. Picking up important personal information about someone's background and worldview provides critical insight into the best way to steer the conversation. The ability to ask good questions, combined with good listening skills, helps to avoid stereotyping people in ways that can cause the conversation to end suddenly. It also shows that you care about someone as an individual, not just as, for example, a Mormon or a Muslim. Even when someone labels oneself, let's say as a Hindu, it's important to discover what that term means to them. Hinduism contains a wide variety of possible beliefs and it would be counterproductive to argue against something that this person doesn't adhere to. As you can imagine, being a good listener and shaping your comments to fit the individual will most likely have a greater impact on them than just memorizing a tract and delivering it regardless of the setting.

Employing wise tactics implies a thoughtful rather than emotional approach to conversations. Emotions can quickly get the best of us, especially if we are unprepared to respond to the questions and challenges that we may encounter. Good planning helps us to accomplish our goal of guiding people to the truth about Jesus. It can also help us to avoid provoking someone to anger. Once people get angry they rarely hear our defense of the gospel. It's even worse if we get angry.

Some might respond to this call for wise tactics in sharing Christ by saying that you cannot argue someone into heaven. I would respond that you cannot love someone into heaven either. Neither arguments, or love, or a simple telling of the gospel

alone will win someone to heaven. Only the Holy Spirit can change someone's heart, but it doesn't follow that God doesn't use these methods to build His kingdom.

Becoming Sherlock Holmes

Sometimes we Christians are tempted to dump our entire theological systems on anyone willing stay put long enough to listen. This doctrinal dump might be a light load for some but a train load for others. The problem is that we are often trying to answer questions that people haven't even thought up yet and we can add confusion and distractions to the gospel message without even being aware of it. How can we avoid making this mistake?

When we sense that a conversation is headed toward spiritual territory, perhaps our first inclination should be to ask good questions so that we better understand the person we desire to share Christ with. Good questions protect us from jumping to conclusions and to deal with the actual beliefs a person holds rather than some straw man position that we might prefer to attack. They also have the tendency to naturally promote further dialogue and shape the discussion.

Once a person makes a statement regarding what they believe to be true, good questions can be particularly helpful. If someone tells you that it is irrational to believe in God because there is no proof that He exists, you now have an opportunity to ask key questions that will make your eventual responses far more effective. The first category of questions seeks further information and clarification. For instance, you might ask "What do you mean by God?" or "What evidence would you count as proof towards His existence?" You might ask if he knows anyone who believes in God and whether or not they might have good reasons for doing so. Asking someone how they arrived at a conclusion or how they know something to be the case helps to differentiate between simple assertions of

belief and reasons for holding that belief. People often make statements of belief without much forethought, and when challenged they find that they have little more than an emotional attachment to their view.

Don't panic if you run into someone who is prepared to defend his or her views. Even if they have an extensive argument supporting their position, good questions can get you out of the hot seat and provide time to build a stronger case for your next encounter. You might ask them to slow down and present their case in detail so that you can understand it better. You can also tell them that you want time to consider their position and will get back to them with a response. Giving someone the podium to clearly present their beliefs is usually well received. Listen carefully to what is said and then do your homework.

Suicidal Arguments

One of the more interesting parts of *Tactics* are Koukl's chapters on ideas that commit suicide. These are commonly called self-refuting ideas or ideas that defeat themselves. A fancier description is that they are self-referentially incoherent. It doesn't take long to encounter one of these arguments when talking to people about religion.

A simple example of a suicidal view is expressed by the comment, "There is no truth," or the more humble version, "It is impossible to know something that is true for everyone, everywhere." This statement fails its own criteria for validity by denying universal truth claims and then making a truth claim implied to be universal. If what the statement professes is true, then it is false. It commits suicide because it violates the law of non-contradiction which prohibits something from being both true and false at the same time.

Christians who are highly influenced by a postmodern view of truth often make self-defeating arguments as well. Koukl gives the example of a teacher in a Christian college classroom asking her students if they are God. When no hands went up she proclaimed that since they are not God they only have access to truth with a small t; only God knows Truth with a capital T. The implication is that small t truth is personal and limited. A student might ask the teacher if what she just offered is truth with a small t; if so, why should the students accept the teacher's limited personal view of reality over the student's perceptions?

Another argument that's quite popular and self-defeating is, "People should never impose their values on someone else." A quick response might be, "Does that express your values?" Of course it does. Then ask the person why he is imposing his values on you. His statement violates the criteria of validity that it tries to establish.

Even comments that seem to make sense at first suffer from suicidal tendencies. For instance, some have argued that since men wrote the Bible, and given that people are imperfect, the Bible is flawed and not inspired by God. The problem is that although people are imperfect it does not follow that everything they say or write is flawed. In fact, if everything a human says or writes is flawed, then this comment about the Bible is flawed. Just because people are capable of error, it doesn't mean that they will always commit error.

Helping people to see that their truth claims might be contradictory must be done gently. The point is not to merely defeat their position, but to help them to become open to other ways of thinking about an issue. It is in this context of gentle persuasion that the Holy Spirit can change a heart.

Sharpening Your Skills

The list of self-defeating truth claims can get rather long. For instance, it is common to hear people say something like “science is the only source for truth.” The problem with this statement is that it is not scientific. There are no scientific experiments that one can perform which establish that science is the only source of truth. It is a self-defeating statement.

It is also quite popular to assume that all religions are basically the same and equally true. If this is the case, then Christianity is true. However, a basic teaching of Christianity is that the core teachings of other religions are false and that Jesus is the only source of salvation. Again, the statement defeats itself.

Ideas that commit practical suicide include the notion that it’s wrong to ever condemn someone, and that God doesn’t take sides. The first comment is a condemnation of all who condemn others. The second assumes that God is on their side, even though God doesn’t take sides. If you think through these ideas you can be ready to gently point out their self-contradictory nature and move on to subjects more profitable.

When dealing with difficult ethical issues like abortion or homosexuality, it is always helpful to have a preplanned set of tactics. Koukl gives the example of a Christian who is asked his views about homosexuality by a lesbian boss. He begins his response by asking if the boss is tolerant of diverse points of view. Does she respect convictions different from her own? Of course, true tolerance means putting up with someone you disagree with. Since very few people want to label themselves as intolerant, they will usually affirm their support of the practice, protecting you from being attacked for giving your viewpoint.

Gregory Koukl’s book contains many more great ideas about

responding to attacks on Christian belief. At the end of the book he leaves us with what he calls the ambassador's creed. An ambassador should be ready to represent Christ. He should be patient with those who disagree. He should be reasonable in his defense. And, finally, he should be tactical, adapting his approach to each unique person that God brings into his path. Our wise use of tactics should improve the "acoustics" in a conversation so that people can hear the gospel well.

Note

1. Gregory Koukl, *Tactics: A Game Plan for Discussing Your Christian Convictions* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009).

© 2011 Probe Ministries

Teaching at Word of Life in Romania & Hungary

Editor's Note: The vision of Probe Ministries—to free 50 million captives and build them into confident ambassadors for Christ by 2020—promises to involve some 20 million believers overseas. Trips by Probe staff members near the time of this writing include destinations like Burundi, the Philippines, Belarus and—the topic of this report featuring Don and Deanne Closson, two of our staff veterans—Hungary and Romania. We hope you'll feel you have an insider's view of helping people think biblically and prepare to pass on a Christian worldview.

One of the things I enjoy about working at Probe is our tradition of partnering with churches and other ministry organizations. An example is Probe's partnership with Word of Life Fellowship (WOL) both here in the U.S. and overseas. The

relationship began when our National Director Kerby Anderson taught at WOL in New York, and later at some of their international campuses. Additional Probe staff members began teaching other courses. In January, 2010, my wife Deanne and I had the privilege of traveling to WOL schools in Romania and Hungary.



Actually, our invitation to Romania came about during our first trip to Hungary in 2008. Deanne and I became friends with students Alin and Iuliana Muntean and their 4-year-old daughter, Ruthie. Alin and Iuliana were mature beyond their years, serious students, and active evangelists in the various WOL outreaches. When we let them know that we were returning to Hungary this year, they invited us to Romania to teach as well! WOL Bible Training and Discipleship Center is only two years old but already has fourteen students. Needless to say, we were thrilled to accept their invitation.



Our four-day stay in Romania

was a busy one. My class was made up of seven second-year students. I taught five hours a day on Apologetics and Worldviews as well as a one hour chapel that challenged our very capable translator, Wanna. She had an amazing ability to translate difficult abstract ideas from English into Romanian. Her skills became evident as the students asked pertinent questions that demonstrated their grasp of the topics. They were eager to receive the apologetics information on the reliability of the Bible, the deity of Christ, answers to the problem of evil and other topics. I also spent one evening helping them to think through a response to the local Jehovah's Witnesses whom most had encountered. It was a lively discussion particularly when they realized they now have biblical answers to those false claims. Deanne sat in on the classes to interact with the students too. She prayed with the girls during a devotion and is continuing friendships with them via email.



Although we only had a few days to spend with Alin and his family, we sensed the considerable burden they were carrying as temporary leaders of the ministry. The director of WOL Romania is in the U.S. until May on a fundraising trip, leaving Alin and Iuliana in charge. Alin was not only overseeing the large building project but was also teaching classes, leading the other staff members, and serving with the various ministry outreaches into the local community.





On top of that, Alin, Iuliana, and Ruthie (now almost seven) live humbly in two of the small student dorm rooms because there isn't enough money yet to finish the construction of their WOL house (shown here). We were touched by Alin's love for the Lord, his family, and a desire to maintain a healthy team atmosphere in light of a demanding work schedule. Please join us in praying for this new outpost for the gospel in Romania and for Alin, Iuliana, and little Ruthie as they depend on God for their needs.

As Iuliana wrote in a recent email:

Thank you so much for praying for us. We need it so much! Thank you for your sensitivity for us and the students as well. God is faithful and will do even more we can ask or think. Thank you for your care!

From Bucharest we were on to Budapest. Fog made it impossible to land in Budapest or at a secondary airport so we circled back to our starting point and the airline put us up in a nice hotel. One benefit to our detour was getting to know Andrassy, a 29-year-old Romanian businessman who lives in Budapest who translated for us. When he found out that I was teaching apologetics at a Bible institute in Budapest, he mentioned that he had grown up going to Bible camps similar to those of WOL. Andrassy told us that he was recently engaged to be married and had yet to find a church to attend in Budapest. We

offered to ask our friends in Hungary for recommendations and to send them to him, which we did.



Our time in Hungary was also extremely rewarding. I had thirty students from nine different countries for a course on the cults covering the Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses, Scientology, Kabala, the Unification Church, and others. Thanks to the expertise of our translator Chris, the students seemed to enjoy the class and always had great questions. In an hour-long chapel I offered a response to the accusations by the so-called "New Atheists" that there is not enough evidence for God's existence and that religion is the major source of wars in the world. I could tell that this information was new to the students. Afterwards, one student asked if he could meet with me. We ended up discussing for hours a variety of topics over two separate days. Since his list of questions about the Bible and Christianity was long, I agreed to work through the ones we didn't cover and email my replies to him. It was encouraging to me that this young man is serious enough about his faith that he wants answers to important questions.



The WOL ministry in Hungary is having a significant impact both in the Bible Institute and with evangelistic teams. While we were there, a team was invited to present a drama in Czech schools. Eleven boys met with one of the WOL staff members to talk about Christ after seeing the play, "Born to a Living Hope." WOL is very serious about evangelism and has effective tools to share Christ in schools, prisons, and in open-air settings. The ministry also has ambitious plans for the 100-year-old historic structure on their property. They have just rebuilt the roof of the building and hope to build new classroom and office space on the third floor.

Our time in Romania and Hungary was a great blessing. Now that we are home, I am meeting with a young man studying as an intern with Probe. I met John Nienaber, an Indiana native, when he was a student at WOL Hungary in 2008. He caught the "apologetics bug" and has wanted to learn more ever since.





WOL has ministry in sixty countries around the world and certainly could benefit from our prayers and support. Please pray for Alin and Iuliana Muntean in Romania as well as their students and staff. Pray too for Director Alex Konya, the students, and the rest of the staff in Toalmas, Hungary, that they will be able to continue their renovations for improved classrooms and as they witness to those in the surrounding eastern European nations. Pray for John Nienaber as he gains new tools for his apologetics toolbelt. Finally, pray for the Probe staff (Pat Zukeran was in Hungary last November and Michael Gleghorn taught there in March) as we link arms with partners such as Word of Life and other great ministries.

© 2010 Probe Ministries

Advocacy Apologetics: Finding Common Ground as a Way to the

Gospel

As you examine your life, can you think of any lessons you wish you had learned earlier than you did?

I'm really glad I learned *this* lesson very early in my career as a Christian communicator. It's made a world of difference.

God has graciously sent me presenting Christ and biblical truth on six continents before university students and professors, on mainstream TV and radio talk shows, with executives, diplomats and professional athletes.

He's put me speaking in university classrooms and auditoriums, in embassies, boardrooms, and locker rooms. He's had me writing for mainstream newspapers, magazines, and on the Internet about controversial subjects like sex, abortion, the afterlife, and reasons for faith.

As you might imagine, I've encountered many skeptics and objections to faith. I've learned much from my critics, the unpaid guardians of my soul.

But if I hadn't learned this crucial lesson at the outset, would all those outreach doors have opened?

The Lesson

I learned it on an island in a river in Seoul, Korea. Over a million believers were gathered for Explo 74. One speaker that day was a prominent church leader from India who discussed how to best communicate the message of Jesus to the types of Buddhists in India. Here's my paraphrase of his advice.

We could use two methods, he said. One was to begin by stressing the differences between Buddhism and Christianity. But that often gets people mad and turns them off.

