

# Miracles

## Miracles: What Are They?

Have you noticed how often the word *miracle* is used these days? Skin creams that make us look younger; computer technology; the transition of a nation from oppression to freedom; what a quarterback needs to pull off for his team to have a winning season. All these are called *miracles* today. Anything that takes extreme effort or which amazes people is now a miracle. I'm still amazed that airplanes stay in the air. But is that a *miracle*?

To begin our discussion we'll first put forth a definition. To clarify the nature of a miracle will also require making distinctions in God's activities in creation. Then we'll respond to objections to the possibility of miracles. Finally, we'll consider their apologetic use.

So, what is a miracle? In his book, *All the Miracles of the Bible*, Herbert Lockyer said that a miracle is "some extraordinary work of deity transcending the ordinary powers of nature and wrought in connection with the ends of revelation."<sup>[1]</sup> Notice the three elements: miracles are supernatural, or the work of deity; they transcend or override natural law; and they are part of God's means of revealing His nature and purposes to us.

In Acts. 2:22, Peter speaks of the "miracles and wonders and signs which God performed through" Jesus. This reference to *miracles* can also be translated *power*. Miracles demonstrate the supernatural power of God over nature and evil forces. This power was seen in Jesus' healing the sick; calming the storm; and raising people from the dead. Such events occurred in opposition to the normal course of nature; they could only be done by a supernatural power.

The word *wonders* refers to the response the miracles evoked in the observers, a response of astonishment and fear. Observers knew they had seen something out of the ordinary, something that in its greatness could even be threatening to them.

Still a third word used by Peter in Acts 2:22 points to the revelatory purpose of miracles. There, Peter referred to the *signs* of Jesus. This word stresses that aspect of miracles which draws attention to the significance of the event. Signs point to or reveal something else.

First, they indicated a relationship between the miracle worker and God. In John 5:36 Jesus said that his works were evidence that he had been sent by God. Second, they pointed to a fuller activity of God still to come. As one writer said: "The power Jesus exhibited was a foretaste of the power to be revealed at the end of the age." [\[2\]](#)

Also, miracles are revelatory themselves in that they reveal the nature of God. Jesus came to reveal the Father to us. He *said* he was the Savior, and he *showed* he was the Savior by doing saving things. He healed diseases; he delivered the demon-possessed; he saved from the fury of the storm.

So, miracles are from God; they override nature; and they reveal God. They aren't simply amazing events. When just about *anything* amazing is called a miracle simply *because* it's amazing, real miracles lose their significance.

## Miracles and Providence

The word *miracle* is used so often and to describe so many things that it's lost its power. One of the reasons events are called miracles which shouldn't be—at least by Christians—is that we want to give due honor to God for His work in our lives. This is how it should be. However, in order to give miracles their due, we should distinguish the different kinds of activity of God in this world.

We can think of God's involvement in three categories. First, what we call *providence*, which is God's ongoing work in sustaining the universe He created and the people in it. He keeps the stars in place; He provides for our physical needs; and He is active in the governing of societies. People have come to learn that things work a certain way, whether they are believers in God or not. No explicit belief in God is necessary to explain such things. Events on this level are not miracles.

Second, God is active in what we might call *special providence*. "Special providences," said theologian Louis Berkhof, "are special combinations in the order of events, as in the answer to prayer, in deliverance out of trouble, and in all instances in which grace and help come in critical circumstances." [\[3\]](#) God's hand is "visible" in a sense to Christians who have watched all the pieces to one or more of life's puzzles fall into place in a very special way.

Our move to Texas to work with Probe is an example. When we survey all the events that led up to our move, we recognize that God had to have been involved. But that's because we set these events in the context of the thinking, the decisions, and the prayers of people who sought God's will. However, people who aren't inclined to see God working in our lives would see nothing supernatural about such events. They might simply see that we made a decision to move, the leadership of Probe and our church concurred, and a bunch of other people who support us agreed. Is this type of occurrence a miracle? In my opinion it isn't. Although God was involved in a special way, the laws of nature weren't transcended.

The third category of God's involvement is *miracles* that we defined earlier as events, which are supernatural in origin, transcend or violate natural laws, and serve a revelatory function in God's redemptive work. Here the hand of God is clearly visible to anyone who doesn't deliberately refuse to believe. The event is contrary to the normal course of nature;

no scientific explanation is possible. Of a purported miracle, we might ask this question: Is it impossible that the event could have taken place without God's special intervention to alter the inevitable course of nature?

These three categories are not rigidly divided. They form more of a continuum. The distinguishing mark is the visibility of God's hand in a given event. Is He in the background, simply maintaining His created order? Or has He manipulated certain events to a certain end without making His presence clearly seen by all? Or has He acted so powerfully in the realm of nature that there is no other reasonable explanation?

The purpose of such considerations is that we might not use the word *miracle* too lightly. To accomplish their role, miracles must remain distinct from that which is simply amazing.

## **Philosophical Attacks: Miracles and Natural Law**

Miracles have come under attack for centuries now. In short, objectors seem to assume that *our* lives' experience is normative. With respect to *environment*, it is assumed that what we see in nature is all there is or can be. With respect to *time*, also, critics say that our experience *today* determines what could have happened *yesterday*, or that our limitations do not allow us to know what happened in the past. Let's consider first the question of nature, and then at the problem of historical knowledge with respect to miracles.

Miracles came under heavy attack during the Enlightenment by deists and atheists, and later by liberal churchmen. In the heady days of the rise of science, many came to see miracles as violations of natural law. To the rationalists of that day, such a violation was an impossibility. David Hume, the Scottish philosopher, put it this way: "A miracle is a violation of the laws of nature; and as a firm and unalterable

experience has established these laws, the proof against a miracle, . . . is as entire as any argument from experience can possibly be imagined.”[\[4\]](#)

This raises two questions. First, are natural laws inviolable? Second, how do we interpret the evidence?

First, the question of natural law. Some critics believe simply that there is no power higher than nature and thus no power that could supersede the laws of nature. This is naturalism, a philosophical belief that can't itself be proved by what is seen in nature. This is a philosophical assumption, and we shouldn't be put off by it. We believe that God exists, and being the creator of the natural laws, He is above them Himself and able to alter them. They don't. To undermine the possibility of miracles, naturalists must prove there is no God to perform them. On the other hand, if we can show that non-natural events *did* or *have* occurred, the naturalist will have to find some explanation in his worldview for them.

Other critics may not argue from an atheistic standpoint, but they hold that a universe in which natural laws can be broken is inherently unstable. If miracles occurred, all would be chaos. We answer that if God is powerful enough to create nature and to override its laws, He is also powerful enough to keep the rest of nature in order.

Thus, the reality of natural law is no deterrent to miracles.

Second, how do we weigh the evidence for and against miracles? What about Hume's objection that there is more evidence *against* miracles than *for* them? First, the abundant evidence of order at most suggests that miracles are the rare exception. But this is what makes them so significant! Consider, too, that the proper use of evidences includes being open to new evidences, including those of unusual occurrences. Second, evidences should be *weighed*, not just *counted*. So, to illustrate, we are more likely to accept the testimony of one

person known for honesty and integrity over the evidence of five known liars. The quality of the evidence is what counts.

As I noted earlier, arguments against miracles based upon the workings of nature typically reveal an underlying philosophy of naturalism. But there is another kind of objection to miracles. That is, that history can't bear the weight of proving miracles occurred in the past. We'll turn our attention to that objection next.

## Philosophical Attacks: Miracles and History

We have looked briefly at David Hume's argument against miracles based on natural law. On the surface, Hume's argument was against *proving* a miracle, not against the *reality* of miracles *per se*. His main point was that we can't *know* whether a miracle occurred because our knowledge is gleaned from evidences, and the preponderance of evidence is always *for* natural law and *against* miracles. He believed that it would be more likely, that, for example, all the witnesses *lied* than that a person was raised from the dead. How was Hume so sure of this? "Because," he said, 'that has never been observed in any age or country.'[\[5\]](#) So, when someone *said* they *saw* a miracle, Hume said they were deluded or were lying because no one's ever seen a miracle! It seems clear that Hume's argument against *knowing* whether a miracle occurred was based upon his prior *conviction* that miracles don't occur.

Of course, if no evidence could be sufficient to prove miracles in the present, records of miracles in history were surely faulty. If we don't experience miracles today, Hume thought, there's no reason to think others did in the past.

Anthony Flew, a contemporary philosopher, has built on Hume's argument. He says there must be uniformity between the present (the time of the historian) and the past (when the event took place) to make any reasonable interpretation of the past. This

is called the *rule of analogy*. The regularities of nature are part of our present experience, and we must assume they were the experience of people in the past.

This argument presupposes that there are no miracles occurring now. How do critics know this? Either they must be omniscient, or they must begin with a naturalistic worldview which by definition precludes miracles. One also wonders how Flew could accept *any* unique, singular event in history, such as the origins of the universe and of life, if regularity is a requirement for historical knowledge.

Other critics say the problem is with the study of history *per se*. They argue that historical knowledge is too subjective for us to know what really happened in the past. Our own values, worldviews and prejudices color our understanding so that there aren't any historically objective facts. But if this is so, the critic's own judgment about historical knowledge is too colored by his own values, etc., to be taken as objective fact. As philosopher Frances Beckwith notes, this also means that no interpretation of history can be considered bad, and that there is no reason to revise history (except perhaps for the historian's amusement).[\[6\]](#)

It would seem that those who deny miracles are typically predisposed against them. If this is the case, is there any apologetic use for miracles? Let's look at this next.

## **The Apologetic Use of Miracles**

"Miracle was once the foundation of all apologetics, then it became an apologetic crutch, and today it is not infrequently regarded as a cross for apologetics to bear." So said a German theologian in the early part of this century.[\[7\]](#) While it's true that evidential apologetics emphasizes the miracle of the resurrection of Jesus, miracles in general play little role in apologetics today.

What's the proper role of miracles in apologetics? First, of course, Christians need to answer the charge that miracles can't happen, and that the Bible, therefore, isn't true. Miracles are an integral part of Christianity; to side-step objections to them by downplaying their role is to abandon the cause.

But what about persuasion? In Scripture, were miracles used as evidence to persuade unbelievers?

We see in the New Testament that miracles *did* serve as evidence and they brought some people to belief. When Jesus raised Lazarus "many of the Jews . . . put their faith in Him" (Jn.11:45; see also Acts 2:22-41; 5:12-16; 6:7,8; 8:6-8; Rom. 15:18,19). But note that some went to the Pharisees and ratted on Jesus. At other times Jesus chastised the Pharisees because they believed neither His words nor His works (Jn.10:22-32; 15:24). Not everyone believed in response to miracles (cf. Acts 14:3,4).

Remember that Jesus didn't do miracles for people who had no faith—such as the people in His hometown (Matt. 13:58)—or for those who insisted that He prove Himself to them—such as the Jewish leaders (Matt. 16:1-4). When He ministered in His hometown, for instance, people took offense at Him, and Matthew says, "He did not do many miracles there because of their lack of faith". Matthew also reports that Jesus refused the Jewish leaders when they came to Him "and tested Him by asking Him to show them a sign from heaven" (16:1-4)

No, Jesus' miracles were done in response to faith. But this wasn't necessarily explicit faith in Jesus as Savior. It could have been simply the openness to God of people who were willing to hear. By doing miracles, Jesus identified himself as the Messiah who had been prophesied.[\[8\]](#) People either recognized the fulfillment of prophecy or simply recognized the hand of God, or both.



Someone might ask, even if people won't accept miracles, might they not respond to the simple preaching of the cross? Remember that miracles were part of God's revelation of His redemptive activity. They were set in the context of the spoken message of Jesus. People who refused the spoken word also refused to accept the evidence of miracles. As Abraham said to the rich man in Jesus' parable, "If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead." (Lk.16:31)

Thus, in answer to the question whether miracles can bring people to belief in Christ, they can if the deep-down knowledge of God that Paul said we all have (Rom.1:20) is first awakened. But for those who have deliberately shut God out of their lives and their worldview, miracles won't do any more to convince them than hearing Scripture will.

Miracles, then, provide evidence for the identity of Jesus and for the truth of the message He proclaimed especially when paired with prophecy. They should thus be a part of the package of evidences we employ. We will not convince everyone of the truth of Jesus Christ. But if God chose miracles as confirming evidence, we should not shun them.

## Notes

1. Herbert Lockyer, *All the Miracles of the Bible*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1961), 13-14.
2. Colin Brown, ed. *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976), s.v. "Might," by O. Betz
3. Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1941), 168.
4. Douglas Geivett and Gary Habermas, eds. *In Defense of Miracles: A Comprehensive Case for God's Activity in History*

(Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1997), 33

5. Ibid., 33.

6. Ibid., 89-90

7. Colin Brown, *Miracles and the Critical Mind* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 281.

8. Ibid., 286-87.

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## Is the Church Ready to Engage the World for Christ?

*Christ's last commandment was to engage the world with the gospel. But today's church has often embraced postmodern attitudes that reject absolute truth, absolute values, and even the Bible's insistence that Jesus is the only way to God. We are hardly ready to engage the world anymore.*

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



### The Mission of the Church

The church is called to engage the world for Christ. Jesus commanded us to “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you . . .”

Many churches and Christian organizations are doing a wonderful job in fulfilling this call. However, it appears

that the majority of the church has responded in one of two ways. Some churches have chosen to retreat and protect themselves from the world by secluding themselves in their own isolated communities. We see huddles of Christian communities with their own sports leagues, schools, clubs, etc. There is nothing wrong with Christian programs, but if it is created with an isolationist mentality, we create a church that is withdrawn from the world, irrelevant, and unable to relate to the unbelieving world.

I saw a display of this at a funeral once. As an invited guest not knowing anyone, I sat with the non-believers in the audience and observed how the Christians at the funeral interacted with the non-believers. The pastor preached a message using terminology foreign to the non-Christian. After the funeral, at the lunch reception, I saw the Christians huddled together speaking “Christianese”—a language that sounded totally foreign. What a wasted opportunity! This moment was a small display of the danger that isolating ourselves from the world creates: Christians unable to relate with the lost world.

Another response has been that, instead of transforming the world, many churches have been transformed by the world. The popular thinking of the culture has dismantled the foundational truths upon which the church once stood. Major denominations are now in a battle or have given up their position on key tenets regarding truth, moral absolutes, and religious truth.

The result of these two responses has been devastating. George Barna writes, “[A]s we prepare to enter into a new century of ministry, we must address one inescapable conclusion: despite the activity and chutzpah emanating from thousands of congregations, the Church in America is losing influence and adherents faster than any other major institution in the nation.”[{1}](#)

Charles Colson writes, "We live in a culture that is at best morally indifferent. A culture in which Judeo-Christian values are mocked and where immorality in high places is not only ignored but even rewarded in the voting booth. A culture in which violence, banality, meanness, and disintegrating personal behavior are destroying civility and endangering the very life of our communities. . . . Small wonder that many people have concluded that the 'Culture war' is over and we (the church) have lost."[\[2\]](#)

Let us study some of the key issues facing the church in the 21st century and see how they have affected our witness. And let's see if we are indeed ready to engage our world.

## The Church and Truth

Our current, postmodern culture adheres to the position that universal objective truth does not exist. Truth is relative to each individual and to each culture. Jim Leffel summarizes postmodern relativism this way,

Relativism says the truth isn't fixed by outside reality, but is decided by a group or individual for themselves. Truth isn't discovered but manufactured. Truth is ever changing not only in insignificant matters of taste or fashion, but in crucial matters of spirituality, morality and reality itself.[\[3\]](#)

Leading postmodern thinker John Caputo writes, "The cold, hermeneutic truth, is that there is no truth, no master name which holds things captive."[\[4\]](#) Both men summarize the postmodern belief that objective truth does not exist and therefore, we conclude that all truth claims are equal even if they are contradictory.

This understanding of truth permeates every area of our culture. Public schools, government, and the media all promote the view that 'since there are multiple descriptions of

reality, no one view can be true in an ultimate sense.

A survey of the American public revealed that 66 percent agreed with the statement, "There is no such thing as absolute truth."[\[5\]](#) Among the youth, 70 percent believe that there is no such thing as absolute truth; two people could define "truth" in conflicting ways and both be correct."[\[6\]](#)

This popular notion stands in opposition to biblical teaching. Truth is rooted in God. It corresponds to the facts of reality. It is embodied in Christ and revealed in God's revelation, the Bible. Jesus states in John 14:6, "I am the way the truth and the life. . . ." God, who is truth, has revealed to us His word of the truth, the Bible. In John 17:17 Jesus prays for His disciples saying, "Sanctify them in truth; your word is truth." Absolute truth is knowable because God has revealed it to us in the Bible. Truth is not a social construct created by a culture, nor is it relative as some postmodernists claim. It is transmitted to us by the God of truth to His creatures who are expected to conform themselves to this truth.

For two millennia the church has been the guardian of truth. However, unbridled postmodern philosophy appears to have influenced the church in a frightful way. According to the latest studies the church could be in danger of surrendering her position. According to the latest research, 53 percent of adults in church believe there is no absolute truth. Among the youth in church, research shows that 57 percent do not believe an objective standard of truth exists[\[7\]](#)

Ephesians 6 exhorts us to engage in spiritual battle with the spiritual armor God provides. An essential component is the "belt of truth." Without a clear understanding of truth, we cannot hope to successfully engage our culture for Christ. God's truth is the foundation on which the church's message stands.

# The Church and Ethics

Most Americans reject the idea of absolute truth, so they naturally reject the idea of absolute moral truth. George Barna writes, “This transformation has done more to undermine the health and stability of American Society—and perhaps, of the world. . . .”[\[8\]](#)

The late Dr. Francis Schaeffer wrote,

If there is no absolute moral standard, then one cannot say in a final sense that anything is right or wrong. By absolute we mean that which always applies (to all people), that which provides a final or ultimate standard. There must be an absolute if there are to be morals, and there must be an absolute if there are to be real values. If there is no absolute beyond man’s ideas, then there is no final appeal to judge between individuals and groups whose moral judgments conflict. We are merely left with conflicting opinions.[\[9\]](#)

Dr. Schaeffer’s conclusion is what we must inevitably come to if we hold to the belief that truth is relative. The danger of rejecting moral absolutes is that we surrender our right to judge anyone’s beliefs or behaviors as right or wrong. We then arrive at the unbiblical position of tolerating all beliefs and lifestyles, whether those involve homosexuality, abortion, misogyny, or other behaviors. The Bible, then, becomes a book of suggestions on how to live and is no longer God’s universal law for mankind.