A second way involved agreeing with the Buddhist where we

could. We could say something like this: “I know that you as a Buddhist believe in Four Noble Truths.” (This is foundational to many strains of Buddhism.) “First you believe suffering is universal. As a follower of Jesus, I also believe suffering is everywhere. It needs a solution.

Second, you believe that suffering is caused by evil desire or craving. I believe something very similar; I call this evil desire sin.”

Third, you believe that the way to eliminate suffering is to eliminate craving. I feel selfishness needs to be eliminated, too. And fourth, you feel we eliminate craving by following the Eightfold Path: right understanding, right aspiration, right behavior, etc.

Here’s where I would suggest an alternative. For many years I, too, tried to eliminate my selfishness by seeking to think and do the right thing. But you know what happened? I became very frustrated because I lacked the power to do it. I realized that if I relied on God, He could give me the inner power I needed.”

Do you see the contrast between those two methods of approaching someone who differs with you? The first emphasizes differences and has the emotional effect of holding up your hands as if to say “Stop!” or “Go away!” The second begins by agreeing where you can. Your emotional hands are extended as if to welcome your listeners. If you were the listener, which approach would you prefer?

Start by Agreeing where You Can

In communicating with skeptics, start by agreeing where you can. You’ll get many more to listen.

I call this approach Advocacy Apologetics. You’re approaching the person as an advocate rather than an adversary. You believe in some of the same things they do. Expressing

agreement can penetrate emotional barriers and communicate that you are *for* that person rather than *against* them. It can make them more willing to consider areas of disagreement.

Don't compromise biblical truth; but agree at the start where you can.

Paul used this approach. He wrote ([1 Corinthians. 9:19-23 NLT](#), emphasis mine):

I have become a servant of everyone so that I can bring them to Christ. When I am with the Jews, I become one of them so that I can bring them to Christ. When I am with the Gentiles who do not have the Jewish law, I fit in with them as much as I can.

Yes, I try to find common ground with everyone so that I might bring them to Christ. I do all this to spread the Good News.

Here's an experiment: The next time you encounter someone who differs with you, take a deep breath. Pray. Ask God to help you identify three areas of agreement. Can't find three? How about one? Discuss that first. Become an advocate for them. Maybe you'll oil some stuck emotional and intellectual gears and nudge someone in His direction.

Reasonable Faith

Reasonable Faith

One of the finest Christian philosophers of our day is William Lane Craig. Although he's become very well known for his debates with atheists and skeptics, he's also a prolific writer. To date, he has authored or edited over thirty books and more than a hundred scholarly articles.^{1} His published work explores such fascinating topics as the evidence for the existence of God, the historical evidence for the resurrection of Jesus, divine foreknowledge and human freedom, and God's relationship to time. In 2007 he started a web-based apologetics ministry called Reasonable Faith (www.reasonablefaith.org). The site features both scholarly and popular articles written by Craig, audio and video recordings of some of his debates, lectures, and interviews, answers to questions from his readers, and much more.

✘ But before he launched the Reasonable Faith Web site, Craig had also authored a book by the same title. One of the best apologetics books on the market, a revised and updated third edition was recently released. His friend and colleague, the philosopher J. P. Moreland, endorsed Craig's ministry with these words:

It is hard to overstate the impact that William Lane Craig has had for the cause of Christ. He is simply the finest Christian apologist of the last half century, and his academic work justifies ranking him among the top one percent of practicing philosophers in the Western world. Besides that, he is a winsome ambassador for Christ, an exceptional debater, and a man with the heart of an evangelist. . . . I do not know of a single thinker who has done more to raise the bar of Christian scholarship in our generation than Craig. He is one of a kind, and I thank God for his life and work.^{2}

Although the book has been described as “an admirable defense

of basic Christian faith,"[{3}](#) many readers will find the content quite advanced. According to Craig, "*Reasonable Faith* is intended primarily to serve as a textbook for seminary level courses on Christian apologetics."[{4}](#) For those without much prior training in philosophy, theology, and apologetics, this book will make for some very demanding reading in places. But for those who want to seriously grapple with an informed and compelling case for the truth of Christianity, this book will richly repay one's careful and patient study.

Although we cannot possibly do it justice, in the remainder of this article we will briefly consider at least some of the reasons why Craig believes that biblical Christianity is an eminently reasonable faith.

The Absurdity of Life Without God

Imagine for a moment that there is no God. What implications would this have for human life? Science tells us that the universe is not eternal, but that it rather had a beginning. But if there is no God, then the universe must have come into being, uncaused, out of nothing! What's more, the origin of life is nothing more than an unintended by-product of matter, plus time, plus chance.[{5}](#) No one planned or purposed for life to arise, for if there is no God, there was no one to plan or purpose it. And human beings? We are just the unpredictable result of a long evolutionary process that never had us in mind. In fact, if one were to rewind the history of life to its beginning, and allow the evolutionary process to start anew, it's virtually certain that none of us would be here to think about it! After all, without an intelligent Agent guiding this long and complicated process, the chances that our species would accidentally emerge a second time is practically zero.[{6}](#)

Depressing as it is, this little thought experiment provides the appropriate backdrop for Craig's discussion of the

absurdity of life without God. In his view, if God does not exist, then human life is ultimately without meaning, value, or purpose. After all, if human beings are merely the accidental by-products of the unintended forces of nature, then what possible meaning *could* human life have? If there is no God, then we were not created for a *purpose*; we were merely “coughed” into existence by mindless material processes.

Of course, some might wonder why we couldn't just create some meaning for our lives, or give the universe a meaning of our own. But as Craig observes, “the universe does not really acquire meaning just because *I* happen to give it one for suppose I give the universe one meaning, and you give it another. Who is right? The answer, of course, is neither one. For the universe without God remains objectively meaningless, no matter how we regard it.”[\[7\]](#)

Like it or not, if God does not exist, then the universe—and our very lives—are ultimately meaningless and absurd. The difficulty is, however, that no one can really live consistently and happily with such a view.[\[8\]](#) Although merely recognizing this fact does absolutely nothing to show that God actually exists, it should at least motivate us to sincerely investigate the matter with an open heart and an open mind. So let's now briefly consider some of the *reasons* for believing that there really is a God.

The Existence of God

In the latest edition of *Reasonable Faith*, Craig offers a number of persuasive arguments for believing that God does, in fact, exist. Unfortunately, we can only skim the surface of these arguments here. But if you want to go deeper, his book is a great place to start.

After a brief historical survey of some of the major kinds of arguments that scholars have offered for believing that God

exists, Craig offers his own defense for each of them. He begins with a defense of what is often called the *cosmological* argument. This argument takes its name from the Greek word *kosmos*, which means "world." It essentially argues from the existence of the cosmos, or world, to the existence of a First Cause or Sufficient Reason for the world's existence.[{9}](#) Next he defends a *teleological*, or design, argument. The name for this argument comes from the Greek word *telos*, which means "end." According to Craig, this argument attempts to infer "an intelligent designer of the universe, just as we infer an intelligent designer for any product in which we discern evidence of purposeful adaptation of means to some end (*telos*)."[{10}](#) After the design argument, he offers a defense of the *moral* argument. This argument "implies the existence of a Being that is the embodiment of the ultimate Good," as well as "the source of the objective moral values we experience in the world."[{11}](#) Finally, he defends what is known as the *ontological* argument. Ontology is the study of being, and this much-debated argument "attempts to prove from the very concept of God that God exists."[{12}](#)

Taken together, these arguments provide a powerful case for the existence of God. As Craig presents them, the cosmological argument implies the existence of an eternal, immaterial, unimaginably powerful, personal Creator of the universe. The design argument reveals an intelligent designer of the cosmos. The moral argument reveals a Being who is the transcendent source and standard of moral goodness. And the ontological argument shows that if God's existence is even possible, then He must exist!

But suppose we grant that all of these arguments are sound. Why think that *Christianity* is true? Many *non-Christian* religions believe in God. Why think that Christianity is the one that got it right? In order to answer this question we must now confront the central figure of Christianity: Jesus of Nazareth.

The Son of Man

When the previous edition of *Reasonable Faith* was published in 1994, most New Testament scholars thought that Jesus had never really claimed to be the Messiah, or Lord, or Son of God. But a lot has happened in the intervening fourteen years, and “the balance of scholarly opinion on Jesus’ use of Christological titles may have actually tipped in the opposite direction.”[{13}](#)

For example, we have excellent grounds for believing that Jesus often referred to himself as “the Son of Man.”[{14}](#) Although some believe that in using this title Jesus was merely referring to himself as a human being, the evidence suggests that he actually meant much more than that. Note, for example, that “Jesus did not refer to himself as ‘a son of man,’ but as ‘*the* Son of Man.’”[{15}](#) His use of the definite article is a crucially important observation, especially in light of Daniel 7:13-14.

In this passage Daniel describes a vision in which “one like a son of man” comes before God with the clouds of heaven. God gives this person an everlasting kingdom and we are told that “all peoples, nations and men of every language worshiped him” (Dan. 7:14). It’s clear that Daniel’s “son of man” is much more than a human being, for he’s viewed as an appropriate object of worship. Since no one is worthy of worship but God alone (see Luke 4:8), the “son of man” must actually be divine, as well as human.

According to Mark, at Jesus’ trial the high priest pointedly asked him if he was the Christ (or Messiah), “the Son of the Blessed One.” Jesus’ response is astonishing. “I am,” he said, “And you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven” (Mark 14:61-62). Here Jesus not only affirms that he is the Messiah and Son of God, he also explicitly identifies himself with the coming Son of Man prophesied by Daniel.[{16}](#) Since we have

excellent reasons for believing that Jesus actually made this radical claim at his trial, we're once again confronted with that old trilemma: if Jesus really claimed to be divine, then he must have been either a lunatic, a liar, or the divine Son of Man!

Now most people would probably agree that Jesus was not a liar or a lunatic, but they might still find it difficult to accept his claim to divinity. They might wonder if we have any good reasons, independent of Jesus' claims, for believing his claims to be true. As a matter of fact we do!

The Resurrection of Jesus

Shortly after Jesus' crucifixion, on the day of Pentecost, the apostle Peter stood before a large crowd of people gathered in Jerusalem and made a truly astonishing claim: God had raised Jesus from the dead, thereby vindicating his radical personal claims to be both Lord and Messiah (see Acts 2:32-36). The reason this claim was so incredible was that the "Jews had no conception of a Messiah who, instead of triumphing over Israel's enemies, would be shamefully executed by them as a criminal."[\[17\]](#) Indeed, according to the Old Testament book of Deuteronomy, "anyone who is hung on a tree is under God's curse" (21:22-23). So how could a man who had been crucified as a criminal possibly be the promised Messiah? If we reject the explanation of the New Testament, that God raised Jesus from the dead, it's very difficult to see how early Christianity could have ever gotten started. So are there good reasons to believe that Jesus really was raised from the dead?

According to Craig, the case for Jesus' resurrection rests "upon the evidence for three great, independently established facts: the empty tomb, the resurrection appearances, and the origin of the Christian faith."[\[18\]](#) He marshals an extensive array of arguments and evidence in support of each fact, as well as critiquing the various naturalistic theories which

have been proposed to avoid the resurrection. He concludes by noting that since God exists, miracles are possible. And once one acknowledges this, “it’s hard to deny that the resurrection of Jesus is the best explanation of the facts.”[{19}](#)

This brings us to the significance of this event. According to the German theologian Wolfhart Pannenberg:

The resurrection of Jesus acquires such decisive meaning, not merely because someone . . . has been raised from the dead, but because it is Jesus of Nazareth, whose execution was instigated by the Jews because he had blasphemed against God. If this man was raised from the dead, then . . . God . . . has committed himself to him. . . . The resurrection can only be understood as the divine vindication of the man whom the Jews had rejected as a blasphemer.[{20}](#)

In other words, by raising Jesus from the dead, God has put His seal of approval (as it were) on Jesus’ radical personal claims to be the Messiah, the Son of God, and the divine Son of Man! This forces each of us to answer the same haunting question Jesus once asked his disciples, “Who do you say I am?” (Matt. 16:15).

Notes

1. See “About William Lane Craig” at www.reasonablefaith.org/site/PageServer?pagename=about_william_lane_craig, accessed 22 August 2008.
2. J. P. Moreland, cited in William Lane Craig, *Reasonable Faith: Christian Truth and Apologetics*, 3rd ed. (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2008), 1.
3. C. Behan McCullagh, cited in Craig, *Reasonable Faith*, 1.
4. Craig, *Reasonable Faith*, 12.
5. *Ibid.*, 76.
6. In the minds of some people, this is a rather controversial

claim. But it's been convincingly defended by naturalist authors like Stephen J. Gould and Michael Shermer. For a brief defense by Shermer, please see the articles on "Glorious Contingency" at

www.metanexus.net/Magazine/ArticleDetail/tabid/68/tabid/72/Default.aspx?aid=27, accessed 4 September 2008.

7. Ibid., 79.

8. Ibid., 78.

9. Ibid., 98.

10. Ibid., 99-100.

11. Ibid., 104.

12. Ibid., 95.

13. Ibid., 301.

14. See Craig's discussion on pp. 315-318.

15. Ibid., 315.

16. Ibid., 317.

17. Ibid., 388.

18. Ibid., 360-61.

18. Ibid., 399.

20. Wolfhart Pannenberg, "Jesu Geschichte und unsere Geschichte," in *Glaube und Wirklichkeit* (Munich: Chr. Kaiser, 1975), 92-94; cited in Craig, *Reasonable Faith*, 399.

© 2008 Probe Ministries

7 Questions Skeptics Ask – Radio Transcript

Rusty Wright considers some common questions skeptics ask about our belief in Christianity. He shows us how to answer these questions from an informed biblical worldview.

Questions of Faith

Picture the scene. You're discussing your faith with a coworker or neighbor, perhaps over lunch or coffee. You explain your beliefs but your friend has questions:

How could a loving God allow evil and suffering? The Bible is full of contradictions. What about people who've never heard of Jesus?

How do you feel about these questions and objections? Anxious? Confused? Defensive? Combative?

Sensitively and appropriately answering questions that skeptics ask you can be an important part of helping them to consider Jesus. Peter told us, "In your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect."^[1] This series looks at seven common questions skeptics ask and gives you some pointers on how to respond. Consider first a story.

As the flight from Chicago to Dallas climbed in the sky, I became engrossed in conversation with the passenger to my left. "Aimee," a French businesswoman, asked me about my work. On learning I was a Christian communicator, she related that a professing Christian had signed a contract with her, attempted to lead her to Christ, then later deceitfully undercut her. "How could a Christian do such a thing?" she asked.

I told her that Christians weren't perfect, that some fail miserably, that many are honest and caring, but that it is Jesus we ultimately trust. Aimee asked question after question: How can you believe the Bible? Why do Christians say there is only one way to God? How does one become a Christian?

I tried to answer her concerns tactfully and explained the message of grace as clearly as I could. Stories I told of

personal pain seemed to open her up to consider God's love for her. She did not come to Christ in that encounter, but she seemed to leave it with a new understanding.

Hurting people everywhere need God. Many are open to considering Him, but they often have questions they want answered before they are willing to accept Christ. As Christian communicators seek to blend grace with truth,^{2} an increasing number of skeptics may give an ear and become seekers or believers.

As you interact with skeptics, compliment them where you can. Jesus complimented the skeptical Nathanael for his pursuit of truth.^{3} Listen to their concerns. Your listening ear speaks volumes. It may surprise you to learn that your attitude can be just as important as what you know.

Dealing with Objections

How do you deal with questions and objections to faith that your friends may pose?

When I was a skeptical student, my sometimes-relentless questions gave my Campus Crusade for Christ friends at Duke University plenty of practice! I wanted to know if Christianity was true. After trusting Christ as Savior, I still had questions.

Bob Prall, the local Campus Crusade director, took interest in me. At first his answers irritated me, but as I thought them through they began to make sense. For two years I followed him around campus, watching him interact. Today, as I am privileged to encounter inquisitive people around the globe, much of my speech and manner derive from my mentor.

Consider some guidelines. Pray for wisdom, for His love for inquirers^{4} and for your questioner's heart. If appropriate, briefly share the gospel first. The Holy Spirit may draw your friends to Christ. Don't push, though. It may be best to

answer their questions first.

Some questions may be intellectual smokescreens. Once a Georgia Tech philosophy professor peppered me with questions, which I answered as best I could.

Then I asked him, If I could answer all your questions to your satisfaction, would you put your life in Jesus' hands? His reply: "[Expletive deleted] no!"

Okay. This first objection is one you might have heard:

1. It doesn't matter what you believe as long as you are sincere.

I once gave a speech arguing *for* this proposition. Later, I reconsidered. In the 1960s, many women took the drug thalidomide seeking easier pregnancies. Often they delivered deformed babies. Sincerely swallowing two white pills may cure your headache if the pills are aspirin. If they are roach poison, results may differ.

After discussing this point, a widely respected psychologist told me, "I guess a person could be sincere in what he or she believed, but be sincerely wrong." Ultimately faith is only as valid as its object. Jesus demonstrated by His life, death and resurrection that He is a worthy object for faith. [\[5\]](#)

Focus on Jesus. Bob Prall taught me to say, "I don't have answers to every question. But if my conclusion about Jesus is wrong, I have a bigger problem. What do I do with the evidence for His resurrection, His deity and the prophecies He fulfilled? And what do I do with changed lives, including my own?"

I don't have complete answers to every concern you will encounter, but in what follows I'll outline some short responses that might be useful.

The second question is:

2. Why is there evil and suffering?

Sigmund Freud called religion an illusion that humans invent to satisfy their security needs. To him, a benevolent, all-powerful God seemed incongruent with natural disasters and human evil.

God, though sovereign, gave us freedom to follow Him or to disobey Him. Oxford scholar C.S. Lewis estimated that eighty percent of human suffering stems from human choice. Lewis called pain "God's megaphone" that alerts us to our need for Him.[{6}](#) This response does not answer all concerns (because God sometimes does intervene to thwart evil) but it suggests that the problem of evil is not as great an intellectual obstacle to belief as some imagine.

Pain's emotional barrier to belief, however, remains formidable. When I see God, items on my long list of questions for Him will include a painful and unwanted divorce, betrayal by trusted coworkers, and all sorts of disappointing human behavior and natural disasters. Yet in Jesus' life, death, and resurrection[{7}](#) I have seen enough to trust Him when He says He "causes all things to work together for good to those who love God."[{8}](#)

3. What about those who never hear of Jesus?

Moses said, "The secret things belong to the LORD."[{9}](#) Some issues may remain mysteries. God's perfect love and justice far exceed our own. Whatever He decides will be loving and fair. One can make a case that God will make the necessary information available to someone who wants to know Him. An example: Cornelius, a devout military official. The New Testament records that God assigned Peter to tell him about Jesus.[{10}](#)

A friend once told me that many asking this question seek a personal loophole, a way so they won't need to believe in Christ. That statement angered me, but it also described me.

C.S. Lewis in *Mere Christianity* wrote, "If you are worried about the people outside [of faith in Christ], the most unreasonable thing you can do is to remain outside yourself."[{11}](#) If Christianity is true, the most logical behavior for someone concerned about those without Christ's message would be to trust Christ and go tell them about Him.

Here's a tip: When someone asks you a difficult question, if you don't know the answer, admit it. Many skeptics appreciate honesty. Don't bluff. It's dishonest and often detectable.

4. What about all the contradictions in the Bible?

Ask your questioner for specific examples of contradictions. Often people have none, but rely on hearsay. If there is a specific example, consider these guidelines as you respond.

Omission does not necessarily create contradiction. Luke, for example, writes of two angels at Jesus' tomb after the Resurrection.[{12}](#) Matthew mentions "an angel."[{13}](#) Is this a contradiction? If Matthew stated that only one angel was present, the accounts would be dissonant. As it stands, they can be harmonized.

Differing accounts aren't necessarily contradictory. Matthew and Luke, for example, differ in their accounts of Jesus' birth. Luke records Joseph and Mary starting in Nazareth, traveling to Bethlehem (Jesus' birthplace), and returning to Nazareth.[{14}](#) Matthew starts with Jesus' birth in Bethlehem, relates the family's journey to Egypt to escape King Herod's rage, and recounts their travel to Nazareth after Herod's death.[{15}](#) The Gospels never claim to be exhaustive records. Biographers must be selective. The accounts seem complementary, not contradictory.

Time precludes more complex examples here. But time and again, supposed biblical problems fade in light of logic, history, and archaeology. The Bible's track record under scrutiny argues for its trustworthiness.

5. Isn't Christianity just a psychological crutch?

My mentor Bob Prall has often said, "If Christianity is a psychological crutch, then Jesus Christ came because there was an epidemic of broken legs." Christianity claims to meet real human needs such as those for forgiveness, love, identity and self-acceptance. We might describe Jesus not as a crutch but an iron lung, essential for life itself.

Christian faith and its benefits can be described in psychological terms but that does not negate its validity. "Does it work?" is not the same question as, "Is it true?" Evidence supports Christianity's truthfulness, so we would expect it to work in individual lives, as millions attest.

A caution as you answer questions: Don't offer "proof" but rather evidences for faith. "Proof" can imply an airtight case, which you don't have. Aim for certainty "beyond a reasonable doubt," just as an attorney might in court.

Don't quarrel. Lovingly and intelligently present evidence to willing listeners, not to win arguments but to share good news. Be kind and gentle.[{16}](#) Your life and friendship can communicate powerfully.

6. How can Jesus be the only way to God?

When I was in secondary school, a recent alumnus visited, saying he had found Christ at Harvard. I respected his character and tact and listened intently. But I could not stomach Jesus' claim that "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me."[{17}](#) That seemed way too narrow.

Two years later, my spiritual and intellectual journey had changed my view. The logic that drew me (reluctantly) to his position involves three questions:

- *If God exists, could there be only one way to reach Him? To*

be open-minded, I had to admit this possibility.

- *Why consider Jesus as a candidate for that possible one way? He claimed it. His plan of rescuing humans “by grace...through faith... not...works”[{18}](#) was distinct from those requiring works, as many other religions do. These two kinds of systems were mutually exclusive. Both could be false or either could be true, but both could not be true.*

- *Was Jesus’ plan true? Historical evidence for His resurrection, fulfilled prophecy[{19}](#) and deity, and for the reliability of the New Testament[{20}](#) convinced me I could trust His words.*

One more common objection:

7. I could never take the blind leap of faith that believing in Christ requires.

We exercise faith every day. Few of us comprehend everything about electricity or aerodynamics, but we have evidence of their validity. Whenever we use electric lights or airplanes, we exercise faith not blind faith, but faith based on evidence. Christians act similarly. The evidence for Jesus is compelling, so one can trust Him on that basis.

As you respond to inquirers, realize that many barriers to faith are emotional rather than merely intellectual.

As a teenager, I nearly was expelled from secondary school for some problems I helped create. In my pain and anger I wondered, “Why would God allow this to happen?” I was mad at God! In retrospect, I realize I was blaming Him for my own bad choices. My personal anguish at the time kept me from seeing that.

Your questioners may be turned off because Christians haven’t acted like Jesus. Maybe they’re angry at God because of personal illness, a broken relationship, a loved one’s death,

or personal pain. Ask God for patience and love as you seek to blend grace with truth. He may use you to help skeptics become seekers and seekers become His children. I hope He does.

Notes

1. 1 Peter 3:15 NIV.

2. John 1:14.

3. John 1:45-47.

4. Romans 9:1-3; 10:1.

5. For useful discussions of evidences regarding Jesus, visit www.WhoIsJesus-Really.com.

6. C.S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (New York: Macmillan, 1974), 89-103 ff. *The Problem of Pain* was first published in 1940.

7. A short summary of Resurrection evidences is at Rusty Wright and Linda Raney Wright, "Who's Got the Body?" 1976, www.probe.org/whos-got-the-body/.

8. Romans 8:28 NASB.

For more complete treatment of this subject, see Rick Rood, "The Problem of Evil," 1996, www.probe.org/the-problem-of-evil/ ; Dr. Ray Bohlin, "Where Was God on September 11?" 2002, www.probe.org/where-was-god-on-sept-11-the-problem-of-evil/.

9. Deuteronomy 29:29 NASB.

10. Acts 10.

11. C.S. Lewis, "The Case for Christianity," reprinted from *Mere Christianity*; in *The Best of C.S. Lewis* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1969), 449. *The Case for Christianity* is copyright 1947 by The Macmillan Company.

12. Luke 24:1-9.
13. Matthew 28:1-8.
14. Luke 1:26-2:40.
15. Matthew 1:18-2:23.
16. 2 Timothy 2:24-26.
17. John 14:6 NASB.
18. Ephesians 2:8-9 NASB.
19. A summary of some of the prophecies Jesus fulfilled is at Rusty Wright, "Are You Listening? Do You Hear What I Hear?" 2004, www.probe.org/are-you-listening-do-you-hear-what-i-hear/.
20. A summary of evidences for New Testament reliability is at Rusty Wright and Linda Raney Wright, "The New Testament: Can I Trust It?" 1976, www.probe.org/the-new-testament-can-i-trust-it/.

Adapted from Rusty Wright, "7 Questions Skeptics Ask," *Moody Magazine*, March/April 2002. Copyright 2002 Rusty Wright. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

© 2005 Probe Ministries

Answering E-mail

Some examples of Probe's e-mail correspondence, covering questions about on which day Jesus died, the Nephilim, and is Jesus God's final messenger. It concludes with some flames from non-fans of our articles.

Three Days in the Tomb

One aspect of our ministry at Probe is answering questions sent via e-mail. In this article I'm going to address a few questions people have asked.

The first question I'll address has to do with the day of Jesus' death. Someone wrote and asked, "Was Jesus crucified on Thursday or Friday? How do we account for the three days [in the tomb]?"

It will be quite impossible to deal adequately with this question in such limited space. But let's see what we can do.[{1}](#)

The Friday view of the crucifixion has been held the longest in the church. John 19:31 says that Jesus' body was taken down from the cross on "the day of preparation" to avoid having it there on the Sabbath. If this refers to the weekly Sabbath, then the day of preparation—and hence, that of Jesus' death—was on Friday. Luke 23:54-56 says the women witnessed his burial on the day of preparation, and then went home and rested on the Sabbath. On the first day of the week, Sunday, they found the tomb empty (Luke 24:1ff).

Jesus' reference to Jonah poses the greatest problem for this understanding. In Matthew 12:40 we read, "As Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth." Because of this verse, some have held a second view of the crucifixion, that Jesus was crucified on Wednesday. He then arose on Saturday afternoon, and first appeared to his disciples on Sunday.[{2}](#) This allows a full three days and nights in the tomb. But Sunday has from the beginning been regarded as the day Jesus rose from the dead, and this would be the fourth day from Wednesday rather than the third. In addition, it's been established that the Jews counted any part of a day as a whole day, so a full seventy-two hours in the

tomb isn't required (cf. Gen. 42:17,18; I Kings 20:29, II Chron. 10:5,12; Esther 4:16, 5:1). "After three days" and "on the third day" are equivalent as Matthew 27:63-64 shows clearly.[{3}](#)

A third view is that Jesus died on Thursday and rose on Sunday, which allows for three nights and part of three days in the tomb. Thus, the Last Supper was on Wednesday evening, and Jesus – the Passover Lamb–was crucified on Thursday. Friday was the first day of Unleavened Bread, a day of no work, and so is thought to be "the Sabbath of the Passover."[{4}](#) So Jesus was buried on Thursday to avoid profaning this "Sabbath."