Barna’s survey shows that most people in our country have come to this conclusion. He records that only 25 percent of adults and 10 percent of teens believe there is absolute moral truth.[\[10\]](#)

The biblical position is that there are revealed moral absolutes. God, who is truth, has revealed His truth through

His word, the Bible. The moral law revealed in God's word is universal. In Romans 2, God is just to judge every person according to His law. His law is given in His word and also He has placed a witness to His law in the moral conscience of men (Romans 2:14-16).

According to Barna's survey, only 49 percent of born again Christians agreed with the proposition that moral truth is absolute and 51 percent either disagreed or did not know what to think about moral truth.[{11}](#) 57 percent of Christian teens believe that when it comes to morals and ethics, truth means different things to different people; no one can be absolutely positive they have the truth.[{12}](#)

If there are no moral absolutes, we cannot clearly define sin. Teaching on holy living is lost in the absence of clear standards of morality. Without a moral foundation, churches and their members are *influenced by* the culture more than they are *influencing* the culture for Christ. That is what we are seeing in churches today. Mainline denominations are adopting the values of the culture and abandoning the biblical stand on several moral issues. Christian philosopher Søren Kierkegaard warns, "Once the church comes to terms with the world, Christianity is abolished."[{13}](#)

## The Church and Spiritual Truth

If absolute truth does not exist, then moral absolutes do not exist. The same then applies to religious truth. The religion of our culture would be syncretism. Syncretism combines complementary and often contradictory teachings from different religions to form a new system tailored to each individual's preferences. Indeed, Barna's research reveals that 62 percent of Americans agree that "it doesn't matter what religious faith you follow because all faiths teach similar lessons about life."[{14}](#)

Syncretism contradicts biblical teaching. The Bible teaches

that the truth is found in Jesus Christ and in Him alone. In John 14:6 Jesus states, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through me." The Apostles repeat this claim. In Acts 4:12 Peter states, "And there is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men by which we must be saved."

The Bible teaches that the Bible itself is the source of spiritual truth and that salvation is found exclusively in Jesus. Not only does the biblical evidence argue against syncretism, logic does as well.

A brief study of the world's religions reveals that they are contradictory on their basic truth claims, and therefore, mutually exclusive. Ravi Zacharias writes, "Most people think all religions are essentially the same and only superficially different. Just the opposite is true."

However, if all religions are true, all religious practices are valid and cannot be judged good or evil. Then are we to tolerate cultures that burn living widows alive at their husband's funerals because of their religious convictions? How about religions that teach young men to execute acts of terrorism on innocent victims in the name of God? We would have to conclude that we couldn't say such practices are right or wrong.

Postmodern ideas have made their impact on the church regarding the belief of absolutes, regarding spiritual truth, and the exclusive claims of Jesus Christ. Jesus made it clear in John 14:6 that He is the source of spiritual truth and the only way to eternal life. However, among born again Christians, 31 percent believe that if a person is good enough they can earn a place in heaven. 26 percent believe it doesn't matter what faith you follow, because they all teach the same lessons. 24 percent believe that while He lived on earth, Jesus committed sins like other people.[\[15\]](#) 30 percent believe



Jesus died, but never had a physical resurrection.[{16}](#)

These surveys reveal that a growing number of Christians do not understand the basic teachings regarding the unique nature of Christ and His message. If Christianity is not true in its unique claims, the church is preaching a message of religious preference and not one of eternal truth. The power of the gospel is that spiritual truth and salvation is found in no one else but Jesus Christ.

## **The Church That Will Engage**

Our postmodern culture brings some formidable challenges to the church of the 21st century. The church is struggling with foundational issues like the nature of truth, moral absolutes, and spiritual truth. What is required of us if we are to be successful in engaging the world for Christ? It is for Christians to have a courageous faith, committed hearts, a compelling defense, and a compassionate attitude.

1 Peter 3:14-16 states, “‘Do not fear what they fear, do not be frightened.’ But 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.”

The world is often hostile to the message of Christ, especially its message of salvation found only in Jesus and its teaching on moral absolutes. That is why courageous faith that overcomes fear is essential.

Second, we are called to engage the world with committed hearts. Peter writes that instead of fear, we are to, “set apart Christ as Lord.” Courageous faith comes from a heart committed to Jesus. When Jesus is Lord of a believer’s heart, he or she responds properly in any situation. The church is the greatest witness for Christ when Jesus is Lord of every member’s life.

Third, to engage the world for Christ, we must have a compelling defense of the faith. Peter writes, "Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give a reason for the hope that you have." We are exhorted to never be caught unprepared; never unwilling, and never timid about our response. The word "answer" in the Greek is *apologia*, which was used in connection with a formal public defense often before magistrates and in judicial courts. Every Christian is called to defend the faith.

Unfortunately, much of the church is unable to do this. A recent survey by Josh McDowell showed that 84 percent of Christian college freshmen were unable to explain why they believed.[\[17\]](#) We can't expect a skeptical world to believe our message if we can't give them a compelling reason why they should. For this reason, every Christian is called to the study of apologetics.

Fourth, we must engage with a compassionate attitude. Gentleness refers to the attitude that relies on God to change attitudes and minds. Respect is the same word used in the New Testament for reverence shown towards God. We are not to witness with an arrogant or combative demeanor, but one of gentleness and respect. Without these two qualities, it is dangerous to attempt to evangelize.

Probe Ministries is committed to equipping the church to engage their world for Christ. Probe's ministries include our Web site, books, and conferences that will equip you to engage our world with insight and integrity, providing Christians a ready answer for their faith.

## Notes

1. George Barna, *The Second Coming of the Church*, (Dallas: Word Publishing, 1998), 1.
2. Charles Colson, *How Shall We Now Live?* (Wheaton, IL:

Tyndale Publishing, 1999), ix-x.

3. Dennis McCallum ed., *The Death of Truth*, (Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 1996), "Our New Challenge: Postmodernism," by Jim Leffel, 31.

4. John Caputo, *Radical Hermeneutics: Repetition, Deconstruction, and the Hermeneutic Project* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1987), 192.

5. Gene Edward Veith, *Postmodern Times*, (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1994), 16.

6. Barna, *Third Millenium Teens*, (Ventura, CA.: Barna Research Group, 1999), 44.

7. Josh McDowell and Bob Hostetler, *The New Tolerance* (Wheaton, IL.: Tyndale House Publishers, 1998) 172-173.

8. Barna, *Boiling Point*, (Ventura, CA.: Regal Books, 2001), 78.

9. Francis Schaeffer, *How Should We Then Live?* (Old Tappan, N.J.: Fleming Revell, 1976), 145.

10. Barna, *Boiling Point*, 78.

11. Ibid., 80.

12. McDowell and Hostetller, 21.

13. Quoted by Michael Horton, *Beyond Culture Wars* (Chicago: Moody, 1994), 37.

14. Barna, *Absolute Confusion*, (Ventura, CA.: Regal Books, 1993), 79-80.

15. Barna, "Born Again Christians," *Barna Research Online*, 19 April 2001, 2.

16. Barna, "Americans' Bible Knowledge is in the Ballpark, But

Often Off Base," *Barna Research Online*, 12 July 2000.

17. McDowell and Hostetler, 173.

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13. Schaeffer, Francis. *How Should We Then Live?* Old Tappan, N.J: Fleming Revell, 1976.

14. Veith, Gene Edward. *Postmodern Times*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1994.

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# Modern Myths

## Myths and Modern Myths

Have you ever heard someone describe the Bible as *myth*? All those supernatural occurrences couldn't possibly have taken place, it is said. It's a good story, intended to help people lead a good life and perhaps get closer to God (if there is one), but not to be taken literally.

What is a *myth*? A myth is a story that serves to provide meaning and structure for life. It *might* have some history behind it, but that isn't important. It is the ideas that count. Myths are intended to translate the supposed abstract realities of the world in concrete, story form.

Myths were important to the ancient Greeks for defining who they were and what the world was like. In modern times, however, we try to de-emphasize the significance of myths for a culture; we equate *myth* with *fiction*, and fiction isn't to be taken seriously.

In his book, *6 Modern Myths About Christianity and Western Civilization*,[\[1\]](#) Philip Sampson debunks the notion that we've

given up myths, even in the arena of science! According to Sampson there are a number of myths that have become significant for our culture even though they are false—or at least misleading—with respect to the facts. In this book, Sampson gives the true stories behind some of the myths our culture holds as true, such as the idea that Galileo's fight with the church provides a good example of the supposed warfare between science and religion.

Myths such as these serve to perpetuate certain notions their promoters want us to believe. They can develop over time with no conscious aim, or they can be knowingly advanced for the good of a certain cause. So, as with the Galileo story, if one wishes to advance the notion that there is a tension between Christianity and science, with science being clearly in the right, one might employ a story which pits the knowledgeable, good scientist just out to present facts against the hierarchy of a church which seeks to keep people in darkness so as to advance its own cause.

In ancient Greece, myths weren't told as though they were historically true. In our society, however, facts are important, so myths are told as if they are scientifically or historically accurate. Thus, with the Galileo story, there is enough history to seem to give it a factual basis—although significant facts are left out!

In this article we will look at three of these modern myths: Galileo and the church, the purported oppression of people by missionaries, and the witch trials of the 16th and 17th centuries.

## **Galileo and the Church**

One myth that is deeply ingrained in our culture is that of the supposed “warfare between science and religion.” Science deals with fact; religion deals with nice stories, at best. Whenever there is a conflict, obviously science wins the day.

This myth goes deeper than just who has the best interpretation of the data. It's as if there is, *of necessity*, a conflict between the two, and religion has to be shown to be inferior to science.

One story that seems to serve this myth especially well is the story of Galileo. You've probably heard about Galileo's celebrated battle with the church over his views on the nature of the universe. As the story is typically told, Copernicus discovered that the earth revolves around the sun. Galileo, who agreed that the earth was not the center of the universe after all, then developed his work. Supposedly the church wanted to keep man at the center of God's creation and thus as the supreme part of the created order. To move earth out of the center was to somehow lower man. Thus, the church persecuted Galileo and eventually silenced him, showing its raw power over society.

George Bernard Shaw said, "Galileo was a martyr, and his persecutors incorrigible ignoramuses."[\[2\]](#) Says writer Patrick Moore, "The Roman Catholic Church attacked Galileo because the [heliocentric] theory was not reconcilable with certain passages of the Bible. As a consequence, poor Galileo spent most of his life in open conflict with the Church."[\[3\]](#) However, reason ultimately prevailed and science won the day over religious obscurantism.

The problem with this story is that it ranges from the true to the distorted to the blatantly untrue! Galileo's primary trouble was with *secular scientists*, not with the church. It was when he began reinterpreting Scripture to promote his cause and publicly ridiculed the pope that he got into big trouble.

"The Galileo story was developed by French Enlightenment thinkers as part of their anticlerical program," says Philip Sampson, "but by the late nineteenth century it had created a language of warfare between science and religion." Science

became the fount of reasoned knowledge, and religion was “reduced to ignorance and dogma.”[{4}](#) To accomplish this, however, history had to be distorted.

Let’s see what really happened with Galileo. It needs to be noted up front that in Galileo’s day the theories of scientists were not thought to give an actual account of the way the heavens worked; they simply provided models for ordering the data. They “were regarded as the play things of virtuosi,” as George Sim Johnston put it.[{5}](#) “To the Greek and medieval mind, science was a kind of formalism, a means of coordinating data, which had no bearing on the ultimate reality of things.”[{6}](#)

The fact is that the church didn’t *care* all that much about what Copernicus and Galileo thought about the order of the universe, scientifically speaking. Copernicus’ book on the subject circulated for seventy years without any trouble at all. It was the *scientists* of the day who opposed the theory, because it went against the received wisdom of Aristotle. Copernicus believed that his theory actually described the universe the way it was, and this was unacceptable to the academics. When Galileo published his ideas, it was the ridicule of fellow astronomers that he feared, not the church.

According to Aristotle, the earth was at the center of the universe, and all the rest of the universe was situated in concentric spheres around it. From the moon out, all was thought to be perfect and unchanging. The earth, however, was obviously changing and thus imperfect. All matter in the universe was thought to fall downward toward the center of the earth. The earth is therefore like the trash bin of the universe; it was no compliment to man to emphasize his place on earth. In other words, to be at the center of the universe was *not* a good thing!

To now say that the earth was out with other planets where things had to be perfect was to seriously undercut Aristotle’s



ideas. So when Galileo published his notions it was the ridicule of fellow astronomers that he feared, not the church.

It's true that Galileo got into hot water with the church, but it was *not* because his theory moved man physically from the center of the universe; that was a *good* thing, given Aristotle's views. Man was already considered small in the universe. Most people already believed that the earth was created for God, not for man. "The doctrine that the earth exists for man's use," says Philip Sampson, "derives from Greek philosophy, not the Bible."[\[7\]](#) Thus, the Copernican theory "ennobled" the status of the earth by making it a planet. So the church in general didn't see the heliocentric theory as a demotion.

The fact is that Galileo was on good terms with the church for a long time, even while advancing his theory. He made sure that the idea he was attacking of the incorruptibility of the universe with its perfect heavens and imperfect earth was an Aristotelian belief and not a doctrine of the church. "Indeed," says Sampson, "the church largely accepted his conclusions, although the die-hard Aristotelians in the universities did not. . . . Far from being constantly harried by obscurantist priests, he was feted by cardinals, received by Pope Paul V and befriended by the future Pope Urban VIII."[\[8\]](#) As historian George Santillana wrote in 1958, "It has been known for a long time that a major part of the church intellectuals were on the side of Galileo, while the clearest opposition to him came from secular circles."[\[9\]](#) He wasn't afraid of the church; he feared the ridicule of his fellow scientists!

What *did* get Galileo in trouble with the church were two things. First, because the church had historically followed Aristotle (as did secularists) in interpreting scientific data, it wanted hard evidence to support Galileo's views, which he did not have. For Galileo to insist that his theory was true to the way things really were was to step outside

proper scientific boundaries. He simply didn't have enough hard data to make such a claim. The problem, then, wasn't between religion and science, but between methods of interpreting the data. But this, in itself, wasn't enough to bring the church down on him.

The bigger problem was Galileo's manner of promoting his beliefs. To do so, he reinterpreted Scripture in contradiction to traditional understandings, which ran counter to the dictates of the Council of Trent. Perhaps even worse was his mockery of the pope. His treatise, *Dialogue Concerning the Chief World Systems*, took the form of a debate. The character that took Aristotle's view against the heliocentric theory was called Simplicio. His "role in the dialogue is to be a kind of Aunt Sally to be knocked down by Galileo. . . .Galileo puts into Simplicio's mouth a favorite argument used by his friend Pope Urban VIII and then mocks it. In other words, he concluded his treatise by effectively calling the very pope who had befriended him a simpleton for not agreeing with Galileo. This was not a wise move," says Sampson, "and the rest is history."[\[10\]](#) In fact, Galileo himself believed that the major cause of his trouble was the charge that he had made fun of the pope, *not* that he thought the earth moved.

So the condemnation of Galileo did *not* result from some basic conflict between science and religion. It "was the result of the complex interplay of untoward political circumstances, political ambitions, and wounded prides."[\[11\]](#) However, the myth continues to bolster the status of secular, naturalistic thought by making religion look bad.

So is there warfare between science and religion? Hardly. This is really warfare between worldviews.

## The Missionaries

A favorite charge against Christians for many years is the belief that missionaries effectively destroyed other cultures:

running roughshod over the natives' beliefs and culture. Like the myth of the warfare between science and religion, the myth of the oppressive missionary provides a vehicle for exalting secularism while denigrating Christianity. According to this myth, the Christian missionary arrogantly strips natives of their own culture and forces western Christian culture on them, even to the point of oppression and exploitation.

Secular literature often leaves one with an impression of missionaries as stern, joyless oppressors who took advantage of innocent natives in order to advance their own ends. They forced their art and music on other cultures, made the people learn the missionaries' language, and manipulated them to wear western clothing. "Missionaries are accused of exploiting natives for commercial gain," says Sampson, "colluding with expansionist colonialism and even committing 'ethnocide.' They are implicated in the theft of land, the forced removal of children from their parents, the destruction of habitats, torture, murder, the decline of whole populations into destitution, alcoholism, and prostitution. Even when they provide disaster relief, they are guilty of 'buying' converts." [\[12\]](#) There are no "half tones," says Sampson. Missionaries "impose rigid, joyless, and patriarchal rules" on natives who are "portrayed as residents in an idyllic land, the victims of the full might of Western oppression incarnate in the person of 'the missionary.'" [\[13\]](#)

One of the problems in this assessment is the ready identification of missionary activity with that of western colonialism and trade. While missionaries often *did* import their culture along with the Gospel, they were not, for the most part, interested in taking over other peoples. Colonialists, however, were. It was "the Enlightenment visions of 'civilization' and 'progress' that inspired colonial activity from the eighteenth century and rejected faith in God for faith in reason." Colonialists had no qualms about attempting to "civilize" the "barbarians" and "savages."

*Civilized* was a term which “had ‘behind it the general spirit of the Enlightenment with its emphasis on secular and progressive human self-development.’” Traders, also, were guilty of exploiting other peoples for their own profit. Consider the power of commercial enterprises such as the search for gold by the conquistadors and the activity of such organizations as the British South Africa Company that brought exploitation.{14}

What this reveals is the role of *modernism* in the oppression and exploitation of native peoples. Romanticism established the image of the “noble savage,” the pure, pristine individual who, living close to nature, had not been corrupted by the influences of civilization. The fact is that some native peoples were given to human sacrifice and cannibalism, among other vices. However, the myth of the noble savage took root in western thinking. Then Darwin taught that there were weaker races that were doomed to extinction by the unstoppable forces of evolutionary change (new ideas about eugenics grew out of this thinking). These two images—the noble savage and the weaker race—combined to paint a picture of vulnerable nobility. According to the myth, Christian missionaries were guilty of taking advantage of this vulnerability to advance their own causes. The reality was that it was often *colonialists* who exploited these people, and salved their consciences by picturing the people as doomed to extinction anyway.

By contrast, what one finds in the literature about missionary activities includes occasions where they stood against the colonial and trading powers. The Dominican bishop Bartolomé opposed slavery in the sixteenth century. John Philip of the London Missionary Society supported native rights in South Africa in the early nineteenth century. Lancelot Threlkeld demanded “equal protection under the law for the Awabakal people of Australia.”{15} John Eliot stood up for the Indians in Massachusetts’ courts against unjust settler claims. Even

one critic of missionary activity conceded that evangelical missions in Latin America “tended to treat native people with more respect than did national governments and fellow citizens.”[\[16\]](#) Missionaries taught people to read their own languages, good hygiene to indigenous groups, farming skills, and even brought medical help. In some regards, the missionaries *did* try to change other cultures, and sometimes illegitimately. But sometimes that isn’t wrong; there should be no apologies for trying to stop such practices as human sacrifice and cannibalism. Compare the efforts of contemporary secularists to end female genital mutilation practiced by some African tribes.

Scholars have known for many years that the identification of missions with oppression is unfair, yet the myth continues to be told. It simply isn’t true that missionaries were responsible for the destruction of native cultures. But the myth persists, for “it provides the modern mind with an alibi for its own complicity in oppression.”[\[17\]](#)

## The Witch Trials

Some critics like to portray the Christian Church as the great persecutor of the weak and helpless. A popular vehicle for this myth is the story of the witch trials in Europe and America in the 16th and 17th centuries. Philip Sampson says that this story “relates that many millions of women throughout Europe, mainly the elderly, poor and isolated, were tortured by the church into confessing nonexistent crimes before being burnt to death.”[\[18\]](#) The story of the witch trials provides a handy illustration for the myth that that the church actively persecutes those who aren’t in agreement. “The history of Christianity is the history of persecution,” said one writer,[\[19\]](#) and this is seen in no bolder outline than in the story of the witch-hunts. Furthermore, this story provides a good example of the supposed women-hating attitude of the church since the vast majority of witches tried were

women.

There is no denying that Christians were involved in the trial and execution of witches. But to paint this issue as simply a matter of the powerful church against the weakest members of society is to distort what really happened.

Before considering a couple of facts about the trials, the bias of the critics who write about them should be noted. For most, there simply is no such thing as a supernatural witch, meaning one who can actually draw on satanic power to manipulate nature. If this is true, it *must* be the case that there is some natural explanation for the strange behavior of those charged with witchcraft, and the church was completely unjustified in prosecuting them. But this is a naturalistic bias; it ignores the fact that “most people of the world throughout most of its history have taken supernatural witchcraft to be real.”[\[20\]](#) Modern writers like to think that it was the dawning of the Age of Reason that brought about the end of the witch trials, but today this is seen as mere hubris, “the prejudice of ‘indignant rationalists’ [who were] more concerned to castigate the witch-baiters for their credulity and cruelty than to understand what the phenomenon was all about.”[\[21\]](#) It was the centralization of legal power that brought the trials to an end, not a matter of “Enlightenment overcoming superstition.”[\[22\]](#)

This leads us to ask who and why these charges of witchcraft were brought in the first place. What we find is that this “was not principally a church matter, nor was the Inquisition the prime mover in the prosecution of witches,” as is often thought. It was ordinary lay people who typically brought charges of witchcraft, and mostly women at that![\[23\]](#) The primary reasons were not bizarre supernatural behavior or heretical beliefs, but the tensions brought about by a loss of crops or the failure of bread to rise. “People commonly appealed to magic and witchcraft to explain tragedies and misfortunes, or more generally to gain power over

neighbors.”{24} Even kings and queens saw witchcraft as a very real threat to their thrones and well-being. The Inquisition actually supplied a tempering influence. Historian Hugh Trevor-Roper said, “In general, the established church was opposed to the persecution” of witches.{25} Likewise, the Protestant churches were not the real aggressors in the witch trials. John Calvin believed that witchcraft was a delusion, the cure for which was the Gospel, not execution.{26}

Estimates of executions in the millions are grossly exaggerated. Recent studies estimate about 150300 per year, making a total of between 40,000 and 100,000 who were executed over a period of 300 years. While “this is an appalling enough catalog of human suffering,” as Sampson says,{27} it pales in comparison to the slaughter of innocent people in the 20th century, resulting from the excesses of modernistic thinking. “Genocide is an invention of the modern world,” says one writer.{28} Compare the numbers slaughtered under Nazism or Stalinism to that of the witch trials. If the witch trials demonstrate the danger of religion to society, the slaughters under Hitler and Stalin demonstrate the much greater danger of irreligion.

Modern writers like to think that it was the dawning of the Age of Reason that brought about the end of the witch trials, but today this is seen as mere hubris. It was the centralization of legal power that brought the trials to an end, not a matter of “Enlightenment overcoming superstition.”{29}

## Conclusion

From the days of the early church we have been called upon to defend not only our beliefs but also the *activities* of individual Christians and the church as a whole. In his book, *6 Modern Myths About Christianity and Western Civilization*, Philip Sampson has given us a tool to better enable us to do that today. I encourage you to read it.

## Notes

1. Philip J. Sampson, *6 Modern Myths About Christianity and Western Civilization* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2001).
2. George Bernard Shaw, *Saint Joan* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1946), 17, quoted in Sampson, 28.
3. Patrick Moore, *A Beginner's Guide to Astronomy* (London: PRC Publishing, 1997), 12, quoted in Sampson, 28.
4. Sampson, 45.
5. George Sim Johnston, "The Galileo Affair," downloaded from <http://www.catholic.net/rcc/Periodicals/Issues/GalileoAffair.html> May 7, 2001.
6. Ibid.
7. Sampson, 34.
8. Sampson, 36-37.
9. George de Santillana, *The Crime of Galileo* (London: Heinemann, 1958), xii, quoted in Sampson, 37.
10. Sampson, 38.
11. William R. Shea, "Galileo and the Church" in *God and Nature*, ed. David C. Lindberg and Ronald Numbers (Berkley: University of California Press, 1986), 312, quoted in Sampson, 39.
12. Sampson, 93.
13. Sampson, 94.
14. Sampson, 94.
15. Sampson, 97-98.



16. D. Stoll, *Is Latin America Turning Protestant?* (Berkley: University of California Press, 1990), 12, quoted in Sampson, 98.
17. Sampson, 99.
18. Sampson, 130.
19. Laurie, Cabot, *Power of the Witch* (Harmondsworth, U.K.: Penguin, 1992), 62, quoted in Sampson, 130.
20. Sampson, 133.
21. Sampson, 144.
22. Sampson, 133.
23. Sampson, 134-135.
24. Sampson, 134.
25. Hugh R. Trevor-Roper, *The European Witch-Craze of the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (Harmondsworth, U.K.: Penguin, 1969), 37, quoted in Sampson, 139.
26. Sampson, 141.
27. Sampson 137.
28. Trevor-Roper, 22, quoted in Sampson, 137.
29. Sampson, 133.

# Confident Belief

## Introduction

It's hard to imagine how any Christian at any time in history could live life completely free from any doubts about the truth of the faith. Suffering, inconsistent behavior among Christians, the lure of the world, intellectual misgivings—these things and others can lead us to question whether it's all true.

Since the days of the early church there have been objections to the gospel which have given pause to Christians. Can I really believe this? *Should* I believe this? Doubt is part of human experience, and Christians experience it no less than non-Christians. Doubts about our faith are more momentous than many we deal with, however, because of their implications. I have my doubts about whether my favorite football team will be in the Super Bowl, but I can still hang in there with them as a fan. The claims of Christ are much more momentous, however. Our individual destinies and more are at stake.

We find ourselves today in the West beset by two different schools of thought which can cause us to doubt. On the one hand are the modernists, heirs of the Enlightenment, who believe that reason is sufficient for true knowledge and that Christianity just doesn't measure up to sound reason. On the other hand are postmodernists who don't believe anyone can know what is true, and are astonished that we dare lay claim to having *the* truth about ultimate reality.

I'd like to look at these two mindsets to see if they have legitimate claims. The goal is to see if either should be allowed to rob us of our confidence.

*Modernism and Certain Knowledge*

Modernists believe that our reason is sufficient to know truth, in fact the *only* reliable means of attaining knowledge. Only that which can be scientifically measured and quantified and reasoned through logically can constitute true knowledge.

What does this say, however, about things that *can't* be so measured, things such as beauty, morals, and matters of the spirit? Can we not have knowledge of such things? We have inherited the belief that such things are at best matters of opinion; they are subjective matters having to do only with the individual's experiences and tastes.

This way of thinking is disastrous for religious beliefs of almost any kind. Christianity in particular makes claims that can't be weighed or counted or measured (although there *are* elements which *can* be empirically tested): the nature of God, justification by faith, the deity of Christ, and the reality of the Holy Spirit are a few examples. Since these elements are central but don't fit within our logical, scientific mindset, they are said to be matters of personal opinion at best, or figments of our imagination at worst.

The matter of the "knowability" of the faith is a problem for nonbelievers, but it can be a worse problem for believers. Those whom Daniel Taylor calls "reflective Christians" often find themselves betrayed by their own doubts; they feel the weight of providing for themselves the kind of evidences a nonbeliever might demand and feel guilty when they cannot produce in their own minds a logical certainty for their beliefs.[{1}](#) What such a believer typically does is continue to mount up evidence and arguments and think and talk and think some more and hope that one day either the missing link will come clear or he will be able to "call off thoughts awhile," in the words of poet Gerard Manley Hopkins.[{2}](#)

### *Postmodern Skepticism*

Times are changing, though, and the problem Christians face

more and more is the challenge coming from the other end of the spectrum. If modernists demand indubitable knowledge, postmodernists deny the very possibility of true knowledge at all. While on the one hand modernists say there is not enough evidence to trust our beliefs, on the other hand postmodernists tell us our evidences mean nothing regarding the truth value of our faith.

Postmodernists believe that truth is a construct of our own imagination and desires. They believe there is no single, unifying account of reality that covers everything, one *metanarrative* as they call it. They believe one must leave everything an open question, that one shouldn't settle anywhere since there is no way to know ultimate truths at all. Our own realities are created for us partly by our society and partly by our own exercise of power, often by the very words we use.

Is the Christian, then, now to think of her faith as just that? *Her* faith? Something that has validity for *her* and her *group* but not necessarily for everyone? This kind of thinking fosters religious pluralism, the belief that truth is found in many different religions. This is disastrous for Christianity for it leaves us wondering why we should hold to these beliefs when others might be more attractive.

Thus, there is on the one hand the modernist who thinks we can know everything we need to know using our reason, and on the other the postmodernist who thinks the search for knowledge is a waste of time. In the face of these mindsets, what should we do? Should we resign ourselves to feeling guilty and maybe a little intellectually perverse because we can't assign mathematical certainty to our beliefs? Or do we swallow the skepticism of postmodernists and just hold our beliefs as the creations of our own minds and wills? It is my contention that we needn't be bound by either position on truth and knowledge, but that we can have knowledgeable confidence in the truth of the faith.

# Modernism: The Enlightenment Search for Knowledge

Modernity was the era which had its roots in the Enlightenment of the 17th and 18th centuries, and which continued until recent years. Although postmodernism seems to be the order of the day, one worldview doesn't come to a screeching halt one day and another pick up the next. Thus, there are still many people who view life in modernist terms.

Modernists believe that reason is the only truly reliable source of knowledge. Revelation is set aside. Since reason is the authority, only that which has logical or mathematical certainty can be accepted as true knowledge. Anything less can only have some level of probability. The attacks of empiricists such as David Hume apparently rendered Christianity highly *improbable*.

Lesslie Newbigin argues that this demand for indubitable knowledge gave rise to the skepticism of our day. In fact, postmodern skepticism is a sharp rejection of Enlightenment thought.

Let's look briefly at the Enlightenment ideal of knowledge.

## *René Descartes and the Search for Certainty*

In response to the skepticism of the 17th century, mathematician/philosopher René Descartes accepted the challenge of providing an argument for the existence of God which would be beyond doubt.[\[3\]](#) Descartes's approach was to use the tool of the skeptics—which is *doubt*—as his starting point. He threw out everything that couldn't be known indubitably, and was left with one idea which he couldn't doubt: I think, therefore I am. He developed his philosophy from this starting point.

Two important points are to be made about Descartes's method.

First, he made the break from starting with God as the measure of all things to starting with the individual person. Human reason was now the supreme arbiter of truth.{4} Second, Descartes established doubt as a principle of knowledge.{5} In modern times, critical thinking doubts everything until it is proved true.

On this basis, Western man devoted himself to knowing as much as he could about his world without any reference to God, and with the idea that knowledge had to be logically or mathematically certain. Knowledge is quantifiable; one must strip away anything other than brute, objective facts which can be weighed, counted, or measured or deduced from facts which can be so quantified. Knowledge was to be objective, certain, and dispassionate—not subject to personal feelings or values or faith commitments. As theologian Stanley Grenz says, “The new tools of research included precise methods of measurement and a dependence on mathematical logic. In turning to this method, Enlightenment investigators narrowed their focus of interest—and hence began to treat as real only those aspects of the universe that are measurable.”{6}

On the heels of Descartes came Isaac Newton who gave us a vision of the cosmos as being an orderly machine, an idea in keeping with the rationalism of Descartes. The universe could be understood once its laws were understood. Although Descartes and Newton believed their ideas gave support to their Christian beliefs, they were subsequently used for just the opposite. “The modern world turned out to be Newton’s mechanistic universe populated by Descartes’s autonomous, rational substance,” says Grenz. “In such a world, theology was forced to give place to the natural sciences, and the central role formerly enjoyed by the theologian became the prerogative of the natural scientist.”{7}

Was Descartes’s method significant in Western History? Grenz notes that “Descartes set the agenda for philosophy for the next three hundred years” by making human reason central.{8}

In time, this approach was applied to other disciplines as well, from politics to ethics to theology. "In this way," says Grenz, "all fields of the human endeavor became, in effect, branches of natural science."[\[9\]](#)

Time has proved the value of scientific and mathematical reasoning. We all enjoy the benefits of technology. This being the case, however, why is it that we at the turn of the century find ourselves so skeptical? What has happened to the confidence modern man had in his ability to know?

## **Postmodernism: The Rejection of the Enlightenment Idea**

With the acceptance of René Descartes's idea that truth was to be found ultimately in reason, and that the starting point for knowledge was doubt, the die was cast for the period of history we call modernity. Using just his reason, and denying anything which wasn't certain, the individual could come to true knowledge with no reference to God.

But skeptical attacks continued through such philosophers as David Hume. In response, Immanuel Kant formulated a new understanding of knowledge. He believed that knowledge came from data received by the senses which was then formed into understandable ideas by the workings of our own minds. Thus, the structure of our own minds became a crucial component of the known world. With Kant, the thinking individual was now firmly established as the final authority for truth. Even with this, however, Kant still believed there *is* a reality external to us, and that all our minds work the same way to understand it.

Although Kant believed that we could truly know the world around us, his ideas pushed us a significant step *away* from that reality. He believed that we are thus incapable of knowing things as they are *in themselves*; we only know things as they *appear* to us. Thus, since God doesn't appear to us

empirically, we do not have real knowledge of Him. Philosophers following him began to pick away at his ideas. Johann Fichte, for example, accepted Kant's ideas for the most part, but denied the idea that there are things-in-themselves; in other words, that there is something to reality apart from our perceptions of it. What we perceive is what is there. Now the way was made clear to think in terms of "alternative conceptual frameworks." There could now be multiple ways of understanding and interpreting the world.

### *Nietzsche*

Other philosophers picked away at Kant as well, but we'll only consider one more, the man who has been called the "patron saint of postmodern philosophy,"[{10}](#) Friedrich Nietzsche. Nietzsche was a true foe of modernism. He believed the whole project of building up these "great edifices of ideas"[{11}](#) was fundamentally flawed. Our attempts to abstract general knowledge from the particulars around us only results in distortion, he thought. He argued that "what we commonly accept as human knowledge is in fact merely a self-contained set of illusions. He essentially viewed 'truth' as a function of the language we employ and hence believed that truth 'exists' only within specific linguistic contexts."[{12}](#) Our world is only a construction of our own perspective, an aesthetic creation. And it has its roots in the will to power, "the desire to perfect and transcend the self through the exercise of personal creative power rather than dependence on anything external." Thus, "Motivated by the will to power," he thought, "we devise metaphysical concepts—conceptions of 'truth'—that advance the cause of a certain species or people."[{13}](#)

This is the heart of postmodern thought, and it surrounds us today. We cannot know the truth about reality; we only know our own constructions of it. We can hope to convince others to join us in our beliefs, but there is no room for rational argumentation, because one's views about the world are no



better or worse than any others. As Stanley Grenz says, “all human interpretations—including the Christian worldview—are equally valid because all are equally invalid.”[\[14\]](#) No one can really know, so believe what you want. But in attacking the possibility of knowing truth, postmodernism has cut off the limb upon which it sits. One writer has noted that postmodernism has destroyed itself. “It has deconstructed its entire universe. So all that are left are pieces. All that remains to be done is to play with the pieces. Playing with the pieces—that is postmodern.”[\[15\]](#)

These, then, are the primary choices our society offers for considering the truth value of Christianity. Either we can affirm the modernist attitude and be satisfied only with scientific or mathematical certainty, or with the postmodernist we can throw the whole truth thing out the window.

## **Impossible Demands, Groundless Limitations: A Critique**

When challenged directly or indirectly by the world about the validity of our faith, what do we do? Do we continue to use modernistic ways of thinking to make a case for the faith, believing that we must provide logically certain proof? Or do we offer a postmodern, “true for me” argument relying on subjective matters which we use to persuade people to believe?[\[16\]](#) The answer lies in rejecting both the demands of modernism and the limitations of postmodernism.

*Neither Mathematical Certainty . . .*

In his book *Proper Confidence: Faith, Doubt, and Certainty in Christian Discipleship*, Lesslie Newbigin argues that the modern approach was essentially wrong-headed, that it called for something which was unattainable.

With respect to the insistence on mathematical certainty,

Newbigin notes first that this way of thinking takes us away from the real world rather than moving us closer to it. He says, "The certainty of mathematical propositions, as Einstein often observed, is strictly proportionate to their remoteness from reality."[\[17\]](#) For example, there is no such thing as a point as understood mathematically. Certainty belongs to the world of pure forms, not that of material things. "Only statements that can be doubted make contact with reality," he says.[\[18\]](#)

Second, thinkers in the Romantic period argued that "mathematical reason could not do justice to the fullness of human experience." Such things as art and music and cultural traditions can't be mapped out mathematically.[\[19\]](#)

Third, the ambition of dealing with facts apart from values or other non-factual biases is an impossible dream. We are never value-free in our thinking, even in the laboratory. As writers such as Thomas Kuhn and Michael Polanyi have shown (both of whom were scientists turned philosophers), what one studies and for what purpose, how one acts ethically in the lab and in the reporting of studies, what ones overall goals are for particular scientific work—all these reflect unproved value commitments; no one gives indubitable evidence for their validity. For all practical purposes it is impossible to remove such values held by faith.

In addition, I suggest that it isn't merely practically impossible to remove these faith/value commitments: it would be *wrong* to attempt to do so. One must always situate one's work in a framework of values to give it any significant meaning at all. Otherwise we are just acting, just doing things with no purpose to give coherence and direction.