In response, New Testament scholar Harold Hoehner notes that there is no precedent for thinking of Friday as a special Sabbath. "The day of preparation for the Passover" in John 19:31 needn't refer to the day before Passover; it could refer to Passover itself.[{5}](#) John 19:31,42, which speaks of the day of preparation and the Sabbath, seems naturally to refer to Friday and Saturday.[{6}](#) In this writer's view, then, the Friday view still seems to be the correct one.

The Nephilim

Who were the Nephilim in Genesis chapter 6? That is a question raised fairly often. The Nephilim are mentioned in Genesis 6 and again in Numbers 13. The passage in Genesis 6 is especially intriguing because of its account of the "sons of God" going in to the "daughters of men." Someone wrote to ask whether the Nephilim "were simply human or the off-spring of angels (demons) mating with human women."

Let's begin with the passage itself. Genesis 6: 1-4 reads:

When men began to increase in number on the earth and daughters were born to them, the sons of God saw that the daughters of men were beautiful, and they married any of

them they chose. Then the LORD said, "My Spirit will not contend with man forever, for he is mortal; his days will be a hundred and twenty years." The Nephilim were on the earth in those days—and also afterward—when the sons of God went to the daughters of men and had children by them. They were the heroes of old, men of renown.

In considering the identity of the Nephilim, one must also answer two other questions: the identity of the "sons of God" and the "daughters of men," and the significance of the passage relative to that which precedes it and that which follows (its context). "In most cases," says John Sailhamer, "the interpretations [of this passage] have arisen out of the viewpoint that these verses introduce the story of the Flood."[{7}](#) Some commentators, however, think otherwise.

First, who are these "sons" and "daughters"? One view holds that the "sons" were kings and the "daughters" were lower class women who made up the harems of such kings.[{8}](#) The "sons" were guilty of polygamy in taking more than one wife from among the "daughters of men." This was at least part of the reason God brought judgment. This view has real possibilities, for it provides a bridge between the genealogies of Cain and Seth in chapters 4 and 5, and it serves as an explanation of the judgment to follow. A weakness of this view is that "while both within the OT and in other Near Eastern texts individual kings were called God's son, there is no evidence that groups of kings were so styled."[{9}](#)

Another view is that these "sons of God" were angels or demons who united with human women, and so corrupted the race that God had to bring judgment. It seems highly unlikely that this is the correct interpretation. First, Jesus said that angels don't marry, and in Genesis 6:2 the word for "married" means just that, and not fornication. If good angels don't marry, why would God grant sexual powers to demons? Second, if demons were taking advantage of human women, why was mankind judged? The Interpreter's Bible Commentary offers this view, but

relegates the story to myth. If we aren't prepared to think of Genesis as being mythological, we need to look for another option.

A third view is that the "sons of God" were descendents of godly Seth, while the "daughters of men" were descendents of ungodly Cain. Although "sons of God" is used in the Old Testament to refer to angels (see Job 1:6, 2:1 in the NASB), godly men are also called "sons" as in Psalm 73:15 and Hosea 1:10.

This view provides a bridge between chapters 4-5 and chapter 6. Chapter 4 lists some offspring of Cain, chapter 5 those of Seth, and chapter 6 brings them together. According to this view, says commentator Victor Hamilton, "The sin is a forbidden union, a yoking of what God intended to keep apart, the intermarriage of believer with unbeliever."[{10}](#)

Jesus said in Matt. 24:38, "For in the days before the flood, people were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, up to the day Noah entered the ark." Seth's godly descendents had shifted their focus from God to the things of the flesh and were simply carrying on with their lives, but not in accordance with God's will. That the primary focus of God's wrath is against the union, rather than the offspring of it, is the fact that God's displeasure is announced after mentioning the marriage unions but before mentioning the offspring.

So, then, who were the Nephilim? The Holman Bible Dictionary says the word "probably derived from the root 'to fall' and meaning either 'the fallen ones' or else 'ones who fall [violently] upon others.'"[{11}](#) Hamilton translates it "those who were made to fall, those who were cast down." If this is correct, then the Nephilim are certainly not to be identified with the "heroes of old, men of renown" in verse 4.[{12}](#) Old Testament commentators Keil and Delitzsch believe Martin Luther had it correct when he said these men were tyrants.

“They were called Nephilim,” they say, “because they fell upon the people and oppressed them.”[\[13\]](#)

Were they the offspring of the “sons of God” and “daughters of men”? Apparently not, for the verse says they “were on the earth in those days—and also afterward”; in other words, they were contemporaries of the “sons” and “daughters.”

It’s hard to be dogmatic about the interpretation of Genesis 6:1-4. But my vote goes with this last view.

Is Jesus the Final Messenger from God?

The next question has to do with Jesus as the final “messenger” from God. A letter e-mailed to us reads in part: I assume you believe the Old Testament to be part of the inspired word of God, and therefore believe Moses, and Abraham before him, were part of this “progress of revelation.” Were there others, perhaps Krishna, Zoroaster, or Buddha, who spread God’s instructions to others at different places and times?

The writer continues:

Is it possible that God has sent other messengers since Jesus, to accommodate His instructions, perhaps Muhammad (as Muslims believe) or Baha’ullah (as Baha’is believe)? If you do not believe these two men were messengers from God, do you believe we are due for another messenger, so God can accommodate his instructions to the moral and spiritual standards of the people of our time? In general, how can we determine which messengers are part of God’s progressive revelation and which are not?

According to Scripture, Jesus was the full revelation of God to us (Heb. 1:1-2). Not only did he teach us about God, but also His work of securing our redemption was the culmination of God’s plan. He was the focus of God’s message. Both the Old Testament and the New Testament point to Him. As two sorrowful

disciples of Jesus made their way home after His death, He appeared to them, and “beginning with Moses and with all the prophets, [Jesus] explained to them the things concerning Himself in all the Scriptures” (Luke 24:27). The New Testament clearly is focused on Jesus as well. If Jesus was the focus of God’s message, anyone who legitimately spoke for God after Jesus was simply clarifying and expanding on His message.

In another e-mail, the same writer said: “I am struck by the great similarities of the world’s religions. It seems to me that certain central themes run through them all . . . for example, Love for God and your fellow man.” In response, I quoted Steve Turner’s tongue-in-cheek declaration of religious pluralists: “We believe that all religions are basically the same . . . They all believe in love and goodness. They only differ on matters of creation, sin, heaven, hell, God, and salvation.”[\[14\]](#)

Those are some major differences, aren’t they? So all religions believe in God. Which God? There are polytheists, Trinitarian theists, oneness theists, pantheists, panentheists, . . . Which view of God is true? What about salvation? Are we to become one with the cosmos, or find forgiveness through faith in Jesus alone? Are we to discover our own essential divinity, or recognize that we are finite, contingent beings who were made to serve the one true God who is “Wholly Other”? According to Jesus, there is only one God and only one way to Him.

It’s clear, then, that no other “messenger” such as Krishna or Buddha, who doesn’t preach Jesus and salvation through him alone, could be from God.

Flames

Along with e-mails asking questions and occasionally giving us pats on the back, there are those that take issue with something we’ve said.

One general kind of criticism is that we don't know what we're talking about. Here's an excerpt from an e-mail to Dr. Ray Bohlin:

I was highly disturbed by the content of this page. Your delusions and misinterpretation of facts is highly disconcerting. . . . This page is ripe with Christian propaganda and follows a thoroughly unscholarly approach in developing its argument. I only hope that millions of innocent people are not blinded by your lies, and that scientific research will continue to restore the truth that has been so corrupted by the archaic concept that is Christianity.

Wow! That's rather harsh. But notice that there are no specific issues mentioned. Here is Ray's response in part:

I . . . noticed that your message was loaded with accusations but no substance or specifics. If you really think we are so full of errors and lies, a few examples might allow us the opportunity to correct them.

The critic wrote back to say he would substantiate his accusations but never did.

Others of us have been accused of not knowing what we're talking about. One writer thought Pat Zukeran's assessment of Buddhism reflected a lack of direct experience with Buddhists. Pat replied,

I come from an island that is 80% Buddhist. My entire family clan has held to Buddhist teachings for hundreds of years. My parents and cousins remain in the Buddhist faith. I grew up under the teachings of the Buddhist temples near my house. I have been a member of the Young Buddhist Association. Therefore, I have many Buddhist friends including my own family members.

That should be enough experience, shouldn't it?

Occasionally we receive e-mails that almost fry our monitors—"flaming," I think it's called. Don Closson received this one:

I read your article about Bishop Spong, and while I don't always agree with him, I'm not an idiot like you who doesn't understand one word of the bishop's writings. You should try living in the 21st century sometime. What an idiot.

This isn't going to look good on Don's resume.

If things aren't looking good for Don, though, what about poor Ray? One writer said, "Hey I read your commentary on apes, 'hominids', and humans and thought it [stinks]." Well, he didn't say "stinks," but I think it would be improper to use his actual word. "Surely you can find something better to do than knock God's evolutionary plan back into the dark ages," he continues. "LOL. Crack me up. . . what a buffoon! You crack me up!"

But wait! It gets worse. Here's an e-mail that begins, "You are a sad man." Another says plainly, "You're sick." One says, "I think that you are a moron." Whoa! What kind of crew do we have here at Probe, anyway?

One final e-mail ought to be noted. Someone was upset about one of our articles on evolution and creation, and concluded his message with this:

All your pseudo-religion promotes is hate and intolerance, preaching your holyier [sic] than thou attitude. So with great contempt I say, if your god is real, may you burn in hell, you evil Christian dinosaur.

Let's see. We preach "hate and intolerance," and the writer consigns us to a long stay in hell?

At Probe we take input seriously . . . when it's presented in a reasonable manner. Maybe a variation of the Golden Rule should be a guide: "Speak unto others as you would have them

“speak unto you.” Do you have a complaint? State it clearly, give specific examples, and keep the tone as amiable as possible. And one of our sick, holier than thou, unscholarly, idiotic buffoons will answer . . . once we figure out what we’re talking about.

Notes

1. I have drawn extensively from chapter four of Harold Hoehner’s *Chronological Aspects of the Life of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1977), pp. 65-74, for this discussion.
2. W. Graham Scroggie, *A Guide to the Gospels* (London, 1948), 569-577; cited in Hoehner, *Chronological Aspects*, 66-67.
3. Also, there are more occasions in the Gospels where Jesus is said to rise on the third day than after the third day (Matt. 16:21; 17:23; 20:19; 27:64; Luke 9:22; 18:33; 24:7, 21, 46; Acts 10:40; I Cor. 15:4).
4. Hoehner, 68.
5. New Testament scholar Leon Morris notes that there is no evidence that the phrase indicates the day before the Passover; all clear references to the “day of preparation” refer to Friday. See Hoehner, 70.
6. Hoehner, 71.
7. John Sailhamer, “Genesis,” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 75.
8. Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1-17* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 263.
9. Hamilton, 264.
10. Ibid.
11. *Holman Bible Dictionary*, “Nephilim.”
12. Hamilton, 270.
13. C.F. Keil and F. Delitzsche, *Commentary on the Old Testament*, Vol. 1: The Pentateuch. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, n.d.), 137.
14. Steve Turner, *Nice and Nasty* (Marshall and Scott, 1980).

See also the entire [Probe Answers Our E-Mail](#) section of our website

7 Questions Skeptics Ask About the Validity of Christianity

Rusty Wright considers some common questions skeptics ask about our belief in Christianity. He shows us how to answer these questions from an informed biblical worldview.

Questions of Faith

Picture the scene. You're discussing your faith with a coworker or neighbor, perhaps over lunch or coffee. You explain your beliefs but your friend questions:

How could a loving God allow evil and suffering? The Bible is full of contradictions. What about people who've never heard of Jesus?

How do you feel about these questions and objections? Anxious? Confused? Defensive? Combative?

Sensitively and appropriately answering questions that skeptics ask you can be an important part of helping them to consider Jesus. Peter told us, "In your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect."[\[1\]](#) This series

looks at seven common questions skeptics ask and gives you some pointers on how to respond. Consider first a story.

As the flight from Chicago to Dallas climbed in the sky, I became engrossed in conversation with the passenger to my left. "Aimee," a French businesswoman, asked me about my work. On learning I was a Christian communicator, she related that a professing Christian had signed a contract with her, attempted to lead her to Christ, then later deceitfully undercut her. "How could a Christian do such a thing?" she asked.

I told her that Christians weren't perfect, that some fail miserably, that many are honest and caring, but that it is Jesus we ultimately trust. Aimee asked question after question: "How can you believe the Bible?" "Why do Christians say there is only one way to God?" "How does one become a Christian?"

I tried to answer her concerns tactfully and explained the message of grace as clearly as I could. Stories I told of personal pain seemed to open her up to consider God's love for her. She did not come to Christ in that encounter, but she seemed to leave it with a new understanding.

Hurting people everywhere need God. Many are open to considering Him, but they often have questions they want answered before they are willing to accept Christ. As Christian communicators seek to blend grace with truth,^{2} an increasing number of skeptics may give an ear and become seekers or believers.

As you interact with skeptics, compliment them where you can. Jesus complimented the skeptical Nathanael for his pursuit of truth.^{3} Listen to their concerns. Your listening ear speaks volumes. It may surprise you to learn that your attitude can be just as important as what you know.

Dealing with Objections

How do you deal with questions and objections to faith that your friends may pose?