Someone might object here that ones value commitments *can* be verified so as to render them no longer just faith commitments. To this Newbigin responds that faith is fundamental, even to doubt! For even doubt must rest on

beliefs which are not themselves doubted. This is because one doubts something because it conflicts with something else one already believes. If that prior belief is also subjected to the test of doubt, it, too, can only be doubted because of something else one believes, and so on. Further, if one's doubt itself is based upon certain criteria of truth, then those criteria themselves must be believed. If they, too, are subjected to doubt, then the criteria for evaluating *them* must be believed to be true criteria, and so on again. Of course, one could simply doubt everything—in other words, become a skeptic. But no one can live consistently as a skeptic. To get in a car and drive on the highway indicates that one believes the brakes will work. And we expect people to have a basic understanding of some normative moral values. Newbigin sums up: "One does not learn anything except by believing something, and—conversely—if one doubts everything one learns nothing. . . . Rational doubt always rests on faith and not vice versa."[\[20\]](#)

It's important to realize, too, that the mathematical model simply doesn't apply across the board. Few areas of our lives are governed by such a high standard. Christianity isn't just a set of ideas to be logically constructed and evaluated. It is a Person relating to persons in particular historical contexts. We can place no stricter demands on this relationship regarding the certainty of knowledge than we do on the relationships we experience with people on earth in particular historical contexts.

On the plus side, we *do* have a significant body of evidence supporting our belief including historical evidences, rational arguments, and matters of the human experience such as the question of meaning—things which can't be quantified and thus find no place in modernistic thought. We also have no reason to adopt the reductionistic naturalism of modernism just on modernists' say so, but rather recognize the reality of and intrusion of the supernatural into our world.

In addition, it must also be kept in mind that the truth of Christianity doesn't rest on the fragility of human reason, although it is through our minds that we recognize its truth. It rests on the faithfulness of God who has made Himself known to us.[{21}](#) Our assurance comes from the combination of knowing, believing, and following the One who is true, not just from working out logical arguments.

Thus, we conclude that beliefs do *not* have to be indubitable to be held as true—in fact, very little of what we know has indubitable certainty—and unproved values form a necessary part of our knowledge. Modernists are not justified in requiring us to conform to their narrow standards for rationality.

### *. . . Nor Postmodern Skepticism*

Although modernism was naïve in its expectations of reason, the reaction of postmodernism has been too severe.

In its reaction against modernism, postmodernism threw off the classical understanding of truth—namely, correspondence with reality. Having rejected the possibility of knowing what is real external to us, postmodernists have left us with only our own minds, wills, and words. Truth is the product of the creative activity of the individual.

But this clearly isn't the way we live. We assume that whenever we say something like, "It's raining outside," or even, "It's wrong to wantonly destroy the earth," we intend our words to reflect what really is the case.[{22}](#) Even the postmodernist will believe that injustice and oppression are wrong and shouldn't be tolerated. Otherwise, how would we know that one act is morally acceptable and another unacceptable, even across cultures?[{23}](#) Thus, we reveal that we believe truth is there and accessible. Is there any reason to think that spiritual beliefs can't also correspond with reality? I can't think of any, *unless* one simply presupposes that

spiritual realities can't be known.

What's more, we typically act as if we believe truth is *objective*, by which we mean that something really is the case apart from whether we believe it or not.[{24}](#) How can we meaningfully interact with the world around us if we don't think we can truly know it and not simply our individual or group construction of it?

Postmoderns' belief that there can be multiple and conflicting truths must be rejected also, for if truth is that which conforms to reality and reality itself cannot be contradictory, truth cannot be either. Either it is raining outside my window or it's not. It can't be doing both at the same time in the same location. Likewise, for example, either God exists or He doesn't. It can't be both.

Against postmodernism, we hold that there is no reason to think there *can't* be one explanation for all of reality *unless* one accepts a radical perspectivalism; i.e., that our beliefs are *only* our own perspectives and not reflections of reality itself. For the postmodernist to say this is to reveal that he assumes he has the inside scoop on ultimate reality which he claims no one has. This is therefore a faith commitment. Furthermore, there's no reason to think we can't know what the true explanation *is*, especially if the One who knows about it perfectly tells us.

Postmoderns also believe that truth is a construct of language. Because the meanings of words can vary, each linguistic group has its own truth. However, the fact that there are different words for the same thing doesn't change the fact that the referent is the same. We don't change the nature of something simply by changing the words we use for it. This is the weakness of what has been called "political correctness." It is thought, it seems, that by using different words for something we thereby change the thing itself. While a change of terminology might change our *attitude* about

something, it doesn't change that something itself.

Thus, we reject the skepticism of postmodernity and confidently rest on the faith we hold as describing the way things really are.

We believe that there is no reason to accept postmodern skepticism. Skepticism is ultimately unlivable, and we needn't spend our lives "playing with the pieces." There is no reason in principle to assume we *can't* know ultimate realities just because of our human limitations. It is arbitrary to simply decide God cannot reveal truth to us because of our limitations.

Further, there is no reason why there can't be one explanation of reality. The good news for postmodernists is that we *have* been met by the One who created the "story" of the world and is able to put the pieces together into a coherent whole. His is the one true explanation of reality. We deny that we are trapped behind our own perspectives, cut off from direct contact with reality, [{25}](#) and thus not able to "impose" truth on others. Truth is knowable and sharable.

Postmodernists believe that each person can only have his or her own "story" or life's situation, that each of us can only have his or her own little piece. We respond that we have a story that puts all the pieces together, a story which is coherent and consistent and which matches the nature of the needs of humanity. As we look around the world we see that we all are very much alike in our basic needs and aspirations. If there is such a thing as human nature and a human condition, it isn't unreasonable to think there could be one explanation of it.

### *Summary*

Modernism served to produce doubts through its insistence upon certain knowledge, and postmodernism produces doubt through its insistence that no one can really know ultimate truths.

Can we have confidence in the trustworthiness of our beliefs in the face of modernist and postmodernist ideas?

In response to doubts produced by modernism we look to Jesus, a historical Person who has revealed to us more than our reason is capable of discovering on its own. In response to doubts engendered by postmodernism, we look to Jesus the Creator of all and the final Word who has revealed to us ultimate truth. In him we find truth in its fullest sense, as the one who is real and trustworthy and who speaks. We can have confidence in our beliefs.

## Notes

1. Daniel Taylor, *The Myth of Certainty: The Reflective Christian and the Risk of Commitment* (Waco: Word Books, 1986), 18-19.

2. Ibid., 19.

3. Lesslie Newbigin, *Proper Confidence: Faith, Doubt, and Certainty in Christian Discipleship* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 20.

4. Carl F.H. Henry, *Remaking the Modern Mind* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1946), 22-23, 227-28.

5. For this reason Descartes has been called the father of modern philosophy. Dagobert D. Runes, ed., *Dictionary of Philosophy* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1983), s.v. "Descartes, Ren," by St. Elmo Nauman, Jr.

6. Stanley J. Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 66.

7. Ibid., 67. Grenz notes that "Descartes set the agenda for philosophy for the next three hundred years" by making human reason central.

8. Ibid., 64.
9. Ibid., 67.
10. Ibid., 88.
11. Ibid., 89.
12. Ibid., 90.
13. Ibid., 92.
14. Ibid., 164,
15. Jean Baudrillard, quoted in Douglas Groothuis, *Truth Decay: Defending Christianity Against the Challenges of Postmodernism* (Downers Grove, Ill.: 2000), 169.
16. There are some who believe we can put to use some of the perspectives of postmodernism, but it would take us too far afield of our subject to develop that now. For our purposes, I'm only concerned with the central skepticism of postmodernism.
17. Newbigin, 51.
18. Ibid., 52.
19. Ibid., 31.
20. Ibid., 24, 25.
21. Ibid., 67.
22. For a recent study on truth in relation to postmodernism, see Groothuis, *Truth Decay*.
23. Alister McGrath, *A Passion for Truth: The Intellectual Coherence of Evangelicalism* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 197-199.
24. Against modernism, however, we can affirm that believing



in objective truth doesn't require that there be no non-provable elements involved in coming to know truth.

25. Trevor Hart, *Faith Thinking: The Dynamics of Christian Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1995), 63.

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## **“Help! My Doubts Scare Me!”**

Dear Sue Bohlin,

Hello. My name is \_\_\_\_\_. I e-mailed Ray earlier too. Anyways, I was reading an e-mail discussion you had with somebody, who didn't believe in God. You said something in it about how it's not an intellect issue, but a heart issue. This is hard for me to accept. I'm ashamed admitting this, but oh gosh its hard for me to admit. Maybe I won't. I could say that I don't believe in God, but that just sounds way too harsh. Have you heard of anybody who was a Christian, but then they began to have doubts and became agnostic? That's how I feel. I asked Jesus into my heart when I was younger (I'm 18 now), but for a long time I've just been so skeptical. I guess I'm not a Christian, because a Christian knows that he or she is one, and I don't. I don't know how to express what I've been going through lately. Everyday I think about my doubt and it depresses me. I'm not sure if I'll ever get rid of it and that scares me. I desire to believe in God so much, but it's hard. I have so many questions. I wonder why God doesn't show himself to me so I know for sure that He is there. I don't know. Maybe He has but it's just not enough. Maybe I don't have enough faith.

Another thing that really doesn't help me is some of the stuff

that I have read on the internet. Different books that I've read about have caused me to have even more doubt. Have you heard of *The Bible Unearthed...*, or *The Jesus Puzzle...*? I haven't read any of them, but read reviews. Anyways, the second one I think denies that Jesus was a historical person. That really bothers me. Earlier today I was reading something on the web where this person was being critical of Lee Strobel (who wrote *The Case for Christ*). I really like that book (not done with it yet), but after what I read on the internet about it, I wonder if it really shows that Jesus was a historical person. I don't know. Maybe I just let other people's conflicting views on Christianity get to me too much, but after reading these things, I start to wonder if maybe they are correct on what they are arguing.

Anyways, to me, my problem doesn't seem to be a heart issue because I really would like to believe in God. I desire to believe in Him and live for Him, but it's hard. Is there something that I lack? Do I just not have enough faith? I don't know, maybe I don't. Well I think I've made this long enough. If there's any advice you could give me I would appreciate it. Maybe you could pray for me. Thanks a lot.

I know you don't know me, but I REALLY wish I could reach through this computer screen and put my arms around you and give you a big hug and tell you IT'S GOING TO BE OK!!!!!! It is so OK to have doubts, to wonder about where you stand spiritually, because, at 18, you are at the point you need to be—deciding for yourself what you should keep and what you should jettison of what you have been taught. You are an adult now but you probably don't feel that you have enough information to make an informed, committed adult choice about something as important as eternal destiny and one's relationship with God!

Good news—lots of other people are also in your shoes. But they don't ask for help, and bless you, you did, and there IS help for you!! There are good answers, and you'll be stronger

and more confident for having voiced your doubts and questions, once you're on the other side of this spiritual crisis. It's OK, \_\_\_\_\_. . . .God is walking through it with you.

*I guess I'm not a Christian, because a Christian knows that he or she is one, and I don't.*

Well, no, actually that's not true. Many Christians have assurance that we are Christians, and many Christians fervently *hope* they are but they're not sure. That's an important issue all by itself: can we *know* we're saved and going to heaven? Can we lose our salvation? Our founder and first president, Jimmy Williams, addressed this issue in one of [his e-mails](#).

*I don't know how to express what I've been going through lately. Everyday I think about my doubt and it depresses me. I'm not sure if I'll ever get rid of it and that scares me.*

I wish you could see God's heart as He watches you wrestle with your doubts and fears. He loves you so much (man, I feel like Monica on *Touched by an Angel* here!) and is very tender toward you as you experience these strong and scary emotions. I understand your fear that you'll never get rid of the doubt. But doubt is like darkness—you don't overcome it by pushing it away, you make it go away by bringing in light. As you seek light and truth and to know what is really true and real, God will show you the light. I am so grateful that you came to us at Probe instead of some New Age "all religions are the same" website!

*I desire to believe in God so much, but it's hard. I have so many questions. I wonder why God doesn't show himself to me so I know for sure that He is there. I don't know. Maybe He has but it's just not enough. Maybe I don't have enough faith.*

What's important isn't the amount or strength of our faith,

but the *object* of our faith. God is strong enough to handle your doubts and to show you, in ways so intimate you will know it's HIM, that He is real and He loves you very much.

*Another thing that really doesn't help me is some of the stuff that i have read on the internet. Different books that I've read about have caused me to have even more doubt. Have you heard of The Bible Unearthed..., or The Jesus Puzzle...? I haven't read any of them, but read reviews. Anyways, the second one I think denies that Jesus was a historical person. That really bothers me.*

With good reason. Some of the best Christian apologetics books started out with the author's intention to disprove Christianity, and the facts overwhelmed the skeptics into belief. The entire world was affected by the life of Jesus Christ, in one way or another, but He didn't exist? Now THAT takes a lot of faith!

*Earlier today I was reading something on the web where this person was being critical of Lee Strobel (who wrote The Case for Christ). I really like that book (not done with it yet), but after what I read on the internet about it, I wonder if it really shows that Jesus was a historical person.*

Did you know Lee Strobel started out as an atheist? I'm glad you're reading it; it was a wise choice. So is his second book, *The Case for Faith*. I found this statement from him in an interview online: "I have found that the testimony of history points compellingly toward Jesus Christ having returned from the dead in the ultimate authentication of His claim to be God. To me faith in Jesus is not blind or irrational. I have so much independent evidence that the New Testament writings are reliable that I would be swimming upstream against the evidence if I were to follow the teachings of the Koran or the Book of Mormon. The more I subject the New Testament to analysis, the more I pepper it with questions, the more I walk away utterly convinced of its

trustworthiness.”

*I don't know. Maybe I just let other people's conflicting views on Christianity get to me too much, but after reading these things, I start to wonder if maybe they are correct on what they are arguing.*

Just about every truth, especially those of eternal importance, will be countered with something counterfeit, because we're in a very real battle for our minds and souls. It's unfortunate that the counter-arguments can *appear* so compelling, but the issue is ultimate truth. Right now, you're on the right track in seeking truth and desiring to sort through the clamoring voices that attack it.

*Anyways, to me, my problem doesn't seem to be a heart issue because I really would like to believe in God. I desire to believe in Him and live for Him, but its hard. Is there something that I lack? Do I just not have enough faith? I don't know, maybe I don't.*

It's been said that the Christian life isn't hard, it's IMPOSSIBLE. You can't live for God in your own strength—not for any length of time, anyway, without burning out and getting majorly discouraged. The secret is to allow Jesus to live His life through you by yielding to Him. That, by the way, is one of the things that sets Christianity apart from every other religion: God inside us, offering to live His life through us, without any loss of our own individuality. But right now, the big issue is what to do with your head/heart conflict. Fortunately, there is a PERFECT book that I believe will make all the difference in the world to you.

It's called [\*Making Your Faith Your Own: A Guidebook for Believers With Questions\*](#) by Teresa Vining. I was privileged to read Teresa's manuscript and LOVED her book. One of its strengths is that she was in the exact place you are now, and she takes you through the questions AND the answers, and

suggests you keep a journal as you work through the book so you can decide what you believe and commit to, and what you're not willing to. It is a terrific book on apologetics, and she is very respectful of the person with questions and doubts. I think you will love this book too.

*Well I think I've made this long enough. If there's any advice you could give me I would appreciate it. Maybe you could pray for me.*

I'd like to pray for you right now!

Father, I lift up \_\_\_\_\_ to You and I thank You for her intellect and her honesty in facing her doubts and questions. Thank You that You are not in the least bit troubled by them because You know You are real and true and able to take her through this time to a point where she will know beyond a shadow of a doubt that YOU ARE. I ask You to send her little intimate glimpses of You and open her eyes so she'll know it's You saying "Hi." I ask that You give her a peace when she's pursuing truth and give her an uncomfortable restlessness when she's moving toward the darkness and deception that would seek to draw her away from You. Lord, I thank You for Your hand on \_\_\_\_\_'s life and on her heart and on her mind, and by faith I thank You for taking her to the place where she will joyfully serve You with all three. Lord, make her feel loved and protected and cherished by You.

In Jesus' name,  
Amen.

Hope this helps, dear one!

Sue

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# Sheep Among Wolves

## What's the Problem?

In Colossians 2:8, Paul states that a Christian should . . .

*See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deception, according to the tradition of men, according to the elementary principles of the world, rather than according to Christ.*

Paul's words have particular application for the Christian student who is about to engage in the intellectual and social combat that can be found on many of our college campuses. Our higher educational institutions are often incubators for non-Christian thought and life. Christian students must be advised to be prepared. Too many of them are "taken captive." Consider these few examples:

- *A sociology professor asked her students, "How many of you believe abortion is wrong? Stand up." Five students stood. She told them to continue standing. She then asked, "Of you five, how many believe it is wrong to distribute condoms in middle schools?" One was left standing. The professor left this godly young lady standing in silence for a long time and then told her she wanted to talk with her after class. During that meeting the student was told if she persisted in such beliefs she would have a great deal of difficulty receiving her certification as a social worker.*

- *During the first meeting of an architecture class at a large state university the students were told to lie on the floor. The professor then turned off the lights and taught them to meditate. (Be assured they were not meditating on Scripture.)*

- *At a church-related university a professor stated, "Communism is definitely superior to any other political-economic system."*
- *In an open declaration on the campus at Harvard, the university chaplain announced he is homosexual.*
- *When asked how he responds to students who confess strong Christian convictions, a professor stated, "If they don't know what and why they believe, I will change them."*
- *In a university dormitory crowded with over 100 students I declared that Jesus is the only way to God. Many of the students expressed their strong disagreement and anger. One student was indignant because he realized my statement concerning Christ logically meant that his belief in a Native American deity was wrong. Even some Christian students were uncomfortable. They had uneasiness about it because it seemed too intolerant.*

These are but a few of many illustrations and statistics that could be cited as indication of contemporary college life. The ideas that are espoused on many of our campuses can understandably bewilder the Christian student. What can be done to help them in their preparation? In this article I will offer some suggestions that can serve to give them guidance.

## **Develop a Christian Worldview**

A critical component in the arsenal of any Christian heading off to college is to develop a Christian worldview. Everyone has a world view whether they have thought about it or not. To understand how important a worldview is consider a jigsaw puzzle with thousands of pieces. In order to put the puzzle together you need to see the picture on the box top. You need to know what the puzzle will look like when you finish it. If you only had the pieces and no box top, you would probably experience a great deal of frustration. You may not even want



to begin the task, much less finish it. The box top gives you a guide and helps you put together the “pieces” of life.