When I was a skeptical student, my sometimes-relentless questions gave my Campus Crusade for Christ friends at Duke University plenty of practice! I wanted to know if Christianity was true. After trusting Christ as Savior, I still had questions.

Bob Prall, the local Campus Crusade director, took interest in me. At first his answers irritated me, but as I thought them through they began to make sense. For two years I followed him around campus, watching him interact. Today, as I am privileged to encounter inquisitive people around the globe, much of my speech and manner derive from my mentor.

Consider some guidelines. Pray for wisdom, for His love for inquirers^{4} and for your questioner's heart. If appropriate, briefly share the gospel first. The Holy Spirit may draw your friends to Christ. Don't push, though. It may be best to answer their questions first.

Some questions may be intellectual smokescreens. Once a Georgia Tech philosophy professor peppered me with questions, which I answered as best I could.

Then I asked him, "If I could answer all your questions to your satisfaction, would you put your life in Jesus' hands?" His reply: "[Expletive deleted] no!"

Okay. This first objection is one you might have heard:

1. It doesn't matter what you believe as long as you are sincere.

I once gave a speech arguing *for* this proposition. Later, I reconsidered. In the 1960s, many women took the drug

thalidomide seeking easier pregnancies. Often they delivered deformed babies. Sincerely swallowing two white pills may cure your headache if the pills are aspirin. If they are roach poison, results may differ.

After discussing this point, a widely respected psychologist told me, "I guess a person could be sincere in what he or she believed, but be sincerely wrong." Ultimately faith is only as valid as its object. Jesus demonstrated by His life, death and resurrection that He is a worthy object for faith.[\[5\]](#)

Focus on Jesus. Bob Prall taught me to say, "I don't have answers to every question. But if my conclusion about Jesus is wrong, I have a bigger problem. What do I do with the evidence for His resurrection, His deity and the prophecies He fulfilled? And what do I do with changed lives, including my own?"

I don't have complete answers to every concern you will encounter, but in what follows I'll outline some short responses that might be useful.

The second question is:

2. Why is there evil and suffering?

Sigmund Freud called religion an illusion that humans invent to satisfy their security needs. To him, a benevolent, all-powerful God seemed incongruent with natural disasters and human evil.

God, though sovereign, gave us freedom to follow Him or to disobey Him. Oxford scholar C.S. Lewis estimated that eighty percent of human suffering stems from human choice. Lewis called pain "God's megaphone" that alerts us to our need for Him.[\[6\]](#) This response does not answer all concerns (because God sometimes does intervene to thwart evil) but it suggests that the problem of evil is not as great an intellectual obstacle to belief as some imagine.

Pain's emotional barrier to belief, however, remains formidable. When I see God, items on my long list of questions for Him will include a painful and unwanted divorce, betrayal by trusted coworkers, and all sorts of disappointing human behavior and natural disasters. Yet in Jesus' life, death, and resurrection^{7} I have seen enough to trust Him when He says He "causes all things to work together for good to those who love God."^{8}

3. What about those who never hear of Jesus?

Moses said, "The secret things belong to the LORD."^{9} Some issues may remain mysteries. God's perfect love and justice far exceed our own. Whatever He decides will be loving and fair. One can make a case that God will make the necessary information available to someone who wants to know Him. An example: Cornelius, a devout military official. The New Testament records that God assigned Peter to tell him about Jesus.^{10}

A friend once told me that many asking this question seek a personal loophole, a way so they won't need to believe in Christ. That statement angered me, but it also described me. C.S. Lewis in *Mere Christianity* wrote, "If you are worried about the people outside [of faith in Christ], the most unreasonable thing you can do is to remain outside yourself."^{11} If Christianity is true, the most logical behavior for someone concerned about those without Christ's message would be to trust Christ and go tell them about Him.

Here's a tip: When someone asks you a difficult question, if you don't know the answer, admit it. Many skeptics appreciate honesty. Don't bluff. It's dishonest and often detectable.

4. What about all the contradictions in the Bible?

Ask your questioner for specific examples of contradictions. Often people have none, but rely on hearsay. If there is a specific example, consider these guidelines as you respond.

Omission does not necessarily create contradiction. Luke, for example, writes of two angels at Jesus' tomb after the Resurrection.^{12} Matthew mentions "an angel."^{13} Is this a contradiction? If Matthew stated that only one angel was present, the accounts would be dissonant. As it stands, they can be harmonized.

Differing accounts aren't necessarily contradictory. Matthew and Luke, for example, differ in their accounts of Jesus' birth. Luke records Joseph and Mary starting in Nazareth, traveling to Bethlehem (Jesus' birthplace), and returning to Nazareth.^{14} Matthew starts with Jesus' birth in Bethlehem, relates the family's journey to Egypt to escape King Herod's rage, and recounts their travel to Nazareth after Herod's death.^{15} The Gospels never claim to be exhaustive records. Biographers must be selective. The accounts seem complementary, not contradictory.

Time precludes more complex examples here. But time and again, supposed biblical problems fade in light of logic, history, and archaeology. The Bible's track record under scrutiny argues for its trustworthiness.

5. Isn't Christianity just a psychological crutch?

My mentor Bob Prall has often said, "If Christianity is a psychological crutch, then Jesus Christ came because there was an epidemic of broken legs." Christianity claims to meet real human needs such as those for forgiveness, love, identity and self-acceptance. We might describe Jesus not as a crutch but an iron lung, essential for life itself.

Christian faith and its benefits can be described in psychological terms but that does not negate its validity. "Does it work?" is not the same question as, "Is it true?" Evidence supports Christianity's truthfulness, so we would expect it to work in individual lives, as millions attest.

A caution as you answer questions: Don't offer "proof" but

rather evidences for faith. "Proof" can imply an airtight case, which you don't have. Aim for certainty "beyond a reasonable doubt," just as an attorney might in court.

Don't quarrel. Lovingly and intelligently present evidence to willing listeners, not to win arguments but to share good news. Be kind and gentle.[{16}](#) Your life and friendship can communicate powerfully.

6. How can Jesus be the only way to God?

When I was in secondary school, a recent alumnus visited, saying he had found Christ at Harvard. I respected his character and tact and listened intently. But I could not stomach Jesus' claim that "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me."[{17}](#) That seemed way too narrow.

Two years later, my spiritual and intellectual journey had changed my view. The logic that drew me (reluctantly) to his position involves three questions:

- *If God exists, could there be only one way to reach Him?* To be open-minded, I had to admit this possibility.
- *Why consider Jesus as a candidate for that possible one way?* He claimed it. His plan of rescuing humans – "by grace...through faith...not...works"[{18}](#) was distinct from those requiring works, as many other religions do. These two kinds of systems were mutually exclusive. Both could be false or either could be true, but both could not be true.
- *Was Jesus' plan true?* Historical evidence for His resurrection, fulfilled prophecy[{19}](#) and deity, and for the reliability of the New Testament[{20}](#) convinced me I could trust His words.

One more common objection:

7. I could never take the blind leap of faith that believing

in Christ requires.

We exercise faith every day. Few of us comprehend everything about electricity or aerodynamics, but we have evidence of their validity. Whenever we use electric lights or airplanes, we exercise faith – not blind faith, but faith based on evidence. Christians act similarly. The evidence for Jesus is compelling, so one can trust Him on that basis.

As you respond to inquirers, realize that many barriers to faith are emotional rather than merely intellectual.

As a teenager, I nearly was expelled from secondary school for some problems I helped create. In my pain and anger I wondered, “Why would God allow this to happen?” I was mad at God! In retrospect, I realize I was blaming Him for my own bad choices. My personal anguish at the time kept me from seeing that.

Your questioners may be turned off because Christians haven’t acted like Jesus. Maybe they’re angry at God because of personal illness, a broken relationship, a loved one’s death, or personal pain. Ask God for patience and love as you seek to blend grace with truth. He may use you to help skeptics become seekers and seekers become His children. I hope He does.

Notes

1. 1 Peter 3:15 NIV.
2. John 1:14.
3. John 1:45-47.
4. Romans 9:1-3; 10:1.
5. For useful discussions of evidences regarding Jesus, visit www.WhoIsJesus-Really.com.
6. C.S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (New York: Macmillan, 1974), 89-103 ff. The Problem of Pain was first published in 1940.
7. A short summary of Resurrection evidences is at Rusty Wright and Linda Raney Wright, “Who’s Got the Body?” 1976,

www.probe.org/whos-got-the-body/.

8. Romans 8:28 NASB.

For more complete treatment of this subject, see Rick Rood, "The Problem of Evil," 1996, www.probe.org/the-problem-of-evil/; Dr. Ray Bohlin, "Where Was God on September 11?" 2002, www.probe.org/where-was-god-on-sept-11-the-problem-of-evil/.

9. Deuteronomy 29:29 NASB.

10. Acts 10.

11. C.S. Lewis, "The Case for Christianity," reprinted from *Mere Christianity*; in *The Best of C.S. Lewis* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1969), 449. The Case for Christianity is copyright 1947 by The Macmillan Company.

12. Luke 24:1-9.

13. Matthew 28:1-8.

14. Luke 1:26-2:40.

15. Matthew 1:18-2:23.

16. 2 Timothy 2:24-26.

17. John 14:6 NASB.

18. Ephesians 2:8-9 NASB.

19. A summary of some of the prophecies Jesus fulfilled is at Rusty Wright, "Are You Listening? Do You Hear What I Hear?" 2004, www.probe.org/are-you-listening-do-you-hear-what-i-hear/.

20. A summary of evidences for New Testament reliability is at Rusty Wright and Linda Raney Wright, "The New Testament: Can I Trust It?" 1976, www.probe.org/the-new-testament-can-i-trust-it/.

Adapted from Rusty Wright, "7 Questions Skeptics Ask," *Moody Magazine*, March/April 2002. Copyright© 2002 Rusty Wright. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

© 2005 Probe Ministries

The Relevance of Christianity: An Apologetic

Rick Wade develops and defends the relevancy of Christianity, encouraging believers to find points of contact with an unbelieving world.

This article is also available in [Spanish](#). 

Christianity and Human Experience

In his book, *Intellectuals Don't Need God and Other Modern Myths*, theologian Alister McGrath tells about his friend's stamp-collecting hobby. His friend, he says, "is perfectly capable of telling me everything I could possibly want to know about the watermarks of stamps issued during the reign of Queen Victoria by the Caribbean islands of Trinidad and Tobago. And while I have no doubt about the truth of what he is telling me, I cannot help but feel that it is an utter irrelevance to my life."[\[1\]](#)

Christianity strikes many people the same way, McGrath says. They simply see no need for a religion that is 2000 years old and has had its day. How is it relevant to them?

One of the duties of Christian apologetics is that of making a case for the faith. We can prepare ourselves for such opportunities by memorizing many facts about our faith, such as evidences for the reliability of the Bible and the truth of the resurrection. We can learn logical arguments such as those for the existence of God or the logical consistency of Christian doctrines. While these are important components, such things can seem very remote from people today. They will not do much good in our apologetics if people are not

listening.

This is why some Christian thinkers are now saying that before we can show Christianity to be *credible*, we must first make it *plausible*. In other words, we must get people's attention first by bringing Christianity—at least in *their* thinking—into the position of being possibly true.[{2}](#) We need to find those points of contact with people that will encourage them to want to listen.

Why do we need to begin at such a basic level? A few reasons come to mind. First, many people think religion has nothing important to say regarding our public activities. So, in our daily lives religion is only allowed a minor role at best. This attitude quickly affects how we view our private lives as well. Second, many people hold that science is the only worthwhile source of meaningful knowledge. This often—although not necessarily—leads to a naturalistic worldview or at least causes people to think like naturalists. Scientism and naturalism seem to go hand-in-hand. Thus, in order to get a person's attention, the first step we might need to take is to show him how Christianity applies to his life's experience.[{3}](#)

Even though we are physically better off because of our scientific knowledge applied through various technologies, are we better off all around than before we had such things? I am not deriding the benefit of science and technology; I am simply wondering about our spiritual and moral health. Our society is trying to find itself. This is clearly seen in current debates over important ethical and social issues. At the root of our culture wars is the question, Who are we, and what are we to be about? The age-old questions continue to haunt us: Where did I come from? Why am I here? What am I supposed to be doing? Where am I going? With the loss of his exalted place in the universe following the loss of a Christian world view, man now wonders what his place is. Am I significant in a universe that sees me as just one more piece of cosmic dust? Is there any intrinsic meaning to my

existence? Or must I determine for myself what my place and role will be?

In addition to apologetic arguments from logic and factual evidence, we should also be prepared to answer questions such as these. We need to let people know that in Christ are found answers to the major issues of life. By doing this, we can engage people where they really live. We can show them that God is not some abstract force separated from the concerns of life, but “is intimately related to personal and human needs.”[{4}](#) As one writer put it, “God must be shown to be necessitated or justified by *practical* or *existential* thinking.”[{5}](#)

In this article I will address these three issues: meaning, morality, and hope.[{7}](#) offers and contrast it with the Christian view.

The Matter of Meaning

Let us begin with the matter of *meaning*. The question What is the meaning of life? might not be one which most people give serious attention to. But a similar question is often heard, namely, What’s the *point*? When we look for the significance or the point of our activities, we are wondering about their meaning. Reflective individuals carry this idea further, wondering What’s the point—or what is the *meaning*—of it *all*? Although many people would argue that life *has* no ultimate meaning, most people seem to expect it to. We search for it in creativity, in helping others, in “finding ourselves,” and in a variety of other ways.

The question of meaning encompasses other questions: Where did I come from? What is the significance of the experiences of my life? What is my overall purpose, and what should I be doing? Where is all this heading?

The prevailing view in the West today, for all practical

purposes, is naturalism. This is not only the prevailing philosophy on college campuses, but we have all been encouraged by the successes of science to believe that if something is not scientific, it is not reliable. Since science investigates the natural order, we tend to see nature as all that is really important, or even as all that exists. This is called scientific reductionism.

However, the scientific method is capable of dealing only with quantitative matters: How much? How big? How far? How fast? Philosopher Huston Smith has argued that, for all the achievements of science, it is incapable of speaking to such important issues as values, purpose, meaning, and quality. [\[8\]](#)

This focus on science is not meant to pick on this discipline, but to point out that science cannot give answers to some of the major issues of life. Moreover, if we go so far as to adopt naturalism as a world view, we are really in a bind, for naturalism *has* no answers to give, at least to the question of ultimate meaning. Naturalism says there was no purpose for our coming into being; the only meaning we can have now is that which we superimpose on our own lives; and we are all just going back to the dust. If the universe is just a chance accident in space and time; if living beings intrinsically are nothing more than just so many molecules, no matter how marvelously arranged; if human beings are merely cousins to trees, trapped on a planet caught somewhere “between immensity and eternity,” as Carl Sagan said; then there is no meaning to life that we ourselves do not give to it. Being finite, we are by nature incapable of providing ultimate meaning.

If we should seek to establish our *own* meanings, what is to guide us? By what shall we measure such things? What if that which is meaningful to me is offensive to you? Furthermore, what if the goals we pursue are not capable of bearing the meaning we try to put into them? Many people strive to move up the ladder, to attain the power and prestige that they think will fulfill them, only to find that it's not all it's cracked

up to be. The possession of material goods defines many of our lives. But how much is enough? Does the one with the most toys when he dies really win? Or, as some have said, is it simply that the one who dies with the most toys . . . still dies?

Thus, there is no ultimate meaning in a universe without God, and our attempts at providing our own limited meanings often leave us looking for more.

If naturalism is true, we should be able to shake off the fantasies of our past and give up worrying about questions of ultimate meaning. However, we continue to look for something bigger than ourselves, something that will give our lives meaning. Christianity provides the explanation. We are drawn toward the One who created us and imbues our lives with meaning as part of His purposes. We are significant in ourselves because He made us, and there is meaning in our daily activities because that is the context in which we work out His ambitions for us and our world. Recognizing the true God opens to us the reality of value and meaning. The meaning of life is found when we find our place in God's world.

The Matter of Morality

In his book, *Can Man Live Without God*, apologist Ravi Zacharias makes this bold assertion: "Antitheism provides every reason to be immoral and is bereft of any objective point of reference with which to condemn any choice. Any antitheist who lives a moral life merely lives better than his or her philosophy warrants."[9](#) What a bold thing to say! Is Zacharias saying that all atheists (or antitheists, as he calls them) are immoral? Not at all. But he is saying that atheism itself makes no provision for fixed moral standards.

One very important aspect of being human is morality. A basic understanding of the concept of right and wrong or good and bad is fixed in our nature. We constantly evaluate actions and events—and even people—as good or bad or, in some cases,

neither. These are moral evaluations. They are significant for our personal choices, and they are critical to our participation in society.

In our culture today naturalism is the reigning public philosophy. Even if many people claim to believe in God, practical naturalism (or atheism) is the rule of the day. Regarding morality, the general attitude seems to be that there is no moral code to which we all are subject. We say in effect, I'll choose my morality, and you choose yours. But if Zacharias is correct, naturalism (or atheism) provides no solid foundation even for personal morality.

The question we might pose to an atheist (which could be directed at a practical atheist as well) is this: How do you justify your own actions? To that question the atheist could simply answer that he has need no for justification apart from his own desires and needs. While I think it is possible to argue that naturalism cannot be trusted to provide a moral compass—even for one's own needs—we can bring the real issue to the fore more quickly by asking two questions: How do you justify your moral outrage at the actions of others in any given instance? and, Do you expect others to take your objections seriously? To expect someone to take my objections to his behavior seriously, I must presuppose a moral standard that stands in authority above us all, unless, of course, I think that I *myself* am that standard. But what does that do to his right to determine his *own* morality? The atheist sometimes wants to have it both ways. He wants to be his own standard-maker. But is he willing to give this privilege to others?

Now, some atheist might respond that, of course, as a culture we have to have laws in order to live together peacefully. Individuals are not free to do anything they please; they have to obey the laws of society. The well-known humanist philosopher Paul Kurtz believes that "education, reason, science and democratic methods of persuasion" are adequate for establishing our norms.[\[10\]](#) But there are educated people who

hold different beliefs. Intelligent reason has led people to different conclusions. Science can not instruct us in morality. And in a society where there are a variety of opinions about what is right and wrong, how do we know which opinion is correct? Simple majority rule? Sometimes the minority is in the right, as the issue of civil rights has shown. No, Kurtz's reason, education, science, and democracy will not do by themselves. They need to be informed by a higher law.

Besides all this, Kurtz has certain presupposed ideas about the proper end of our laws. For example, does furthering the human race mean giving everyone an equal opportunity? Or does it mean joining with Hitler and seeking to exterminate the weak and inferior?

Naturalism provides no transcendent law that stands over all people at all times to which we can appeal to establish a moral order. Nor is there a solid basis upon which to complain when we are wronged. Christianity, on the other hand, *does* provide a transcendent moral structure and specific moral laws that serve to both restrain us and protect us.

When the question of morality arises, atheists will often offer the rebuttal that Christian morality is apparently not sufficient to lead people into the "good life" because Christians have done some terrible things to other people (and to each other) over the years. While it is true that Christians have done some terrible things, there is nothing in Christianity that requires it, and there are definite commands not to do such things. The Christian who does evil goes against the religion he or she professes. The atheist, however, can justify almost any kind of activity since man becomes the measure of all things. Again, this does not mean that all or even most atheists lead blatantly immoral lives. It just means that they have no fixed point of reference by which to establish laws or to condemn the actions of others.

Christianity not only provides a moral structure and specific moral laws, it also provides for the power to do what is right. The atheist is left on his own to do what is right. Those who submit to God also have the Spirit to enable them to obey God's moral law.

There is turmoil in our society today as we try to decide all over again what is good and what is evil. In our encounters with non-believers, by tapping into the need we all have for a moral structure suitable for both our preservation and our betterment, we can pave the way for their consideration of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

The Matter of Hope

You have likely heard the expression "hope against hope." It refers to those times when there is no hope in sight, yet we keep on hoping anyway. There is something within us—most of us, anyway—which continues to see some possibility for good beyond a present crisis, or at least causes us to long for it.

As we consider the role human experience can play in apologetics, we should give serious attention to the question of hope because it quickly finds a home in our souls. Few of us have absolutely no hope. What worse state can we imagine than to have no hope at all? What we are more likely to see than no hope at all is hope in things that are not worthy. Nonetheless, the presence of hope in the darkest of places is something with which we are all familiar.

Nowadays, however, hope seems to be in short supply. In spite of all the glorious advances made in a number of areas of life, there is a prevailing mood of unease. Americans seem to be scrambling for something in which to put their confidence for the future.

For centuries the Western world found its hope in God, the One who was working out His purposes toward a glorious end. But by

the early part of this century, naturalism had taken hold of the academy and then our social consciousness as well.

From there, people went in different directions in their thinking. Secular humanists took the optimistic route and declared their hope in mankind. They continue to do so in spite of the fact that, in this “enlightened” era, our means of advancing the cause of humanity include aborting the unborn and helping the desperate kill themselves. Education, reason, science, and democracy—the gods of humanism—have yet to give us any real cause for hope.

Other people have grown cynical. With nothing more to hope in than what they see around them, they have lost faith in everything. They do not trust anyone anymore; they doubt that anyone can be truly virtuous; and they have simply settled into hopelessness. {11} Still others of a more philosophical bent have been drawn to atheistic existentialism, the philosophy of despair, which declares that God is dead and with Him that in which we once put our hope. {12}

A good illustration of someone trying to find something positive in the loss of hope in the Christian God is found in Albert Camus’ novel, *The Stranger*. {13} The protagonist, Meursault, winds up in jail for the senseless murder of a man on a beach. After his trial, as he is awaiting either an appeal or his execution, Meursault is visited by a chaplain who tries to get him to confess belief in God. Meursault informs him that he does not have much time left, “and [he] wasn’t going to waste it on God.” {14} Meursault angrily rejects all the priest says. He believes that the fate of death to which everyone is subject levels out everything people believe. One action is as good as another; one way of life is as good as another.

After the priest leaves and Meursault has slept for awhile, he says this as he considers his fate:

[I] felt ready to start life all over again. It was as if that great gush of anger had washed me clean, emptied me of hope, and, gazing up at the dark sky spangled with its signs and stars, for the first time, the first, I laid my heart open to the benign indifference of the universe. {15}

If there is no God out there, the best we can do is accept the reality of our nothingness, and begin to make of ourselves whatever we can. Like the bumper sticker I once saw which read, "I've been much happier since I gave up hope." Previously Meursault had admitted being afraid, and he had betrayed his own humanity when, after coolly thinking about how death comes to everyone, and how it really does not matter when or how one dies, the thought of a possible appeal brought a sudden rush of joy through his body and brought tears to his eyes. {16} Now he bravely faces a universe that does not care, and he feels free.

If anyone ever truly feels this way in real life, that person is the exception rather than the rule. The word *hopeless* has negative connotations; we do not normally think of it as a positive thing. The atheistic existentialist must go against what appears to be the norm to achieve this state of happiness in the face of a purposeless universe.

Of course, not all atheists will opt for Camus' philosophy. To some extent, hope for the fulfillment of our various earthly ambitions fits in with a naturalistic worldview. A boy can practice his swing with the hope of doing better in the batter's box. A woman with the hope of getting married can very likely see that hope fulfilled. A man may get that promotion he hopes for by working hard. Yet frequently people find that what they had hoped for fails to provide the fulfillment they expected.

And what about hope for the future? Is there anything to hope for after death? When old age creeps up and the elderly man

reviews his life, is there any hope that something will come of all the labors and heartaches and wins and losses of his life? Was it all leading somewhere? The most naturalism can allow is that our lives might benefit others. But naturalism cannot of itself undergird such a hope. An impersonal universe offers no rewards. And no one can predict what the next generation will do with one's efforts. Besides, we might wonder why we should worry about the benefit of others who, like ourselves, are just pieces of cosmic dust. To take this even further, naturalism can just as easily allow for the destruction of the weak and the development of a master race as it can for an altruistic attitude toward all people.

Of course, naturalism has nothing beyond the grave to offer the individual him- or herself. There is no culmination, no reward, no "Well done, good and faithful servant" (Matt. 25:21). You live, you do your best (according to your own standards, of course), and you die.

Yet, we continue to hope. I wonder if the "hope [that] springs eternal" is rooted within us in that "eternity" which is "set . . . in the hearts of men" (Eccl. 3:11)? Or, maybe it stems from the knowledge we all have of Deity, even though that knowledge might be warped by sin. An inescapable awareness of something transcendent continually draws us upward.

Christianity holds that the psychological reality of hope, and the content of hope that does not fail, is found in Jesus who is our hope (1 Tim. 1:1). Let us look at that in more detail.

The Answer Found in Jesus

One of the great benefits of addressing the matters of meaning, morality, and hope in Christian apologetics is that they take us right into the Gospel message. Our meaning is rooted in the personal God who created us and is actively involved in our affairs. Lasting, objective moral values to which we all are accountable and which serve to protect us

find their source in God's nature and will. And hope is what He sent His Son to give us along with forgiveness and new life and a host of other things.

Before looking at these issues more closely, I should address a couple of potential objections to bringing human experience into apologetics. One objection is that the apologist can quickly fall into *selling* the faith by an appeal to the felt needs of consumeristic Americans. Such needs are not always valid.

Another objection is that such matters are subjective. To appeal to them is to become trapped in matters that are at best non-rational and at worst irrational. Our consideration of Christianity should not be based upon such flimsy foundations.

These problems can be avoided by concentrating on those aspects of our experience which are universally shared. Someone has called these "objective-subjective" matters. That is, they are subjective matters of a kind shared by all of us by virtue of our membership in the human race. The desire for moral order is something felt inwardly, but it is a universal need. Faith is subjective, but the disposition to believe is a universal one. Personal meaning also is an inward desire, but it is one we all have.

Let us consider now the answers the Bible gives to the questions we're considering.

Remember that one of the questions encompassed by the question of meaning is, Where did I come from? In John 1:1-3, Colossians 1:16-17, and Hebrews 1:2 we learn that we were created by God through Jesus. Furthermore, we learn from the examples of David and Jeremiah that God created us and knows us individually (Ps. 139:13-16; Jer. 1:5). Unless we are prepared to argue that we were made on a whim or maybe just for sport—and nothing in Scripture indicates that God does

anything like that—we must conclude that He made us for a purpose.

The question, Is there meaning in the experiences of daily life?, is answered by the understanding that God is working out His own purposes in our lives (Phil. 2:12-13; Rom. 8:28; 9:11,17; Eph. 1:11).

Finally, to the questions, What is my purpose? and What should I be doing?, Scripture teaches that I am to obey God's moral precepts (Jn. 14:23,24; 1 Jn. [entire book]), and that I am to participate in God's work by doing the things He has given me to do in particular (Jn. 13:12-17; Eph. 2:10; 1 Pe. 4:10).

Regarding morality, the noble acts of people and the ravages of war are understandable in light of our being created in God's image, on the one hand, and corrupted by sin, on the other. Although we typically do not think of Jesus as the law-giver as much as the exemplar of moral goodness, this is not to say that He does not Himself define for us what is good. Being fully God He shares the moral perfection of God the Father. He also created us as moral creatures and planted in us the awareness of right and wrong. Furthermore, His central position in the plan of redemption—which was put into effect because of our sin-induced estrangement from God—makes Him a focal point in the matter of good and evil. Thus, in Jesus is found an understanding of our consciousness of sin and judgment as well as the solution to the crucial issue of guilt and forgiveness.