The box top in a Christian worldview is provided by the revealed truth of the Bible. The Bible contains the correct picture to help us assemble the individual pieces we encounter in life. Other world views will always get some portion of the picture right, but a few important pieces will always seem out of place. It’s important for a young Christian college student to have some idea of which pieces are out of place in other worldviews as well as a foundational understanding of a Christian worldview.

Essentially a worldview is a set of assumptions or presuppositions we hold about the basic make-up of our universe that influences everything we do and say. For instance, within a Christian world view we wake up in the morning assuming that God exists and that He cares about what happens to you.

There are four essential truths that help us evaluate different worldviews.

The first truth is that *something exists*. This may seem obvious, but many people aren’t sure. Many forms of pantheism argue that the material world is just an illusion. The only reality is spiritual. If this were actually the case, then physical consequences wouldn’t matter. However, I have yet to find a pantheist who is willing to perform their meditation on a railroad track without knowing the train schedule.

The second truth is that *all people have absolutes*. There are always some things that people recognize as true, all the time. For Christians, God is the ultimate reference point to determine truth. Even the statement, “There are no absolutes!” is to declare absolutely that there are no absolutes.

Third, *truth is something that can’t be both true and false at the same time*. This is critical in our current time. A

contemporary idea is that all religions are the same. This sounds gracious, but it's nonsense. While various religions can often have some elements in common, if they differ in the crucial areas of creation, sin, salvation, heaven, and hell, then the similarities are what is trivial, not the differences.

Last, we need to realize that *all people exercise faith*. What matters is the object of our faith. We all use faith to operate through the day. We exercise faith every time we take medication. We assume it will help us and not harm us. Carl Sagan's famous statement that "The cosmos is all that is, or ever was, or ever will be" is a statement of naturalistic faith not scientific truth.

## **Take Ownership of Beliefs**

Parents need to help their student headed off to college to take ownership of their faith. Too often Christian young people spend their pre-college years repeating phrases and doctrines without intellectual conviction. They need to go beyond clichés. A few of us at Probe have questioned Christian high school students about their faith by posing as an atheistic college professor. When pressed to explain why they believe as they do, the responses get rather embarrassing. They'll say, "That's what my parents taught me," or "That's what I've always heard," or "I was raised that way," or "That's what my pastor said."

If this is the best a student can do, they are simply grist for the mill. They are easily ground down to dust. Paul wrote to young Timothy saying, "Continue in the things you have learned and become convinced of, knowing from whom you have learned them" (2 Tim. 3:14). Timothy was taught by his mother, grandmother, and Paul. He not only learned about his faith from them, but he became convinced that it was true.

This means you are to know not just what you believe but also

why. Ask yourself or your student why he or she is a Christian? If this question stumps you, you've got some thinking and exploring to do. The apostle Peter said to always be prepared to give a defense to anyone who asks for an account of the hope that is in you. (1 Peter 3:15)

Peter wrote that we are always to be ready, and we are to respond to everyone who asks. These are all-encompassing words that indicate the importance of the task of apologetics. If the student is going to live and think as a Christian on campus he will be asked to defend his faith. Such an occasion will not be nearly as threatening if he or she has been allowed to ask their own questions and have received answers from their home or church.

For instance, how would you answer these questions if someone who really wants to know asked them of you? "Is there really a God?" "Why believe in miracles?" "How accurate is the Bible?" "Is Christ the only way to God?" "Is there any truth in other religions?"

Such questions are legitimate and skeptics deserve honest answers to their tough questions. How they receive the answer is between God and them. Our responsibility is to provide the answers as best as we can in a loving manner. To say, "I don't know, I just believe," will leave the impression that Christianity is just a crutch and therefore only for the weak and feeble-minded.

## **The Mind Is Important**

A student needs to understand that the mind is important in a Christian's life. In fact, a Christian is required to use his mind if he desires to know more of God and His works among us. The acts of reading and studying Scripture certainly require mental exercise. Even if a person can't read, he still has to use his mind to respond to what is taught from Scripture. For example, Jesus responded to a scribe by stating the most

important commandment:

*Hear O Israel; the Lord our God is one Lord; and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength. (Mark 12:29-30)*

The use of our mind refers not only to Scripture. We need to abolish the sacred/secular barrier many of us have erected. Colossians 3:17 says, "And whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to Him through God the Father." Paul pretty much covers it. It's hard to come up with anything additional after using the words "whatever" and "all." This includes our academic studies.

The first chapter of Daniel offers amazing insights into this issue. Daniel and his friends were taught everything that the "University of Babylon" could offer them; they graduated with highest honors and with their faith strengthened. God honored them in the task and even gave them the knowledge they needed to grapple with Babylonian ideas. (Daniel 1:17, 20)

If Daniel's situation is applied to a contemporary Christian student's life, there is an important lesson to be learned. That is, the young Jewish boys learned and understood what they were taught, but that does not mean they believed it. Many students have asked how to respond on papers and exams that include ideas they don't believe. As with Daniel and his peers, they should demonstrate their understanding to the best of their ability, but they cannot be forced to believe it. Understanding and believing are not necessarily the same thing. But a certain level of understanding is crucial in knowing where these ideas fail to meet reality.

If Christian students have also been allowed to ask questions at home and at church, then they can apply the lessons learned by asking questions of those of differing faiths. This will allow them to expose the inconsistencies of these competing

worldviews in a respectful manner.

Many Christian students enter an ungodly educational arena every year. They should be encouraged with the understanding that God's truth will prevail, as it did for Daniel and his friends. For all truth is God's truth.

## **How Do We Teach these Things?**

Coming to the end of our discussion on preparing students to defend their faith in college, you may be asking, "How can I apply some of these suggestions in my life with students?" The following ideas are offered with the belief that you can use your imagination and arrive at even better ones.

First do role-plays with your students occasionally. This can be done either with an individual or a group.

For example, as alluded to previously, find someone from outside your church or school that the students don't know. This person should have a working knowledge of the ways non-Christians think. Introduce him to the group as a college professor researching the religious beliefs of high school students.

[The "professor"](#) should begin to ask them a series of blunt questions regarding their beliefs. The idea is to challenge every cliché the students may use in their responses. Nothing is to be accepted without definition or elaboration. After ten minutes or so, reveal who the professor really is and assure them he is a Christian. Then go over some of the answers and begin to reveal what they could have said.

This would also be good time to implement a second suggestion, and that is to teach a special course on apologetics for upper high school students. You've definitely got their attention now and they will be much more attentive.

Another idea is if you live near a college or university, ask

to be put on their mailing list for upcoming lectures from visiting scholars. After attending one of these lectures, discuss it with your student. See if they can identify the speaker's worldview and where what they said conflicts with a Christian worldview. This would also be a good place to model asking good questions if a question and answer period is allowed.

When considering a college or university, the student should not only visit the campus to investigate campus life but also the intellectual atmosphere. Visit with representatives of a local college ministry or a Christian faculty member and inquire of their opinion of the likely intellectual challenges they can expect to find. This would also be a good opportunity to ask about resources available for Christian students who face challenges in the classroom.

Finally, consider sending your student to a Probe [\*Mind Games\*](#) Conference. A schedule of all our upcoming conferences is available on our website at [www.probe.org](http://www.probe.org). Just click on the *Mind Games* button on the home page to open a menu of information on our conferences. Or better yet, organize one of these conferences in your own community. Probe travels around the country in order to help youth, college students, their parents, and the church at large prepare for contemporary life.

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## A (Not So) Brief Defense of

# Christianity

## Faith

Everybody has faith. From the meticulous scientist to the most irrational religious fanatic, everyone believes in something, and everyone acts on that belief somehow. The question is not whether we WILL have faith; it is whether or not the things we believe are true. Unfortunately, many people never evaluate the basis for their beliefs. They go with the flow of society, which today is dominated by the idea of *religious pluralism*. Religious pluralism means that we look at one another's beliefs and in effect say, "I'm OK and you're OK." A remark often heard, especially on campus is, "I don't think it really makes much difference what you believe as long as you're sincere."

## Truth

Many of us are hesitant or feel it's wrong to make distinctions between people or their ideas. This is because we feel it is arrogant, exclusionary, undemocratic, or socially inappropriate. We want people to like us, so we try not to be disagreeable. Ironically, this very pluralistic environment creates a hesitancy to express personal convictions for fear of offending another. In reality, this creates an atmosphere where all views held are of equal value and are therefore "true." It also may explain why so many people today regard themselves as atheists or agnostics. Viewing so many "religious" options which profess to be THE truth, they become agnostics or atheists, disclaiming the religious idea of "faith" altogether. Some militant atheists propose philosophical and scientific "proofs" to explain away the existence of God, hoping to convince others logically. Other atheists and agnostics have not come to their beliefs logically, but rather believe what they do simply because they prefer or are more comfortable with it.

## The Need for Apologetics

A committed, thinking Christians desire must be to challenge that complacency. If there is such a thing as truth, and if different worldviews do contradict one another, then we need to make sure that the one we choose is the right one and that we have good reasons for believing it to be so. Further, 1 Peter 3:15 tells us that we are to be ready always to give a “defense” (*apologia*), to give answers, reasons for why we believe as we do. This particular outline is designed to provide some of those answers: thus, the title, “A Brief Defense of Christianity.” There are three primary reasons why such apologetical information is important:

1. The religious pluralism rampant in our culture demands it. Many today are spiritually hungry and looking for truth in a culture of “isms” very similar to what we find in the Graeco-Roman world of the New Testament. It was in this kind of cultural environment that Christianity came, flourished, and ultimately dominated Western Civilization for 15 centuries. It has been said that Christianity prevailed because the first Christians “out-thought” and “out-loved” the ancient world. Many contemporary Christians are so enamored of having a personal “experience” with God in the safety of their various religious enclaves they have little time left to defend the faith and convert the pagans. *Mind Games* is designed to help us better connect with the wider world through solid thinking and loving care.

2. In the light of Peter’s admonition above, Christians are to prepare themselves to share their faith with others and help remove the obstacles to faith which hinder some non-Christians from giving serious consideration to Christ and His claims upon their lives. Apologetics can help remove these obstacles and demonstrate the “reasonableness” of Christianity.

3. Apologetics can also serve to strengthen the faith of young Christians as well as provide them with the discernment



necessary to identify and counter non-Christian thinking and worldviews. This enhances personal spiritual growth and better equips the Christian for more effective evangelism. Finally, we noted above that EVERYONE has faithatheist, agnostic, and Christian. The real issue is not to have faith, but rather to have a worthy OBJECT for our faith. As you walk out on a frozen pond, which would you prefer, a LITTLE faith in a sheet of ice two-feet thick, or a LOT of faith in 1/4 inch of ice? Faith is important, but the object of our faith is all-important. The material in this outline is designed to help assure you that to stand upon Christ and the world view which He taught is to rest upon an object most worthy of your faith. To demonstrate this, we are going to ask and then answer some basic questions concerning the truthfulness of the Christian faith.

## **SECTION I: THEISM**

### **What is the most reasonable worldview?**

#### **Metaphysical options**

We have stated that the most basic philosophical question is not that NOTHING is here, but rather SOMETHING IS HERE, and it demands explanation. I am a part of some kind of reality. I have consciousness. Something is happening and I am part of it. Where did it come from? Did everything come from nothing? Or has the material universe always been here and things just accidentally got started? Or is there something or someone that transcends the material universe and is responsible for bringing it into being, and us with it? All of these questions relate to the philosophical concept of *metaphysics*. Webster defines it thusly: "That division of philosophy which includes ontology, or the science of being, and cosmology, or the science of the fundamental causes and processes in things."

When we seek to answer these basic questions, then, we are

thinking “metaphysically,” thinking about the origin and causes of the present reality. And we really have few options, or possible answers to consider:

1. The idea that “something came from nothing.” (Most reject this view, since the very idea defies rationality).

2. The idea that matter is eternal and capable of producing the present reality through blind chance. This second view has spawned two basic worldviews: *Materialism* (or *Naturalism*) and *Pantheism*. Both hold to the idea that nothing exists beyond matter. Materialism is therefore atheistic by definition. Pantheism is similar with the exception that since God does not exist, nature becomes “god” in all its parts.

3. The idea that Someone both transcends and did create the material universe of which we are a part (*Theism*). THERE ARE NO OTHER LOGICAL EXPLANATIONS. Christians of course would embrace this third view, theism, as the most reasonable explanation for what we believe AND for what we find to be true in ourselves and in reality at large. These ideas will be developed more fully in the section on the arguments for the existence of God.

In order to argue for the truth of Christianity, therefore, we must begin with the existence of God. Christianity is a theistic religion. That is, we believe that there is one God who created all things. This is not simply a statement of blind faith. There are sound and rational reasons for preferring this view above the others. We will begin to explore those, but first, let’s briefly evaluate atheism and agnosticism.

## **Atheism and Agnosticism**

### ***Atheism***

Ever since the “Enlightenment” in the eighteenth century, philosophers have argued that ALL of reality is to be observed

only in space and time. Any notion of a God who is transcendent, eternal, and not bound by natural laws has been largely rejected as “unscientific” or “unproveable.” Since we cannot “prove” the existence or the non-existence of God, they reason, there is no real benefit or practical value in considering theism as a metaphysical option. An atheist is a person who makes the bold assertion, “There is no God.” It is bold because it claims in an absolute manner what we have just said was not possible: i.e., the existence or non-existence of God cannot be proven. It is also bold because in order to make such an assertion, the atheist would have to be God himself. He would need to possess the qualities and capabilities to travel the entire universe and examine every nook and cranny of the material world before he would even begin to be qualified to come to such a dogmatic conclusion.

The most brilliant, highly-educated, widely-traveled human on earth today, having maximized his/her brain cells at optimum learning levels for a lifetime could not possibly “know” 1/1000th of all that *could* be known; and knowledge is now *doubling* by the years rather than by decades or centuries! Is it possible that God could still exist outside this very limited, personal/knowledge experience of one highly intelligent human being? By faith, the atheist says, “No.” Another curious thing about the atheist is that before he can identify himself as one, he must first *acknowledge* the very idea, or concept, or possibility of God so he can then *deny* His existence! David saw the fallacy of this long ago when he said, “Only the fool has said in his heart, ‘there is no God.’” (Psalm 14:1). (Note: For those who desire additional, more formal material on the existence of God, see the Appendix at the end of this outline, where this subject is addressed in greater detail by such philosophers as Anthony Flew, Ludwig Feuerbach, and David Hume). [Editor’s note: Anthony Flew disavowed his atheism in 2005 after grappling with the impossibility of DNA arising from purely naturalistic, random forces.]

## ***Agnosticism***

By definition, agnosticism takes the position that “neither the existence nor the nature of God, nor the ultimate origin of the universe is known or knowable” (Webster). Here again are some bold statements. The agnostic says, “You can’t know.” What he really means is, “I can’t know, you can’t know, and nobody can know.” Leith Samuel in his little book, *Impossibility of Agnosticism*, mentions three kinds of agnostics:

1. *Dogmatic*. “I don’t know, you don’t know, and no one can know.” Here is a person who already has his mind made up. He has the same problem as the atheist above he must know everything in order to say it dogmatically.
2. *Indifferent*. “I don’t know, and I don’t care.” God will never reveal Himself to someone who does not care to know.
3. *Dissatisfied*. “I don’t know, but I’d like to know.” Here is a person who demonstrates an openness to truth and is willing to change his position if he has sufficient reason to do so. He is also demonstrating what should be true about agnosticism, that is, for one who is searching for truth, agnosticism should be temporary, a path on the way to a less skeptical view of life.

## **Theism**

Those who have not found atheism and agnosticism philosophically, scientifically, or personally satisfying may, at some time in their lives consider the third alternative, that of theism. They may come to ask our next question:

### **“Is it reasonable to believe that God exists?”**

Theism is a reasonable idea. Theologians have traditionally used several philosophical proofs in arguing for the existence of God. These arguments are not always persuasive, but that

probably says as much about us as it does about the arguments. People most often reject God for reasons other than logic. These arguments, however, do provide insights that, while not PROVING the existence of God, do provide insights that may be used to show EVIDENCE of His existence.

## **The Cosmological Argument**

The cosmological argument is quite similar to one that the Bible uses in Psalm 19, Psalm 8, and Romans 1. The existence of the "cosmos," the creation, strongly suggests the existence of a Creator. Central to this argument is the following proposition: If anything now exists, something must be eternal. Otherwise, something not eternal must have emerged from nothing. If something exists right now, it must have come from something else, come from nothing, or always existed. If it came from something else, then that something else must have come from nothing, always existed, or come from something else itself. Ultimately, either something has always existed, or at some point something came into being from nothing.

Someone may argue that it is possible that nothing now exists. That is both absurd and self-defeating, because someone must personally exist in order to make the statement that nothing exists. Therefore it is undeniable that we ourselves exist.

Therefore, if I exist, then something must be eternal. If something is eternal, it is then either an eternal being or an eternal universe. Scientific evidence strongly suggests that the universe is not eternal, but that it had a beginning. In addition, if the non-personal universe is that which is eternal, one must explain the presence of personal creatures within that universe. How does personal come from non-personal? If something is eternal and personal while the universe is finite and non-personal, then there must be an eternal being. If there is an eternal being, that being must by definition have certain characteristics. He must have always existed, and he must be the ultimate cause of all that

we can see. He must possess infinite knowledge, or else he himself would be limited, not eternal. Similarly, he must possess infinite power and an unchanging nature.

We do not have to go very far with these arguments to realize that we are describing the God of the Bible. One of the questions asked most frequently concerning this cosmological argument is, "Where did God come from?" While it is reasonable to ask this question about the universe, since as stated above, the strongest evidence argues for a universe which had a beginning. Asking that same question of God is irrational, since it implies of Him something found only in the finite universe: time. By definition, something eternal must exist outside both time and space. God has no beginning; He IS (Exod. 3:14).

## **The Teleological Argument**

Another philosophical argument for the existence of God is the teleological argument. This comes from the Greek word *telos*, meaning "end" or "goal." The idea behind this argument is that the observable order in the universe demonstrates that it functions according to an intelligent design. The classic expression of this argument is William Paley's analogy of the watchmaker in his book, *Evidences*. If we were walking on a beach and found a watch in the sand, we would not assume that it washed up on the shore having been formed through the natural processes of the sea. We would assume that it had been lost by its owner and that somewhere there was a watchmaker who had designed it and built it with a specific purpose.

Some evolutionists maintain that the argument from design has been invalidated by the theory of natural selection. Richard Dawkins, a scientist at Oxford, even speaks of evolution as "The Blind Watchmaker," saying that it brings order without purpose. However, the theory of evolution faces major obstacles in scientific circles to this day, and it is grossly inadequate in its explanation of the ordered species of

animals in this world. The best explanation for the order and complexity that we see in nature is that the divine Designer created it with a purpose and maintains all things by the word of His power (Heb. 1:3; Col. 1:17).

## **The Moral Argument**

The moral argument recognizes humankind's universal and inherent sense of right and wrong (cf. Rom. 2:14,15) and says this comes from more than societal standards. All cultures recognize honesty as a virtue along with wisdom, courage, and justice. These are thought of as absolutes, but they cannot be absolute standards apart from an absolute authority! The changeless character of God is the only true source of universal moral principles; otherwise all morality would be relative to culture preferences (See ["Rights and Wrongs"](#) outline). Each of these arguments follows the same basic pattern. What we see in the creation must have come from a sufficient cause. This is the argument of Romans 1, and it is the argument used by Paul in Acts 14 and 17. God has provided us with a witness to Himself in the creation, and we are called upon to believe in Him on the basis of what we have seen Him do: "For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so they are without excuse" (Rom. 1:20).

## **Pantheism**

Pantheism offers a self-defeating alternative. Pantheism is the belief that all is god. Pantheists maintain that there are no real distinctions between persons, creatures, or objects; that all is divine. For many years, the only pantheists most of us would have been exposed to were Buddhists. However, with the rise of the New Age movement, which is extremely pantheistic, pantheism has become a very popular worldview in North America. The hope of pantheism is an irrational one. Evil is regarded as an illusion, however real it may seem, and

the cruel actions of others are attributed to their misunderstanding, or non-enlightenment. Shirley MacLaine, an actress who has been one of the most popular spokespersons for the New Age movement, writes, "There is no such thing as evil or good. There is only enlightened awareness or ignorance."

Since all is one and all is divine, there are no real contradictions. There are no black-and-white distinctions between truth and falsity. Instead, reality consists of that which seems contradictory, but really is not. Buddhists are sometimes encouraged to meditate on "the sound of one hand clapping." There can be no sound with just one hand, and that's the point. For the pantheist, reality is irrational. Since there are not distinctions and all is divine according to pantheists, Shirley MacLaine and others believe themselves to be perfectly justified in declaring, "I am God." This "realization" is thought to be the key to unlocking one's true potential, for to realize you are God is to realize that you have no finite limitations. But that is the precise problem with the claim. If God does not have limited knowledge and abilities, why would we have to grow in knowledge if we are God? Why would we even have to come to the conclusion that we are divine? If we are unlimited, why are we so limited that we do not always realize we are unlimited? If New Age pantheism violates reason, as it obviously and admittedly does, then how can it be defended? We are told that the concepts cannot be adequately comprehended apart from one's personal experience of them, but the fact is that reality is logical. To argue that logic does not apply to reality would be self-defeating, because one cannot make the claim without using logic. Reality IS logical, and there are distinctions in our world. I am not you, and you are not me. Common sense tells us that as we converse. The pantheistic option, then, is both illogical and self-defeating. It is tragic that it has become such a popular viewpoint in our day.



## **The Possibility of God**

Some five hundred years ago the rise of modern science initiated a process we could call the “demythologizing of nature,” the material world. Superstition and ignorance had ascribed spirit life to forest, brook, and mountain. Things that were not understood scientifically were routinely designated as the hand of supernatural forces at work.

### **Theistic Skepticism**

Slowly, the mysterious, the spiritual dimension was drained away as scholars and scientists provided natural explanations and theories for how and why things worked quite apart from supernatural forces. Man and earth were now no longer at the center of the universe with the sun, the planets, and the stars revolving around this uniquely important globe. Human significance diminished in the vastness of the cosmos, and only time, not God, was needed to explain the totality of the natural order.

### **Re-emergence of the Spiritual**

Ironically, the same science which took God away then, is bringing the possibility of His existence back today. Physics and quantum mechanics have now brought us to the edge of physicality, to the extent that the sub-atomic particle structure is described by some as characterized more as spirit, ghost-like in quality. Neurophysiologists grapple with enigmatic observations which suggest that the mind transcends the brain. Psychology has developed an entirely new branch of study (parapsychology) which postulates that psycho-spiritual forces (ESP, Biofeedback, etc.) beyond the physical realm actually function. Molecular biologists and geneticists, faced with the highly-ordered and complex structures of DNA, ascribed a word implying “intelligence” to the chaining sequences: “the genetic CODE.” Astrophysics has settled on the “Big Bang theory,” one which seems to contradict the idea that

matter is eternal, but rather that the universe had a definite beginning. Huge as it is, the universe appears to be finite.

### **The Reasonability of Theism**

It certainly seems more reasonable to believe that God exists than to suggest the alternatives explored above. And this brings us to the next important question.

## **III. If God does exist, how could we know He is there?**

### **Introduction**

Herbert Spencer, an agnostic, once pointed out that no bird ever flew out of the heavens and therefore concluded that man cannot know God." What Spencer is saying is that man in his finiteness, like the bird, can only go so far and no farther. There is a ceiling, a veil which separates us from God, and we are helpless to penetrate it from our side and find Him. Tennessee Williams, in his drama, "Sweet Bird of Youth," was making the same point when his character, the "Heckler," comes on stage and says, "I believe that the long silence of God, the absolute speechlessness of Him is a long, long and awful thing that the world is lost because of, and I think that it is yet to be broken to any man." These statements hit on a crucial point of epistemology (how we know). If God does not exist, then knowing can come to us only through one of two avenues: experience (empiricism) or reason (rationalism).

### **The Possibility of Revelation**

What both of these men are saying is simply that if God does exist, man cannot make contact with Him through any effort of his own. But both have forgotten one other very important possibility. If God exists and so desires, would He be able to penetrate the veil from HIS side and make His presence known? Of course He could. The next question would logically be, "Has

He ever done so?" Christians would answer a resounding, "Yes!" God did so in the Person of Jesus Christ. "The Word Who was with God and was God became flesh and dwelt among us and we beheld His glory" (John 1:1,14). Theologically, this event is called the Incarnation. If true, humans have an additional source of knowing truthrevelation.

## Who Was Jesus?

There have been many great and outstanding men and women of history. But Christian and non-Christian alike would have to agree that Jesus of Nazareth has had the greatest and most far-reaching impact on earth than any person who ever walked the planet. One anonymous writer said,

*All the armies that ever marched,  
all the navies that ever sailed,  
all the parliaments that have ever sat, put together,  
have not affected life on this planet as much as has that  
One Solitary Life.*

What do we really know about this Jesus? Some think Him merely a man, the founder of a religion, like Muhammad or Zoroaster. Others believe He lived, but His followers embellished the story and made a god out of him. Or they postulate that He was either a clever "con man" who purposefully engineered His personal circumstances toward Messianic ends, or a paranoid schizophrenic with "delusions of grandeur." Still others don't even believe He was ever an historical person. For them Jesus is a mythological figure. Before we can examine His Person, His Work, and His extraordinary claim to be the Son of God in human flesh, we must first determine if He every actually lived, and if so, what can the source materials tell us about the kind of man He was and about the things He did or said.

# Was Jesus a Historical Person?

## Introduction

Let us begin by saying that Christianity is rooted in history. Christ's birth was counted in a Roman census, and his death was no doubt recorded in the Roman Archives. What do we know about Him? We are solely dependent upon the accuracy and the validity of the sources handed down to us. But what do we know about Julius Caesar? Charlemagne? George Washington, or any other person of history? We must rely on those sources which have survived and give information concerning their lives.

## Extra-Biblical Sources

Ignoring for the moment the reliability of the biblical documents concerning Jesus, we will examine other sources from antiquity which verify that Jesus actually lived in the first century.

### Jewish Sources

*Josephus* (37-95 A.D.). "And there arose about this time Jesus, a wise man . . . for he was a doer of marvelous deeds, a teacher of men who receive the truth with pleasure. He led away many Jews, and also many of the Greeks. . . . And when Pilate had condemned him to the cross on his impeachment by the chief men among us, those who had loved him at first did not cease . . . and even now the tribe of Christians, so named after him, has not yet died out."

*Rabbinical Writings*. After the fall of Jerusalem in 70 A.D. Jewish religious scholars began to codify the legal and theological traditions of Jewry based on the Old Testament. The Mishnah (legal code) and the Gemara (commentaries on the Mishnah) developed in the early A.D. centuries to form The Talmud which was reduced from an oral tradition to writing about 500 A.D. There are a number of statements or allusions to Jesus and Christianity contained within. F. F. Bruce points

out that while most of these references were hostile, they all refer without question to Jesus as a historical person. He says, "According to the earlier Rabbis whose opinions are recorded in these writings, Jesus of Nazareth was a transgressor in Israel, who practiced magic, scorned the words of the wise, led the people astray, and said he had not come to destroy the law but to add to it. He was hanged on Passover Eve for heresy and misleading the people. His disciples, of whom five are named, healed the sick in his name."

### *Roman Sources*

Cornelius Tacitus (55-117 A.D.). (Regarding Nero and the burning of Rome in 64 A.D.): "Hence to suppress the rumor, he falsely charged with the guilt and punished with the most exquisite tortures, the persons commonly called Christians, who were hated for their enormities. Christus, the founder of the name, was put to death by Pontius Pilate, procurator of Judea in the reign of Tiberius. . ." (Annals, XV.44).

Seutonius ( ). In his work, *Life of Nero*, Seutonius also mentions the Christians in conjunction with the Great Fire of Rome: "Punishment was inflicted on the Christians, a class of men addicted to a novel and mischievous superstition."

Another possible reference to Christians may be found in his *Life of Claudius*: "As the Jews were making constant disturbances at the instigation of Chrestus, he expelled them from Rome."

Pliny the Younger ( ). In 112 A.D. Pliny Secundus, governor of Bithynia in Asia, wrote to Emperor Trajan requesting advice about how to deal with the "Christian" problem: "they were in the habit of meeting on a certain fixed day before it was light, when they sang an anthem to Christ as God, and bound themselves by a solemn oath not to commit any wicked deed, but to abstain from all fraud, theft and adultery, never to break their word, or deny a trust when called upon to honor it;

after which it was their custom to separate, and then meet again to partake of food, but food of an ordinary and innocent kind."

### *Archeology/Artifacts*

Ossuaries. Hebrew University professor E. L. Sukenik found in 1945 what he believed to be the earliest record of Christianity: two inscriptions scratched on two ossuaries (containers for human bones) found near Jerusalem. One was a prayer to Jesus for help; the other prayed Jesus would raise from the dead the person whose bones were contained therein.

Name of Pontius Pilate. While Josephus and Tacitus both name Pontius Pilate in their writings, artifacts are stronger evidence. In 1971, Pilate's actual name was found in Caesarea Maritima by archeologists. "Found in a step of the theater, it was originally part of a nearby temple. The Latin reads, 'Pontius Pilate, the Prefect of Judea, has dedicated to the people of Caesarea a temple in honor of Tiberius.'

The Cross. For Paul and the other New Testament writers to speak of the cross as a symbol of faith, would be the equivalent of our doing the same thing today with the electric chair. Yet Tertullian (145-220 A.D.) speaks of its early prominence in the Christian community: "In all travels and movements, in all our coming in and going out, in putting on our shoes, at the bath, at the table, in lighting our candles, in lying down, in sitting down, whatever employment occupies us, we mark our forehead with the sign of the cross."

### *Conclusion*

Without the aid of the biblical documents, we here find a Christianity and a Jesus with which we are familiar, a perspective that moves from "a good and wise man, a doer of wonderful works" to one who "practiced sorcery and beguiled and led astray Israel." From the annals of history, we know that this man, Yeshua, underwent trial and persecution by the

reigning religious and Roman authorities (including the name of the Procurator (Pilate) who pronounced sentence upon him), was executed by crucifixion, and that his teachings became the foundation for a “cult” of religious worshippers called Christians. These sources corroborate, rather than contradict, the Jesus portrayed in the biblical documents. We now turn to the crucial question of how reliable these documents are.

## **SECTION II: ARE THE BIBLICAL DOCUMENTS RELIABLE?**

### **Introduction**

How do we know that the Bible we have today is even close to the original? Haven't copiers down through the centuries inserted and deleted and embellished the documents so that the original message of the Bible has been obscured? These questions are frequently asked to discredit the sources of information from which the Christian faith has come to us.

### **Three Errors To Avoid**

1. Do not assume inspiration or infallibility of the documents, with the intent of attempting to prove the inspiration or infallibility of the documents. Do not say the bible is inspired or infallible simply because it claims to be. This is circular reasoning.
2. When considering the original documents, forget about the present form of your Bible and regard them as the collection of ancient source documents that they are.
3. Do not start with modern “authorities” and then move to the documents to see if the authorities were right. Begin with the documents themselves.

## Procedure for Testing a Document's Validity

In his book, *Introduction in Research in English Literary History*, C. Sanders sets forth three tests of reliability employed in general historiography and literary criticism.<sup>[1]</sup> These tests are:

Bibliographical (i.e., the textual tradition from the original document to the copies and manuscripts of that document we possess today)

Internal evidence (what the document claims for itself)

External evidence (how the document squares or aligns itself with facts, dates, persons from its own contemporary world).

It might be noteworthy to mention that Sanders is a professor of military history, not a theologian. He uses these three tests of reliability in his own study of historical military events.

We will look now at the bibliographical, or textual evidence for the Bible's reliability.

## The Old Testament

For both Old and New Testaments, the crucial question is: "Not having any original copies or scraps of the Bible, can we reconstruct them well enough from the oldest manuscript evidence we *do* have so they give us a true, undistorted view of actual people, places and events?"

### The Scribe

The scribe was considered a professional person in antiquity. No printing presses existed, so people were trained to copy documents. The task was usually undertaken by a devout Jew. The Scribes believed they were dealing with the very Word of



God and were therefore extremely careful in copying. They did not just hastily write things down. The earliest complete copy of the Hebrew Old Testament dates from c. 900 A.D.

## **The Massoretic Text**

During the early part of the tenth century (916 A.D.), there was a group of Jews called the Massoretes. These Jews were meticulous in their copying. The texts they had were all in capital letters, and there was no punctuation or paragraphs. The Massoretes would copy Isaiah, for example, and when they were through, they would total up the number of letters. Then they would find the middle letter of the book. If it was not the same, they made a new copy. All of the present copies of the Hebrew text which come from this period are in remarkable agreement. Comparisons of the Massoretic text with earlier Latin and Greek versions have also revealed careful copying and little deviation during the thousand years from 100 B.C. to 900 A.D. But until this century, there was scant material written in Hebrew from antiquity which could be compared to the Masoretic texts of the tenth century A.D.

## **The Dead Sea Scrolls**

In 1947, a young Bedouin goat herdsman found some strange clay jars in caves near the valley of the Dead Sea. Inside the jars were some leather scrolls. The discovery of these "Dead Sea Scrolls" at Qumran has been hailed as the outstanding archeological discovery of the twentieth century. The scrolls have revealed that a commune of monastic farmers flourished in the valley from 150 B.C. to 70 A.D. It is believed that when they saw the Romans invade the land they put their cherished leather scrolls in the jars and hid them in the caves on the cliffs northwest of the Dead Sea.

The Dead Sea Scrolls include a complete copy of the Book of Isaiah, a fragmented copy of Isaiah, containing much of Isaiah 38-6, and fragments of almost every book in the Old Testament. The majority of the fragments are from Isaiah and the

Pentateuch (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy). The books of Samuel, in a tattered copy, were also found and also two complete chapters of the book of Habakkuk. In addition, there were a number of nonbiblical scrolls related to the commune found.

These materials are dated around 100 B.C. The significance of the find, and particularly the copy of Isaiah, was recognized by Merrill F. Unger when he said, "This complete document of Isaiah quite understandably created a sensation since it was the first major Biblical manuscript of great antiquity ever to be recovered. Interest in it was especially keen since it antedates by more than a thousand years the oldest Hebrew texts preserved in the Massoretic tradition."[\[2\]](#)

The supreme value of these Qumran documents lies in the ability of biblical scholars to compare them with the Massoretic Hebrew texts of the tenth century A.D. If, upon examination, there were little or no textual changes in those Massoretic texts where comparisons were possible, an assumption could then be made that the Massoretic Scribes had probably been just as faithful in their copying of the other biblical texts which could not be compared with the Qumran material.

What was learned? A comparison of the Qumran manuscript of Isaiah with the Massoretic text revealed them to be extremely close in accuracy to each other: "A comparison of Isaiah 53 shows that only 17 letters differ from the Massoretic text. Ten of these are mere differences in spelling (like our "honor" and the English "honour") and produce no change in the meaning at all. Four more are very minor differences, such as the presence of a conjunction (and) which are stylistic rather than substantive. The other three letters are the Hebrew word for "light." This word was added to the text by someone after "they shall see" in verse 11. Out of 166 words in this chapter, only this one word is really in question, and it does not at all change the meaning of the passage. We are told by

biblical scholars that this is typical of the whole manuscript of Isaiah.”[{3}](#)

## **The Septuagint**

The Greek translation of the Old Testament, called the Septuagint, also confirms the accuracy of the copyists who ultimately gave us the Massoretic text. The Septuagint is often referred to as the LXX because it was reputedly done by seventy Jewish scholars in Alexandria around 200 B.C. The LXX appears to be a rather literal translation from the Hebrew, and the manuscripts we have are pretty good copies of the original translation.

## **Conclusion**

In his book, *Can I Trust My Bible*, R. Laird Harris concluded, “We can now be sure that copyists worked with great care and accuracy on the Old Testament, even back to 225 B.C. . . . indeed, it would be rash skepticism that would now deny that we have our Old Testament in a form very close to that used by Ezra when he taught the word of the Lord to those who had returned from the Babylonian captivity.”[{4}](#)

## **The New Testament**

### **The Greek Manuscript Evidence**

There are more than 4,000 different ancient Greek manuscripts containing all or portions of the New Testament that have survived to our time. These are written on different materials.

### **Papyrus and Parchment**

During the early Christian era, the writing material most commonly used was *papyrus*. This highly durable reed from the Nile Valley was glued together much like plywood and then allowed to dry in the sun. In the twentieth century many

remains of documents (both biblical and non-biblical) on papyrus have been discovered, especially in the dry, arid lands of North Africa and the Middle East.

Another material used was *parchment*. This was made from the skin of sheep or goats, and was in wide use until the late Middle Ages when paper began to replace it. It was scarce and more expensive; hence, it was used almost exclusively for important documents.

## Examples

### 1. Codex Vaticanus and Codex Sinaiticus

These are two excellent parchment copies which date from the 4th century (325-450 A.D.). Sinaiticus contains the entire New Testament, and Vaticanus contains most of it.[\[5\]](#)

### 2. Older Papyri

Earlier still, fragments and papyrus copies of portions of the New Testament date from 100 to 200 years (180-225 A.D.) before Vaticanus and Sinaiticus. The outstanding ones are the Chester Beatty Papyri (P45, P46, P47) and the Bodmer Papyri II, XIV, XV (P66, P75).