This is all too often forgotten in evangelical witness today. One theologian has noted that the central theme of the Gospel is no longer justification by faith, but the new life. But people know that they do wrong, and they want to have the burden of guilt lifted. Many do this by denying any kind of universal morality. All they have to do to maintain a clear conscience, they think, is to be "true" to themselves. But in practice this does not work. We react negatively when an

individual who is being “true” to himself does something mean to us. We also know that others are justified in objecting to our actions that are hurtful to them. Our moral outrage at the actions and words of others betrays our sense that there is a moral law that transcends us. Naturalism has no means of dealing with all this, but Jesus does.

I have already touched on the important place that hope occupies in the Christian life. We have something specific to hope for, and in our walk with Christ we can experience hope on the psychological level.

For the apostles Paul and Peter, hope finds its objective focal point in the resurrection of Jesus (Acts 23:6; 24:14-15; 1 Pe. 1:3). For our hope is eternal life (Titus 1:2; 3:7), and Jesus’ resurrection is objective, concrete evidence that the promise of eternal life is sure. It is with the objective content of our hope in mind that Paul can say the Gentiles had no hope and were without God in the world (Eph. 2:12).

The hope we have is not something we can see (Rom. 8:24-25); it is waiting for us in heaven (Col. 1:5). Nonetheless it provides the context for our joy today (Rom. 12:12). Hope is strengthened as we learn what God has done in the past, and as we persevere in our Christian walk (Rom. 15:4). As our faith grows and we experience the joy and peace Jesus gives, our hope is brought alive (Rom. 15:13). Rather than put our hope in earthly riches (1 Tim. 6:17), we put our hope in the God who cannot lie (Titus 1:2).

In short, the answers to the questions of meaning, law, and hope—which have no answers in naturalism – are found in Jesus. These truths, buttressed by the facts and logical consistency of Christianity, can be a significant part of our case for the truth of Jesus Christ. Although truth is not ultimately determined by experience, the common experience of humanity provides a point of contact for the Gospel. Even if such matters are not persuasive by themselves, they might at least

serve to show that Christianity is relevant to our lives today.

©1998 Probe Ministries.

Christian Apologetics

Rick Wade's introduction to Christian apologetics, rather than delving into specific arguments for the faith, examines the need to think well and develop logic skills. It is important to be able to answer the charge of elitism that is often leveled at Christianity today, and this essay concludes with some cogent statements making a case for Christianity.

Introduction

Throughout the history of the church, Christians have been called upon to explain why we believe what we believe. The apostle Paul spoke of his ministry as “the defense and confirmation of the gospel.” Peter said we need to “be ready to make a defense to everyone who asks you.”

This activity of the church came to be known as apologetics which means “defense.” But, if it is important that we defend the faith, how do we do it?

In this essay I will not provide a lot of evidences and arguments. I will rather look at some basic principles that will guide us in defending the faith. We will talk about our starting point and about the important matter of thinking logically. We'll look at the specific charge of elitism which is prevalent on college campuses today. Finally, we'll deal with the question of presenting a case for Christianity.

So, what is apologetics, anyway, and what is it supposed to

do? Apologetics has been defined as “the science and art of defending the faith.” It is chiefly concerned with the question of the truth of Jesus Christ. In the days of the Greeks, when someone was summoned to court to face a charge, he would present an “apology” or a defense. For Christians, this might mean answering the question, “Why do you believe that Jesus is God?” or a question more often heard today, “Why do you think Christians have the truth?”

So, apologetics is first of all defense. It has come to include more than just defense, however. Not only is the truth of our beliefs an issue, but also the beliefs others hold. A second task of apologetics is to challenge other people to defend their beliefs.

A third task of apologetics is to present a case for the truth of the biblical message. One might call this task “proving” Christianity (although the matter of proof must be qualified). If this seems to be too ambitious a goal, we might speak simply of persuading people of the truth of the biblical message.

In all of this our goal is to let the light of God’s truth shine in all its brilliance. It is our ambition also to bring unbelievers to a recognition of the truth of Jesus Christ and to persuade them to put their faith in Him.

Apologetics is typically a response to a specific question or challenge, either stated outright or just implied. Paul reasoned with the Jews for whom the cross was a stumbling block, “explaining and giving evidence that the Christ had to suffer and rise again from the dead.” In the second century, apologists defended not only Christian beliefs but also Christians themselves against such charges as atheism and cannibalism and being threats to the state. In the Medieval era, more attention was given to the challenges of Judaism and Islam. In the era of the Enlightenment, apologists had to defend Christianity against the narrow confines of scientific

rationalism. Today the challenge has shifted again, this time from attacks on specific doctrines to the question of whether Christianity has any claim to final truth at all.

Like our forebears, we must answer the challenges of our day. We must respond to our contemporaries' questions as difficult and uncomfortable as that might be.

Thinking Well

One of my frustrations in studying apologetics has been trying to master the overwhelming number of questions and challenges, on the one hand, and supporting evidences and reasons, on the other. Although it behooves us all to master some of these, it seems to me that it is just as important to learn how to think well.

Learning to think well, or logically, is important for Christians for several reasons. It helps us put together the various pieces of our faith to form a cohesive whole. It helps us make decisions in everyday life when the Bible doesn't speak directly to a particular issue. We must learn to deduce true beliefs or proper courses of action from what we do know from Scripture.

Good, logical thinking is especially important for an apologist. On the one hand, it can help prevent us from putting together shoddy arguments for what we believe. On the other hand, it helps us evaluate the beliefs of those who challenge Christianity. Too often we stumble at criticisms which sound good, but which really stand on logically shaky legs. Let's consider a few examples.

Here's a basic one. How do you respond to someone who says, "There's no such thing as absolute truth"? If the individual really thinks there is no absolute truth that is, truth that stands for all people at all times, that person at best can only say "In my opinion, there's no such thing as absolute

truth.” To say “There’s no such thing as absolute truth” is to state an absolute; the statement refutes itself.

Here’s another one. You’ve heard people say, “All religions really teach the same thing.” Oh, really? Ours teaches that Jesus is God in flesh; other religions say that He isn’t. A logical principle called the law of non-contradiction says that Jesus can’t both be God and not be God.

Let’s try one more. Some people say, “I can’t believe in Christ. Look at all the terrible things Christians have done through the centuries.” How would you answer this objection? While it is true that what Christians do influences non-Christians’ responses to the gospel, such actions have nothing to do with whether Christianity itself is true. If part of the gospel message was that once a person becomes a Christian that person absolutely will never sin again, the objector would have grounds for questioning the truth of the faith. But the Bible doesn’t say that. We can agree that Christians shouldn’t do terrible things to other people, but what people did in fourteenth-century Europe or do in twentieth-century America in the name of Jesus can’t change the reality of the incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection of Christ. The person making this argument may not like what Christians have done, but this complaint has no logical force against the truth of Christ. When people present arguments against the faith, we need to discern whether what they say is both factually true and logically sound. Often the objections we hear are neither. Learning how to think logically ourselves will enable us to spot fallacies in others’ thinking. Perhaps pointing these out (in a gentle way, if possible) will cause the person to rethink his or her position. At least it will defuse the attack on our faith.

Answering The Charge of Elitism

I’ve been talking about the importance of logical thinking in doing apologetics. Now I’d like to apply that in considering a

charge currently being made against Christians, especially on college campuses.

In a video I recently saw, a young woman said the notion that Christians have the only truth is "elitist." She was saying that since there are so many different beliefs in the world, how can any one group of people claim to have the only truth? She, and many others like her, consider such thinking arrogant.

How can we respond to this charge? First, notice the name-calling. We are charged with "elitism." The real issue is passed over in favor of a put-down. This is just another example of how ideas and issues are dealt with in our society these days. It is important, however, not to react in kind. Too often in our society the battles over issues and ideas are fought with name-calling and sloganeering. This is unbecoming to Christians and unprofitable in apologetics and evangelism. We need to deal with the ideas themselves.

Second, Christians can acknowledge that non-Christians can know truth and that other religions can include some truth. If they didn't, they would find very few adherents. They fail, though, on such fundamental issues as the identity of Jesus and the way to be reconciled to God.

Third, notice the faulty logic in the argument. What does the reality of many points of view have to do with the truth-value of any of them? This is like saying: "Some men think they should treat their wives with the same respect they desire; some ignore their wives; others think it's okay to beat them. Who's to say only one way can be right?" The structure of the argument is the same, but it is obvious that the conclusion is wrong. A critic might understandably question our assurance that what we believe is the final truth given that there are so many people who disagree. But it is faulty logic to conclude that no beliefs can claim final truth simply because there are so many of them. Fourth, since the criticism rests

upon the idea that two or more conflicting beliefs can be true, we must challenge this assumption. It can be shown to be incorrect by looking to everyday experience. If my wife says it is raining outside but my son says it isn't, do I take my umbrella or not? It can't be both raining and not raining at the same time. Likewise, if one person says Jesus is the only way to salvation and another says He isn't, no more than one of them can be correct.

Some people, of course, will challenge the notion that our knowledge of God is like knowing whether it is raining outside. God is not a part of nature; He is "wholly other." This issue is much too involved to develop here. But I believe that this thinking is fundamentally a prejudice against authoritative revelation. God has spoken, and He has given us evidence in this world to confirm what He has said.

This challenge to Christianity and many others like it are not easy to deal with. But if defending the faith means responding to the challenges of our day, we must prepare ourselves, as difficult as it may be. Otherwise, we can't expect to be heard.

The Case for Christianity Part 1

Earlier I wrote that one of the tasks of apologetics is to present a case for the truth of the biblical message. Now I'd like to present a few foundational considerations, and after that we'll look at how we might construct a case.

When Christians are called upon to present a case for the faith, they are, in effect, being asked to offer proof that Christianity is true. What evidences or arguments can be marshaled to establish the truth of what we believe?

What we would like to do is make a case which no person of reasonable intelligence can fail to accept. But the Bible acknowledges the reality that many people will not believe no

matter how compelling the evidence. Remember the story in Luke 16 about the rich man who died and suffered torment? He begged Abraham to send Lazarus back from the dead to warn his brothers about what they also faced. Listen to the response. Abraham said, "If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be persuaded if someone rises from the dead." A determined will can ignore the best of evidence.

Unless we are talking about proof in the mathematical sense, we need to note that proof is person-relative; what will convince one person might not convince another. This doesn't mean, however, that Christianity only becomes true when someone is convinced. It's true whether anyone believes it or not.

In making a case for the faith we seek to present a sound argument which will be persuasive for a particular listener. On the one hand, this consideration frees us from the responsibility of having an argument which will convince everyone; on the other hand, it means that we must not depend upon "one-size-fits-all" arguments.

Even if we're able to deal adequately with the challenges of a given individual, we need to also note what the real basis of our belief is. A true knowledge of God is based upon divine testimony which is accepted by faith, but which is also confirmed for us by evidences of various types. The testimony of Scripture about such matters as the work of Christ on the cross and justification by faith are things which can't be proved; they are accepted by faith.

We must also remember the nature of our message. Christianity is not just a system of beliefs, but rather the message of the One who is truth. This is an especially pertinent point today, given the mentality of the younger generations. Today we've lost the confidence in our ability to reason through the major issues of life in a disinterested, scientific manner and come to firm conclusions. Conceptual schemes that don't touch us

where we really live hold little interest anymore. We need to draw people to Jesus who is the answer to the major questions of life. Christianity is living truth, and it should be preached and defended as such.

We might only be able to convince the non-believer that Christianity is plausible or believable. But that's a good start; often it takes many steps for a person to come to faith. Our job is to provide a solid intellectual foundation to make those steps sure.

The Case for Christianity Part 2

Now we'll finish our discussion by outlining a way of presenting a case for Christianity. Note that this is just an outline; it'll be up to you to fill in the details.

Since God created the universe and is active in His creation, there is no lack of evidence for the truth of Christianity. When I use the word "evidence," I'm using it in a broad way to include not only factual evidence, but logical arguments and human experience as well. Evidence is anything that can be brought to bear on the truth-claims of Scripture.

As we present evidence, we must be aware that the false presuppositions unbelievers hold about God, man, and the world might skew their evaluation of the evidences. In fact, the idea of encouraging people to evaluate Christianity makes some people uneasy. Are we allowing sinful people to bring God to the bar of judgment? No, we aren't. We are simply recognizing that, although the Bible never hints that anyone is justified in rejecting its message, it does present witnesses to the truth, typically through historical reminders and miracles. Further, because unbelievers are made in God's image and live in God's world, they have some understanding of the truth, and we can appeal to that understanding.

We can divide the kinds of evidence at our disposal into three

categories: fact (or empirical evidence); reason (or logical thinking); and experience (or human nature and the experience of life).

These three kinds of evidence can be used two ways: evaluation and explanation.

First, we can look for evidence in a given area which confirms Scripture. This is the evaluation aspect of apologetics. So, for example, we can ask, Are there observable facts which affirm what Scripture teaches? Consider history and archeology. Are the teachings of Scripture coherent and logically consistent? Yes, they are. Typically, people who say there are contradictions in the Bible have a hard time remembering one. Is what the Bible says about human nature and human experience true to what we know? Yes it is; we can identify with biblical characters.

The second way we use evidences is to see if Christianity can explain them. The following questions might clarify what I mean. We can ask, Does the Christian worldview explain the facts of nature? Yes, it does, for it says that Jesus created and sustains the universe. Does Christianity provide an explanation for the reliability of human reason itself? Sure; we are created in the image of God with intelligence. Does the Bible explain human nature and experience? Yes, for it relates that, while the image of God and common grace enable us to do good to a certain extent, we are given to sin because of the Fall.