From these five manuscripts alone, we can construct all of Luke, John, Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, Hebrews, and portions of Matthew, Mark, Acts, and Revelation. Only the Pastoral Epistles (Titus, 1 and 2 Timothy) and the General Epistles (James, 1 and 2 Peter, and 1, 2, and 3 John) and Philemon are excluded.[\[6\]](#)

### 3. Oldest Fragment

Perhaps the earliest piece of Scripture surviving is a fragment of a papyrus codex containing John 18:31-33 and 37. It is called the Rylands Papyrus (P52) and dates from 130 A.D., having been found in Egypt. The Rylands Papyrus has

forced the critics to place the fourth gospel back into the first century, abandoning their earlier assertion that it could not have been written then by the Apostle John.[\[7\]](#)

4. This manuscript evidence creates a bridge of extant papyrus and parchment fragments and copies of the New Testament stretching back to almost the end of the first century.

## **Versions (Translations)**

In addition to the actual Greek manuscripts, there are more than 1,000 copies and fragments of the New Testament in Syria, Coptic, Armenian, Gothic, and Ethiopic, as well as 8,000 copies of the Latin Vulgate, some of which date back almost to Jerome's original translation in 384 400 A.D.

## **Church Fathers**

A further witness to the New Testament text is sourced in the thousands of quotations found throughout the writings of the Church Fathers (the early Christian clergy [100-450 A.D.] who followed the Apostles and gave leadership to the fledgling church, beginning with Clement of Rome (96 A.D.).

It has been observed that if all of the New Testament manuscripts and Versions mentioned above were to disappear overnight, it would still be possible to reconstruct the entire New Testament with quotes from the Church Fathers, with the exception of fifteen to twenty verses!

## **A Comparison**

The evidence for the early existence of the New Testament writings is clear. The wealth of materials for the New Testament becomes even more significant when we compare it with other ancient documents which have been accepted without question.

Author and Work	Author's Lifespan	Date of Events	Date of Writing*	Earliest Extant MS**	Lapse: Event to Writing	Lapse: Event to MS
Matthew, <i>Gospel</i>	ca. 0-70?	4 BC – AD 30	50 – 65/75	ca. 200	<50 years	<200 years
Mark, <i>Gospel</i>	ca. 15-90?	27 – 30	65/70	ca. 225	<50 years	<200 years
Luke, <i>Gospel</i>	ca. 10-80?	5 BC – AD 30	60/75	ca. 200	<50 years	<200 years
John, <i>Gospel</i>	ca. 10-100	27-30	90-110	ca. 130	<80 years	<100 years
Paul, <i>Letters</i>	ca. 0-65	30	50-65	ca. 200	20-30 years	<200 years
Josephus, <i>War</i>	ca. 37-100	200 BC – AD 70	ca. 80	ca. 950	10-300 years	900-1200 years
Josephus, <i>Antiquities</i>	ca. 37-100	200 BC – AD 65	ca. 95	ca. 1050	30-300 years	1000-1300 years
Tacitus, <i>Annals</i>	ca. 56-120	AD 14-68	100-120	ca. 850	30-100 years	800-850 years
Seutonius, <i>Lives</i>	ca. 69-130	50 BC – AD 95	ca. 120	ca. 850	25-170 years	750-900 years
Pliny, <i>Letters</i>	ca. 60-115	97-112	110-112	ca. 850	0-3 years	725-750 years
Plutarch, <i>Lives</i>	ca. 50-120	500 BC – AD 70	ca. 100	ca. 950	30-600 years	850-1500 years
Herodotus, <i>History</i>	ca. 485-425 BC	546-478 BC	430-425 BC	ca. 900	50-125 years	1400-1450 years
Thucydides, <i>History</i>	ca. 460-400 BC	431-411 BC	410-400 BC	ca. 900	0-30 years	1300-1350 years
Xenophon, <i>Anabasis</i>	ca. 430-355 BC	401-399 BC	385-375 BC	ca. 1350	15-25 years	1750 years
Polybius, <i>History</i>	ca. 200-120 BC	220-168 BC	ca. 150 BC	ca. 950	20-70 years	1100-1150 years

\*Where a slash occurs, the first date is conservative, and the second is liberal.

\*\*New Testament manuscripts are fragmentary. Earliest complete manuscript is from ca. 350; lapse of event to complete manuscript is about 325 years.

## Conclusion

In his book, *The Bible and Archaeology*, Sir Frederic G. Kenyon, former director and principal librarian of the British Museum, stated about the New Testament, "The interval, then, between the dates of original composition and the earliest extant evidence becomes so small as to be in fact negligible, and the last foundation for any doubt that the Scriptures have come down to us substantially as they were written has now been removed. Both the authenticity and the general integrity of the books of the New Testament may be regarded as finally established."[\[8\]](#)

To be skeptical of the twenty-seven documents in the New Testament, and to say they are unreliable is to allow all of classical antiquity to slip into obscurity, for no documents of the ancient period are as well attested bibliographically as these in the New Testament.

B. F. Westcott and F.J.A. Hort, the creators of *The New Testament in Original Greek*, also commented: "If comparative trivialities such as changes of order, the insertion or omission of the article with proper names, and the like are set aside, the works in our opinion still subject to doubt can hardly mount to more than a thousandth part of the whole New Testament."[\[9\]](#) In other words, the small changes and variations in manuscripts change no major doctrine: they do not affect Christianity in the least. The message is the same with or without the variations. We have the Word of God.

## The Anvil? God's Word

Last eve I passed beside a blacksmith's door  
And heard the anvil ring the vesper chime:

Then looking in, I saw upon the floor

Old hammers, worn with beating years of time.

"How many anvils have you had," said I,

"To wear and batter all these hammers so?"

"Just one," said he, and then, with twinkling eye,

"The anvil wears the hammers out, you know."

And so, thought I, the anvil of God's word,

For ages skeptic blows have beat upon;

Yet though the noise of falling blows was heard,

The anvil is unharmed . . . the hammer's gone.

*Author unknown*

## Notes

1. C.Sanders, *Introduction in Research in English Literacy* (New York: MacMillan, 1952), 143.
2. Merrill F. Unger, *Famous Archaeological Discoveries* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1957), 72.
3. R. Laird Harris, *Can I Trust My Bible?* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1963), 124.



4. Ibid., 129-30.

5. Merrill F. Unger, *Unger's Bible Handbook* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1967), 892.

6. Ibid.

7. Ibid.

8. Sir Fredric Kenyon, *The Bible and Archaeology* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1940), 288ff.

9. B.F. Westcott, and F.J.A. Hort, eds., *New Testament in Original Greek*, 1881, vol. II, 2.

## **SECTION III: WHO WAS JESUS?**

### **Jesus Was a Man of History**

Having established above the overwhelming historical reliability of the extra-biblical and biblical source documents concerning His life, only dishonest scholarship would lead one to the conclusion that Jesus never lived. From the evidence, there is a high probability that He did, and we can therefore discard the notion that He is only a mythological figure, like Zeus or Santa Claus.

### **Jesus Is the Unique Man of History**

But there seems to be a problem for many with the portrayal of Jesus in the source documents. He does things which defy our rationality. He is born of a virgin. He makes strange statements about Himself and His mission. After years of obscurity, He appears for a brief time in a flurry of public ministry in a small and insignificant province of the Roman Empire. He loves and heals and serves. He is a master teacher,

but all of His teaching points to Himself, to His identity. The following claims which He makes concerning Himself are extraordinary.

### **The Claims of Christ**

1. Able to forgive sins (Mark 2:5-10).
2. A Healer of disease (Mark 5:21).
3. Allows others to worship Him (Matt. 14:33, 28:9; cf. also Acts 10:25,26;14:12-15).
4. Claims to be "other worldly" in origin and destiny (John 6:38).
5. Performs miracles over nature (Luke 9:16,17).
6. Claims He has absolute, moral purity (John 8:46, 2 Cor. 5:21).
7. Claimed to be God, Messiah, and the way to God (Mark 14:61,62; John 10:30; 14:6-9).
8. Claimed to be the fulfillment of all Messianic prophecies in the Old Testament (John 5:46-7; Luke 24:44).
9. Allowed others to call Him God and Messiah (John 20:29; Matt. 16:15-17).

### **Responding to the Claims**

The wide divergence of opinion about who Jesus really was is not based, as we have seen, on a lack of good and adequate historical evidence; it rather comes from grappling with His unique and audacious claims listed above. There is no intellectually honest way to carve up the documents according to our own liking and philosophical preferences. Many have done this, including a great American patriot and president, Thomas Jefferson. He admired Jesus as a moral man, but would have nothing to do with the supernatural elements found in the

documents. Using scissors and paste, the Sage of Monticello left on the cutting floor anything, he felt, which contravened the laws of nature. Jefferson entitled his creation, *The Life and Morals of Jesus*. Only 82 columns, or little more than one tenth of the 700 columns in the King James Bible remained. The other nine tenths of the gospel record were discarded. His book ended with the words, "There laid they Jesus (John 19:42) . . . and rolled a great stone to the door of the sepulchre and departed (Matt. 28:60)." One way to deal with the claims is to remove the historical material which is offensive to us, such as Jefferson did. The other option is to honestly accept the historical accuracy of the documents and come up with a plausible explanation. Our choices are reduced to one of four: He was either a Liar, a Lunatic, a Legend, or our Lord.

### **Considering the Options**

**Liar.** Everything that we know about Jesus discourages us from selecting this option. It is incomprehensible that the One who spoke of truth and righteousness was the greatest deceiver of history. He cannot be a great moral teacher and a liar at the same time.

**Lunatic.** Paranoid schizophrenics do not behave as Jesus did. Their behavior is often bizarre, out of control. They generally do not like other people and are mostly self-absorbed. Nor do they handle pressure well. Jesus exhibits none of these characteristics. He is kind and others-centered, and He faces pressure situations, including the events leading to and including His death, with composure and control.

**Legend.** The greatest difficulty with this option is the issue of *time*. Legends take time to develop. Yet most of the New Testament, including Matthew, Mark, Luke, Acts, and all of Paul's Epistles were written by 68 A.D. An equivalent amount of time today would be the interval between President Kennedy's assassination in 1963 to the present. For people to start saying Kennedy claimed to be God, forgave people's sins,

and was raised from the dead would be a difficult task to make credible. There are still too many people around who knew Jack Kennedy . . . and know better.

**Lord.** In his book, *Mere Christianity*, C. S. Lewis said,

*A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic on a level with the man who says he is a poached egg or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God, or else a madman or something worse."*

Other than the fact that the Liar, Lunatic, and Legend choices are not persuasive as explanations for who Jesus was, we are still faced with the question of why we should accept Him as Lord. During the latter days of His ministry, Jesus was confronted by a hostile crowd which posed this question to Him: "Teacher, we want to see a sign from you." Jesus answered, "An adulterous generation craves for a sign; and yet no sign shall be given to it but the sign of Jonah the prophet; for just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so shall the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth" (Matt. 12:38-40). Here we are led to understand that Jesus pointed to His bodily resurrection as THE authenticating sign by which He would confirm His own unique claims. Later on, the Apostle Paul, in speaking of the importance of this event to the faith of a Christian would say, "If there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised; and if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is vain, your faith is also vain. . . . If Christ has not been raised, your faith is worthless; you are still in your sins (1 Cor. 15:13-17)." We now turn to explore the possibility of such an event occurring.

# **The Resurrection of Jesus Christ is a Historical Fact**

There are really two points that we must prove in order to demonstrate the truth of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. First, the tomb of Jesus Christ was found empty on the third day after His death. Second, the tomb was empty because Jesus was alive.

## **The tomb of Jesus Christ was found empty on the third day.**

Many people have denied that Jesus' tomb was found empty on the third day after His death, but their reasons have generally been theological or philosophical. It's extremely difficult to argue against the empty tomb on the basis of historical evidence. Here are some historical facts that support the idea that Jesus' body was no longer in the grave.

Christians have argued that the tomb was empty on the third day since the beginning.

It usually takes at least two generations for false legends to develop, for the simple reason that it takes about that long for those witnesses who might contradict the tale to die off. By all accounts, however, the followers of Jesus began proclaiming *right away* that he had been raised from the dead. The books of the New Testament were written early enough that eyewitnesses could have still contradicted them, and those books at times reveal oral traditions (in the form of early creeds, songs, or sayings) that show the church's belief in the resurrection to be even older. There does not appear to have been sufficient time for a legendary account to have developed the resurrection was talked about immediately after the death of Christ.

Even the opponents of Christianity believed that the tomb was empty. If Jesus' body had still been in the tomb, it would have been pretty easy for the opponents of Christianity to

discredit the resurrection. They could have simply produced the corpse, paraded it around town, and put an end to any further speculation. Why didn't they do it? Because the body wasn't there. The Gospel of Matthew records one of the arguments that the religious leaders of the day used to explain the fact of the empty tomb. Apparently the story was widely spread among the Jews that the disciples had stolen the body from the tomb while the guards were sleeping (Matt, 28:13-15). They did not deny that the tomb was empty. They simply offered another explanation for the disappearance of the body! Some may suggest that the body of Jesus was never buried in a recognizable tomb, and that the opponents of Christianity simply were unable to locate the corpse when Jesus' disciples began talking about the resurrection. However, the earliest historical accounts maintain that He was placed in the tomb of Joseph of Arimathea, a wealthy member of the Sanhedrin. There is no reason to question the credibility of this testimony, which is very ancient and contains a number of specific details. As Craig writes,

*Even the most skeptical scholars acknowledge that Joseph was probably the genuine, historical individual who buried Jesus, since it is unlikely that early Christian believers would invent an individual, give him a name and nearby town of origin, and place that fictional character on the historical council of the Sanhedrin, whose members were well known.*

Jesus was buried in a known tomb, but the tomb was empty the third day. This is a fact that even the opponents of Christianity recognized, and it's one that Christians can appeal to in their arguments for the gospel (Acts 26:26).

If the tomb had not been empty, it probably would have been treated as a shrine. It was common in first-century Judaism to regard the graves of holy men as shrines, but there is absolutely no suggestion that the grave of Jesus was ever treated in that way. His followers did not come back again and

again to the place to worship, nor did they treat it with any special esteem. There was no reason to, because there was nothing inside.

If the tomb was occupied, what would make the disciples of Jesus risk their lives by saying that it was empty? Jesus' followers clearly believed His tomb was empty, for they were persecuted from the very beginning for their testimony to that effect. That doesn't prove that what they said was true, but it does strongly suggest that they believed what they said. People have died for lies, but only because they believed them. What would make the followers of Jesus believe that His tomb was empty? Their own writings state that they believed it because they went to see the tomb and found that His body was no longer there. They did what you and I would do. They checked it out, and it was empty.

**The tomb of Jesus was empty because He had been resurrected from the dead.**

There is very little question that the tomb of Jesus was found empty on the third day after His death. This is a fact that was widely proclaimed at a time when it would have been easily discredited had it not been true. Even the opponents of Christianity agreed that the tomb was empty, and therein lies the crux of our next problem.

Given that the tomb was empty, what happened to the body of Jesus? There have been several suggestions, only one of which can be true.

*Did the disciples steal the body?* As noted above, this was one of the earliest skeptical explanations for the empty tomb. It may be early, but it isn't very credible. For the disciples to steal the body, they would have had to overcome guards who were stationed there specifically to prevent its theft. At the same time, they would have had to manifest a tremendous amount of courage, which is some thing they apparently did not have

when they fled the night Jesus was arrested. If the disciples had stolen the body, they obviously would have known that the resurrection had not really taken place. The fact that these men suffered in life and were then killed for their faith in the resurrection strongly suggests that they believed it really happened. They did not give their lives for what they knew was a lie. The disciples did not steal the body of Jesus.

*Were the disciples deceived?* Some have suggested that the disciples really did believe in the resurrection, but that they were deceived by hallucinations or religious hysteria. This would be possible if only one or two persons were involved, but He was seen alive after His death by groups of people who touched Him, ate with Him, and conversed with Him. Even more to the point, the tomb really was empty! If the disciples didn't steal it, even if they did only imagine that they had seen it, what happened to the body of Jesus?

*Did the Jewish leaders take it?* If the Jewish leaders had taken the body of Jesus, they would have certainly produced it in order to refute the idea that He had been raised from the dead. They never did that, because they didn't have the body.

*Did Jesus really die?* When left with no other credible option, some have suggested that Jesus did not really die, that He only appeared to be dead, was revived, and then appeared to the disciples. This makes a mockery out of the sufferings of the cross, suggesting that a beaten and crucified man could force his way out of a guarded tomb. At the same time, it portrays Jesus as the sort of person who would willingly deceive his disciples, carrying off the greatest hoax of all time. That the disciples would believe Him to be resurrected in triumph over death would be even more surprising if He was in fact on the edge of death after a severe beating. Jesus was truly killed, He was actually buried, and yet His grave was empty. Why? It is extremely unlikely that anybody took the body, but Jesus' disciples offered another explanation.



***Jesus was raised from the dead.*** Since the other explanations do not adequately explain the fact of the empty tomb, we have reason to consider more seriously the testimony of those who claimed to be eyewitnesses. The followers of Jesus said that the tomb was empty because Jesus had been raised from the dead, and many people claimed to have seen Him after the resurrection. In 1 Corinthians 15, Paul identifies a number of individuals who witnessed the resurrected Christ, noting also that Christ had appeared to over five hundred persons at one time (v. 6). He tells his readers that most of those people were still alive, essentially challenging them to check out the story with those who claimed to be eyewitnesses. The presence of such eyewitnesses prevented Paul and others from turning history into legend.

Alternative explanations are inadequate, and eyewitnesses were put to death because they continued to maintain that Jesus had been raised from the dead. Christianity exists because these people truly believed in the resurrection, and their testimony continues to be the most reasonable explanation for the empty tomb of Jesus Christ.

## **The Resurrection Demonstrates the Truth of Christianity**

It is no exaggeration to say that the Christian faith rests on the fact of Jesus' resurrection. Paul, who wrote much of the New Testament, said that his entire ministry would be worthless if the resurrection had not taken place. "If Christ has not been raised," he wrote, "then our preaching is vain, your faith also is vain. . . . If Christ has not been raised, your faith is worthless; you are still in your sins" (1 Cor. 15:14, 17). On the other hand, if Jesus Christ has been raised from the dead, then Paul's message is true, faith has meaning, and we can be freed from our sins.