In this essay I've tried to provide some foundational principles for defending the faith. As we prepare to give an answer to our society, it's important that we learn to think logically, that we respond to the questions of our day, that we become familiar with the broad range of evidence at our disposal, and that we consider the person or persons we are addressing as we present our case. With this in mind, we exhibit the truth of Jesus Christ in all its splendor, and, as

always, leave the results to God.

©1997 Probe Ministries.

Answering the Big Questions of Life

Sue Bohlin presents a Naturalistic, a Pantheistic, and a Christian perspective on the five major questions all of us should ask about life. Knowing the answers to these questions is critical to living a meaningful, fulfilling life on this earth. She concludes by demonstrating that only a Christian worldview provides consistent answers to all of these questions.



This article is also available in [Spanish](#).

One of the most important aspects of Probe's "Mind Games" conference is teaching students to recognize the three major world views—Naturalism, Pantheism, and Theism—and the impact they have both on the surrounding culture as well as on the ideas the students will face at the university. Because we come from an unapologetically Christian worldview, I will be presenting the ideas of Christian theism, even though Judaism and Islam are both theistic as well.

In this essay I'll be examining five of the biggest questions of life, and how each of the worldviews answers them:

- Why is there something rather than nothing?
- How do you explain human nature?
- What happens to a person at death?
- How do you determine right and wrong?

- How do you know that you know?[\[1\]](#)

Why Is There Something Rather than Nothing?

The most basic question of life may well be, **Why is there something rather than nothing?** Why am I here? Why is anything here at all?

Even Maria Von Trapp in the movie *The Sound of Music* knew the answer to this one. When she and the Captain are singing their love to each other in the gazebo, she croons, “Nothing comes from nothing, nothing ever could.”

But naturalism, the belief that says there is no reality beyond the physical universe, offers two answers to this basic question. Until a few years ago, the hopeful wish of naturalism was that matter is eternal: the universe has always existed, and always will. There’s no point to asking “why” because the universe simply *is*. End of discussion. Unfortunately for naturalism, the evidence that has come from our studies of astronomy makes it clear that the universe is unwinding, in a sense, and at one point it was tightly wound up. The evidence says that at some point in the past there *was* a beginning, and matter is most definitely not eternal. That’s a major problem for a naturalist, who believes that everything that now *is*, came from nothing. First there was nothing, then there was something, but nothing caused the something to come into existence. Huh?

Pantheism is the belief that everything is part of one great “oneness.” It comes from two Greek words, *pan* meaning “everything,” and *theos* meaning “God.” Pantheism says that all is one, all is god, and therefore we are one with the universe; we are god. We are part of that impersonal divinity that makes up the universe. In answering the question, **Why is there something rather than nothing**, pantheism says that everything had an impersonal beginning. The universe itself

has an intelligence that brought itself into being. The “something” that exists is simply how energy expresses itself. If you’ve seen the *Star Wars* movies, you’ve seen the ideas of pantheism depicted in that impersonal energy field, “The Force.” Since the beginning of the universe had an impersonal origin, the question of “why” gets sidestepped. Like naturalism, pantheism basically says, “We don’t have a good answer to that question, so we won’t think about it.”

Christian Theism is the belief that God is a personal, transcendent Creator of the universe—and of us. This worldview showed up on a T-shirt I saw recently:

“There are two things in life you can be sure of.

1. There is a God.
2. You are not Him.”

Christian Theism answers the question, **Why is there something rather than nothing**, by confidently asserting that first there was God and nothing else, then He created the universe by simply speaking it into existence. The Bible’s opening sentence is an answer to this most basic of questions: “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.”

How Do You Explain Human Nature?

Another one of the big questions of life is, **How do you explain human nature?** Why do human beings act the way we do? What it really boils down to is, Why am I so good and you’re so bad?

During World War II, a young Jewish teenager kept a journal during the years she and her family hid from the Nazis in a secret apartment in a house in Amsterdam. Anne Frank’s diary poignantly explored the way she tried to decide if people were basically good or basically evil. Acts of kindness and

blessing seemed to indicate people were basically good; but then the next day, Anne would learn of yet another barbarous act of depravity and torture, and she would think that perhaps people were basically bad after all. After reading her diary, I remember carrying on the quest for an answer in my own mind, and not finding it until I trusted Christ and learned what His Word had to say about it.

Naturalism says that humans are nothing more than evolved social animals. There is nothing that truly separates us from the other animals, so all our behavior can be explained in terms of doing what helps us to survive and reproduce. Your only purpose in life, naturalism says, is to make babies. And failing that, to help those who share your genes to make babies. Kind of makes you want to jump out of bed in the morning, doesn't it?

Another answer from naturalism is that we are born as blank slates, and we become whatever is written on those slates. You might mix in some genetic factors, in which case human nature is nothing more than a product of our genes and our environment.

Pantheism explains human nature by saying we're all a part of god, but our problem is that we forget we're god. We just need to be re- educated and start living like the god we are. Our human nature will be enhanced by attaining what pantheists call "cosmic consciousness." According to New Age thought, the problem with humans is that we suffer from a collective form of metaphysical amnesia. We just need to wake up and remember we're god. When people are bad, (which is one result of forgetting you're god), pantheism says that they'll pay for it in the next life when they are reincarnated as something less spiritually evolved than their present life. I had a Buddhist friend who refused to kill insects in her house because she said they had been bad in their previous lives and had to come back as bugs, and it wasn't her place to prematurely mess up their karma.

The Christian worldview gives the most satisfying answer to the question, **How do you explain human nature?** The Bible teaches that God created us to be His image-bearers, which makes us distinct from the entire rest of creation. But when Adam and Eve chose to rebel in disobedience, their fall into sin distorted and marred the sacred Image. The fact that we are created in God's image explains the noble, creative, positive things we can do; the fact that we are sinners who love to disobey and rebel against God's rightful place as King of our lives explains our wicked, destructive, negative behavior. It makes sense that this biblical view of human nature reveals the reasons why mankind is capable of producing both Mother Teresa and the holocaust.

What Happens after Death?

In the movie *Flatliners*, medical students took turns stopping each other's hearts to give them a chance to experience what happens after death. After a few minutes, they resuscitated the metaphysical traveller who told the others what he or she saw. The reason for pursuing such a dangerous experiment was explained by the med student who thought it up in the first place: **"What happens after death?** Mankind deserves an answer. Philosophy failed; religion failed. Now it's up to the physical sciences."

Well, maybe religion failed, but the Lord Jesus didn't. But first, let's address how naturalism answers this question.

Because this worldview says that there is nothing outside of space, time and energy, naturalism insists that death brings the extinction of personality and the disorganization of matter. Things just stop living and start decomposing. Or, as my brother said when he was in his atheist phase, "When you die, you're like a dog by the side of the road. You're dead, and that's it." To the naturalist, there is no life after death. The body recycles back to the earth and the mental and emotional energies that comprised the person disintegrate

forever.

Pantheism teaches reincarnation, the belief that all of life is an endless cycle of birth and death. After death, each person is reborn as someone, or something, else. Your reincarnated persona in the next life depends on how you live during this one. This is the concept of karma, which is the law of cause and effect in life. If you make evil or foolish choices, you will have to work off that bad karma by being reborn as something like a rat or a cow. If you're really bad, you might come back as a termite. But if you're good, you'll come back as someone who can be wonderful and powerful. New Age followers sometimes undergo something they call "past lives therapy," which regresses them back beyond this life, beyond birth, and into previous lives. I think it's interesting that people always seem to have been someone glamorous like Cleopatra and never someone like a garbage collector or an executioner!

Christian Theism handles the question, **What happens to a person at death**, with such a plain, no-nonsense answer that people have been stumbling over it for millenia. Death is a gateway that either whisks a person to eternal bliss with God or takes him straight to a horrible place of eternal separation from God. What determines whether one goes to heaven or hell is the way we respond to the light God gives us concerning His Son, Jesus Christ. When we confess that we are sinners in need of mercy we don't deserve, and trust the Lord Jesus to save us from not only our sin but the wrath that sin brings to us, He comes to live inside us and take us to heaven to be with Him forever when we die. When we remain in rebellion against God, either actively disobeying Him or passively ignoring Him, the consequences of our sin remain on us and God allows us to keep them for all eternity—but separated from Him and all life and hope. It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God (Hebrews 10:31). But it is a delightful thing to fall into the arms of

the Lover of your soul, Who has gone on ahead to prepare a place for you! Which will you choose?

How Do You Determine Right and Wrong?

One of the big questions in life is, How do you determine right and wrong? Steven Covey, author of *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, appeared on the Oprah Winfrey show one day. He asked the studio audience to close their eyes and point north. When they opened their eyes, there were several hundred arms pointing in wildly different directions. Then Mr. Covey pulled out a compass and said, “*This* is how we know which way is north. You can’t know from within yourself.” He used a powerful object lesson to illustrate the way Christian theism answers this big question in life.

Naturalism says that there is no absolute outside of ourselves. There is no final authority because space, time and energy are all that is. There is no such thing as right and wrong because there is no right- and wrong-giver. So naturalism tries to deal with the question of ethics by providing several unsatisfying answers. One is the belief that there is no free choice, that all our behaviors and beliefs are driven by our genes. We are just as determined in our behavior as the smallest animals or insects. Another is the belief that moral values are determined from what is; the way things are is the way they ought to be. If you are being abused by your husband, that’s the way things are, so that’s the way they ought to be. Even worse is the concept of arbitrary ethics: might makes right. Bullies get to decide the way things ought to be because they’re stronger and meaner than everybody else. That’s what happens in totalitarian regimes; the people with the power decide what’s right and what’s wrong.

Pantheism says that there is no such thing as ultimate right and wrong because everything is part of a great undifferentiated whole where right and wrong, good and evil,

are all part of the oneness of the universe. Remember “Star Wars”? The Force was both good and evil at the same time. Pantheism denies one of the basic rules of philosophy, which is that two opposite things cannot both be true at the same time. Because Pantheism denies that there are absolutes, things which are true all the time, it holds that all right and wrong is relative. Right and wrong are determined by cultures and situations. So murdering one’s unborn baby might be right for one person and wrong for another.

Theism says that there is such a thing as absolute truth, and absolute right and wrong. We can know this because this information has come to us from a transcendent source outside of ourselves and outside of our world. Christian Theism says that the God who created us has also communicated certain truths to us. He communicated generally, through His creation, and He communicated specifically and understandably through His Word, the Bible. We call this revelation. Christian Theism says that absolute truth is rooted in God Himself, who is an Absolute; He is Truth. As Creator, He has the right to tell us the difference between right and wrong, and He has taken great care to communicate this to us.

That’s why Steven Covey’s illustration was so powerful. When he pulled out a compass, he showed that we need a transcendent source of information, something outside ourselves and which is fixed and constant, to show us the moral equivalent of “North.” We are creatures created to be dependent on our Creator for the information we need to live life right. God has given us a compass in revelation.

How Do You Know That You Know?

This question generally doesn’t come up around the cafeteria lunch table at work, and even the most inquisitive toddler usually won’t ask it, but it’s an important question nonetheless: How do you know that you know?

There's a great scene in the movie *Terminator 2* where the young boy that the cyborg terminator has been sent to protect, is threatened by a couple of hoodlums. The terminator is about to blow one away when the young boy cries out, "You can't do that!" The terminator—Arnold Schwarzenegger—asks, "Why not?" "You just can't go around killing people!" the boy protests. "Why not?" "Take my word for it," the boy says. "You just can't." He knew that it was wrong to kill another human being, but he didn't know how he knew. There are a lot of people in our culture like that!

Naturalism, believing that there is nothing beyond space, time and energy, would answer the question by pointing to the human mind. Rational thought—figuring things out deductively—is one prime way we gain knowledge. Human reason is a good enough method to find out what we need to know. The mind is the center of our source of knowledge. Another way to knowledge is by accumulating hard scientific data of observable and measurable experience. This view says that the source of our knowledge is found in the senses. We know what we can perceive through what we can measure. Since naturalism denies any supernaturalism (anything above or outside of the natural world), what the human mind can reason and measure is the only standard for gaining knowledge.

Pantheism would agree with this assessment of how we know that we know. Followers of pantheism tend to put a lot of value on personal experience. The rash of near- and after-death experiences in the past few years, for example, are extremely important to New Agers. These experiences usually validate the preconceptions of pantheistic thought, which denies absolutes such as the Christian tenet that Jesus is the only way to God. The experiences of past- lives therapy have persuaded even some Christians to believe in reincarnation, even though the Bible explicitly denies that doctrine, because personal experience is often considered the most valid way to know reality.

Christian Theism says that while human reason and perception are legitimate ways to gain knowledge, we cannot depend on these methods alone because they're not enough. Some information needs to be given to us from outside the system. An outside Revealer provides information we can't get any other way. Revelation—revealed truth from the One who knows everything—is another, not only legitimate but necessary way to know some important things. Revelation is how we know what happened when the earth, the universe and man were created. Revelation is how we know what God wants us to do and be. Revelation is how we can know how the world will end and what heaven is like. Revelation in the form of the Lord Jesus Christ is the only way we can experience “God with skin on.”

Naturalism's answers are inadequate, depressing, and wrong; pantheism's answers are slippery, don't square with reality, and wrong; but Christian theism—the Christian worldview—is full of hope, consistent with reality, and it resonates in our souls that it's very, very right.

Notes

1. These questions are taken from James W. Sire's book *The Universe Next Door* (Downers Grove, Ill.:InterVarsity Press), 1977.

©1996 Probe Ministries.