That's essentially what we have been arguing. It makes good

sense to believe in the teachings of Christianity, because those teachings are based on a simple historical fact the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. If Jesus was raised from the dead, then what He said about himself must have been true. When the religious leaders of His day asked for some proof of His authority, Jesus told them that the only proof they would be given would be His resurrection from the dead (John 2:18 19; Matt. 12:38 40). When He was raised from the dead, that proof was provided.

What was proven through Jesus' resurrection? Here are some of the things that Jesus said about Himself, all of which were affirmed by His resurrection from the dead:

"I am the bread of life; he who comes to me shall not hunger, and he who believes in me shall never thirst" (John 6:35).

"I am the light of the world; he who follows me shall not walk in the darkness, but shall have the light of life" (John 8:12).

"Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was born, I AM" [a claim to be God himself] (John 8:58).

"I am the door; if anyone enters through me, he shall be saved, and shall go in and out, and find pasture" (John 10:9).

"I am the good shepherd; the good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep" (John 10:11).

"I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in me shall live even if he dies" (John 11:25).

"I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but through me" (John 14:6).

If these statements are true, then anything that contradicts them cannot also be true. In other words, if it is true that Jesus is God, then anyone who says Jesus is *not* God must be wrong. If it is true that Jesus gives eternal life to those

who believe in Him and that He is the only way to the Father, then anyone who says that there are other ways to salvation must be wrong. How do we know that what Jesus said about Himself is true? We know by His resurrection, which He offered as definitive proof for all that He did and said. What this means is that the statements quoted above demonstrate the uniqueness of Jesus, but they also demonstrate the uniqueness of Christianity. If what Jesus said about Himself is true, then Christianity is true, and any contradictory religious belief must be false. That's not a very popular message in today's pluralistic culture, but the fact is that there are genuine differences between worldviews. Only one can really be correct. If Jesus Christ was actually raised from the dead, there's little need for further debate. He alone is the way, the truth, and the life.

## **Jesus is the Lord of History**

The material in this outline forms the foundation for a Christian worldview. It is on these critical truths Christians have stood over the centuries. When someone asks us the REASONS for the hope that is within us that is, why we hold to the Christian faith, these are the reasons. We prefer to believe that the universe and man were created, rather than being the products of blind chance in a closed, material world. We believe that God not only created, but that He communicated, revealed Himself to humankind, through His prophets, apostles, and finally through His Son (Heb. 1:1). We believe that Jesus lived, and that His life and mission, outlined most extensively in the biblical documents but corroborated by extra-biblical documents, are what they have purported to be over the millennia: the seeking and saving of the lost through His sacrificial death. We believe that Christianity cannot be acceptably explained, historically, by leaving a dead Jew hanging on a cross. Only His resurrection from the dead adequately explains the boldness and commitment unto death of His disciples, the forsaking of worship on the

Sabbath in preference to Sunday, and the exponential growth of the church which began immediately, and has continued to this day. Every mighty river on this planetthe Mississippi, the Nile, the Volga has its source. Each one begins somewhere. Every Christian church or community in the world also has an historical source. It flows from Palestine, from Jerusalem, from a hill called Golgotha . . . and a nearby empty tomb. We said in the beginning that everyone has faith, but also pointed out that faith must have an object. Christians believe that Jesus Christ is the most worthy of all objects to which we could entrust our lives, our purpose, and our destiny.

## For Further Reading

### *Theism*

Boa, Kenneth and Larry Moody. *I'm Glad You Asked: In-depth Answers to Difficult Questions about Christianity*. Wheaton, IL: Victor, 1982.

This is a small book, but it is surprisingly thorough. It is exceptionally clear, accurate, and very helpful. A leader's guide is available for those who want to use this book in small group study. Highly recommended.

Brooks, Ron and Norman L. Geisler. *When Skeptics Ask: A Handbook on Christian Evidences*. Wheaton, IL: Victor, 1990.

This book addresses a variety of issues in Christian apologetics, from the existence of God to the authority of the Bible and the nature of humanity. It is very readable, and its handbook format makes it easy for the reader to find answers to specific questions without searching through the whole book.

Geisler, Norman L. *Christian Apologetics*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1976.

This is a textbook for courses in Christian apologetics, so it is very detailed and at times rather tedious reading. It presents a complete defense of Christianity from a philosophical viewpoint and can be very helpful.

McGrath, Alister E. *The Sunnier Side of Doubt*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1990.

It may seem odd to include a book on doubt here, but it

really is appropriate. Like the Yancey book noted below, this is written to believers who are having doubts about their faith. It is very readable and very encouraging. Highly recommended.

Montgomery, John W., ed. *Evidence for Faith: Deciding the God Question*. Richardson, TX: Probe, 1991.

This is a collection of essays by scientists who argue that their various disciplines actually provide more evidence for Christianity. As with any multi-author work, some chapters are better than others, but it is extremely thought-provoking and should be very helpful in a college environment.

Moreland, J. P. and Kai Nielson. *Does God Exist? The Great Debate*. Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1990.

This book consists of an actual debate between a theist (J. P. Moreland) and an atheist (Kai Nielson). It includes responses from two other theists (William Lane Craig and Dallas Willard) and two other atheists (Antony Flew and Keith Parsons). All of these men are philosophers, so the debate can be rather challenging at times, but it is a very helpful work for those who want to explore these issues in some depth.

Watkins, William and Norman L. Geisler. *Perspectives: Understanding and Evaluating Today's Worldviews*. San Bernardino, CA: Here's Life, 1984.

This book examines seven different worldviews and argues for the truth of Christianity. It is very readable and very helpful.

Yancey, Philip. *Disappointment With God: Three Questions No One Asks Aloud*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1988.

This is a wonderful book that asks some of the hard questions of life. Is God unfair? Is God silent? Is God hidden? For those whose faith in God is being stretched by doubts or trials, this book should be required reading. It is sensitive, biblical, and extremely insightful. Read it!!

### ***The Resurrection of Jesus***

Craig, William Lane. *The Son Rises: The Historical Evidence for the Resurrection of Jesus*. Chicago: Moody, 1981.

This is an excellent book that thoroughly defends the

resurrection of Jesus from a historical perspective. It is well-reasoned and very readable. Highly recommended.

Morison, Frank. *Who Moved the Stone?* London: Faber & Faber, 1930. Reprint. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1958.

This book was written by a man who intended to disprove the resurrection. In his studies he became convinced that it had actually occurred, and this book presents the evidence that changed his mind.

### ***The Authority of the Bible***

Bruce, F. F. *The New Testament Documents: Are They Reliable?* Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1960.

This is a helpful book by a highly respected New Testament scholar. He argues for the historical authenticity and reliability of the New Testament.

Geisler, Norman L. and William E. Nix. *A General Introduction to the Bible*. Chicago: Moody, 1968.

This book is titled appropriately, for it provides a general overview of the nature of the Bible, the meaning of inspiration, and the reliability of the biblical manuscripts. It is very helpful and very readable.

Goodrick, Edward W. *Is My Bible the Inspired Word of God?* Portland, OR: Multnomah, 1988.

This book describes the difference between the original autographs of Scripture, currently available manuscripts, and modern translations. It is very clear and encourages the reader to have confidence in the Scriptures.

McDowell, Josh. *Evidence that Demands a Verdict: Historical Evidences for the Christian Faith*. San Bernardino, CA: Campus Crusade for Christ, 1972.

One of the most helpful apologetics books available, this work discusses the uniqueness of the Bible, demonstrates the strength of its manuscript support, and also examines the evidence for the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

\_\_\_\_\_. *More Evidence that Demands a Verdict: Historical Evidences for the Christian Faith*. San Bernardino, CA: Campus Crusade for Christ, 1975.

This sequel to McDowell's first book focuses on higher criticism and scholarly attempts to undermine the authenticity of the biblical text. Very thorough and very

helpful.

Yamauchi, Edwin. *The Stones and the Scriptures: An Introduction to Biblical Archaeology*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1972.

Quite thorough for an introduction, this book argues that archaeological discoveries continue to support the truth of the biblical text.

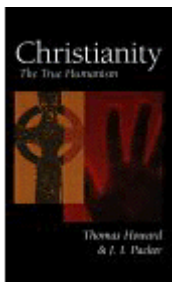
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# Christianity: The True Humanism

## Christianity and Humanism

What does it take to be human?



Does that sound like an odd question? One is human by birth, right? J. I. Packer and Thomas Howard seek to explain and answer that question in their book *Christianity: The True Humanism*.[\[1\]](#) This delightful and insightful book, first published in the mid-'80s, is now back in print. Since it provides valuable insight for apologetics—and is one of my favorites—I'd like to share a few of its insights.

To bring out a Christian view of what makes for a truly fulfilling human experience, the authors contrast it with that of secular humanism. Secular humanism is the belief that

mankind can truly find itself apart from any reference to God. It seeks to elevate the human race through a confidence in our ability to understand and order our world guided by our own reason and standing on the findings and possibilities of science.

One note before continuing. Some have objected to connecting the word *humanism* with *Christian*. Doesn't it suggest the exaltation of people? If you are familiar with either of the authors, you'll know that isn't their intent at all. As they say, "This book is an attempt to describe the sense in which the Christian religion both undergirds and nourishes all that seems to mark our true humanness."[\[2\]](#)

Because *Christianity: The True Humanism* explores the meaning of Christianity for the human experience, it adds to our apologetic for the faith. The authors write: "The best defense of any position is a creative exposition of it, and certainly that is the best means of persuading others that it is true."[\[3\]](#)

### What Do We Need to be Human?

So, what *do* we need to live a full life? It might be hard to get started answering that, but once the answers start they come in a rush. A sense of identity is one thing we need. How about adequate food, companionship, peace, beauty, goodness, and love? Freedom, a recognition by others of one's dignity, some measure of cultural awareness, and a worthy object of veneration also fill certain needs. Recreation, a sense of one's own significance, and meaning in life are a few more.

Animals don't seem to be concerned about most of these things. As the authors say, "Once you get a dog fed he can manage. Give a puffin or a gazelle freedom to range around and it will cope without raising any awkward questions about esteem and meaning."[\[4\]](#)



Far from being a religion of escape which calls people away from the realities of life, as critics are wont to say, Christianity calls us to plunge in to the issues that matter most and see how the answer is found in Jesus Christ. The good things in life are pursued with God's blessing. The difficult things are taken in and worked through, leaving the results to God. Here there is no need for submerging oneself in a bottle of alcohol to relieve the stress, no approval for running from the faults of a failing spouse into the arms of another, no settling for a grimy existence from which there is no escape but death.

What is the testimony of saints around us and those who've gone before us? "If what the saints tell us is true," say the authors, "Christian vision illuminates the whole of our experience with incomparable splendor. Far from beckoning us away from raw human experience, this vision opens up to us its full richness, depth, and meaning."[\[5\]](#) They tell us that to run into the arms of Christ is not to run away from one's humanness, but to find out what it means to be fully human. Even our imaginations give testimony that there is more to life than drudgery; we might try to walk machine-like through life ignoring its difficulties, but our imaginations keep bringing us back. There is something bigger. "Our imaginations insist that if it all comes to nothing then existence itself is an exquisite cheat,"[\[6\]](#) for it keeps drawing us higher.

In this article we'll consider four issues—freedom, dignity, culture, and the sacred—as we explore what it means to be fully human.

## Freedom

What does freedom mean to you? When you find yourself wishing to be free, what is it you want? Are you a harried supervisor facing demands from your superiors and lack of cooperation from your subordinates? Freedom to you might mean no demands from above and no obligations below. Are you a student?

Freedom might mean no more course requirements, no more nights spent hunched over a desk while others are out having a good time.

My Webster's dictionary gives as its first definition of freedom: "not under the control of some other person or some arbitrary power; able to act or think without compulsion or arbitrary restriction."[\[7\]](#) To be free is thus to be able to do something without unreasonable restriction. Of course what will constitute the experience of freedom will vary from person to person according to our interests and desires. But are there any commonalities rooted in human nature which will inform everyone's understanding of freedom?

## A Christian View of Freedom

When we think about freedom we typically focus on our external circumstances which hinder us from doing what we want. If only our circumstances were different we could *really* be free. But if freedom lies primarily in being able to do as we please, very few of us will ever know it. So, freedom can be very elusive; it comes in fits and snatches, and too often our sights are set on things outside our reach anyway.

Given the contrast between the dimensions of our dreams and the restrictions we face, is it possible for anyone to truly be free? It is when we understand our true nature and what we were meant to be and do.

Let's first distinguish between *subjective* freedom and *objective* freedom. *Subjective* freedom is that psychological sense of contentment and fulfillment which comes with doing the best we know and want to do. *Objective* freedom is that condition of being in a situation well-suited to our own makeup which provides for our doing the best thing. It lies, in other words, in being and doing what we were meant to be and do. Like the car engine that is free when the pistons can

move up and down unhindered—and not flop wildly in all directions—we, too, are free when we operate according to our makeup and design.

Because we were created by God according to His plan, freedom results from aligning ourselves with God's design. This requires understanding human nature generally so we can know those things which are best for all people, and understanding ourselves individually so we can know what we are best suited to be and do. This understanding of human nature and of ourselves is then subjected to the law of love in service to others. Because we are made like God, we are made to do for others; to sacrifice for the good of other people. It is God's love which has set us free, and which enables us to let go of our own self-interests in order to reach out to others. This is true freedom in the objective sense. "When nothing and no one can stop you from loving, then you are free in the profoundest sense."[\[8\]](#) But this means being free from any desires of our own which would hinder us from doing those things for others we should be doing.

This focus on love of others contrasts sharply with what we're told in modern society, that freedom means focusing on ourselves. "It is the stark opposite of all egocentrism, self-interest, avarice, pride, and self-assertion—the very things, so we thought, that are necessary if we are ever to wrest any freedom from this struggling, overcrowded, and oppressive world of ours."[\[9\]](#)

The key figure to observe, of course, is Jesus. We might consider Him bound by his poverty and by the rigors of His ministry. But remember that He freely accepted the Father's call to sacrifice Himself for us. His very food was to do the will of the Father. Jesus was free because He fit perfectly in the Father's plan, and there was nothing that could keep Him from accomplishing the Father's wishes which were also His *own* desire.

In summary, the freedom people long for—of being rid of expectations and restrictions so one can do what one wants—turns out to be illusory. We are free when we rid ourselves of the things which prevent us from living in obedience to the God who has loved us and given Himself for us, for this is what we were designed to do.

## Dignity

### *The Imago Dei*

One of the words seldom heard today to describe a person is *dignified*. What does that word bring to mind? Perhaps a stately looking gentleman, dressed formally and with impeccable manners . . . but looking all the world like he'd be more comfortable if he'd just relax!

Packer and Howard believe that dignity is an important component of a full humanity. Dignity is “the quality of being worthy of esteem or honor; worthiness.” It refers to a “proper pride and self-respect”<sup>{10}</sup> True dignity is not the stuffiness of some people who think they are not part of the riff-raff of society. When we react against such arrogance we need to realize that our reaction is not against dignity itself. For it is our innate sense of the dignity of all people, no matter what their place in society, that makes such airs objectionable.

Dignity is defined objectively by our nature, and is subjectively revealed in the way we act. What is that something about us that warrants our being treated with dignity and calls for us to act dignified (in the best sense)? That something is the *imago Dei*, the image of God, which is ours by virtue of creation. We have a relationship to the Creator shared by no other creature because we are like Him. This gives us a special standing in creation, on the one hand, but makes all people equal, on the other.

Secular humanism, by contrast, sees us as just another step on the evolutionary ladder. Our dignity is dependent upon our *development* (as the highest animal currently). Although at present we might demand greater honor than animals because we're on the top, there is nothing in us by nature that makes us worthy of special honor. "By making dignity dependent upon development," Packer and Howard say, "the humanist is opening the door to the idea that less favored, less well-developed human beings have less dignity than others and consequently less claim to be protected and kept from violation than others." [\[11\]](#) Hence, abortion, infanticide, and euthanasia. One has to wonder, too, if there is a connection between we've been taught about our lack of natural worth by evolutionists and the lack of concern for behaving in a dignified manner in public life.

Furthermore, secular humanism treats people according to their usefulness, either actual or potential. "To be valued for oneself, as a person, is humanizing," say the authors, "for it ennobles; but to be valued only as a hand, or a means, or a tool, of a cog in a wheel, or a convenience to someone else is dehumanizing—and it depresses. . . . Secular humanism, though claiming vast wisdom and life-enhancing skills, actually diminishes the individual, who is left in old age without dignity (because his or her social usefulness is finished) and without hope (because there is nothing now to look forward to)." [\[12\]](#)

## **Worship—Drawn Up to Full Height**

If recognizing our dignity means understanding our highest self or nature, in what kind of situation or activity is our dignity most visible? Packer and Howard say it is in worshipping God that our dignity is most fully realized.

Why is that? There are a couple of reasons. First, we are made to worship, and dignity is found in doing what we are made to do. "The final dignity of a thing is its glory—that is, the

realizing of its built-in potential for good. . . . The true glory of all objects appears when they do what they were made to do.”{13} Like a car engine made to operate a certain way, we were made to bring all of our life’s experience into the service of glorifying God.

Second, the object of one’s worship reflects back on the worshipper. Those who worship things lower than themselves end up demeaning themselves, being brought down to the level of their object of worship. But those who worship things higher are drawn up to reflect their object of worship. To worship God is to be drawn up to our full height, so to speak. We are ennobled by worshipping the most noble One.

### Moral Life—Marking the Dignity of Others

Does all this mean non-Christians have no dignity or aren’t worthy of being treated in a dignified manner? Of course not. The authors summarize their idea this way: “To the Christian, every human being has intrinsic and inalienable dignity by virtue of being made in God’s image and realizes and exhibits the full potential of that dignity only in the worship and service of the Creator.”{14} Because of our inherent value as human beings, we all deserve to be treated in a certain way. Christians are to treat people according to their innate worth. We love people as Christ loves us. We also seek to guide them to the place of their highest fulfillment which is in Christ.

Thus, Christianity “reveals us to ourselves as the most precious and privileged of all God’s creatures.”{15} And therein lies our dignity.

## Culture

What does it mean to be cultured? In one sense it has to do with the finer things in life. People visit the great museums

and cathedrals and concert halls of this and other countries, take evening classes at the local college, learn foreign languages, take up painting and pottery making as hobbies. Even those who have little interest in the fine arts have an appreciation for skilled craftsmanship.

Being cultured also can mean being well-mannered, knowing what is considered appropriate and inappropriate in social interaction.

What is at the root of what it means to be cultured? Personal preference is part of it, if we're thinking of the arts for example. But culture goes deeper than that to matters of taste. "Taste is a facet of wisdom," say Packer and Howard; "it is the ability to distinguish what has value from what does not." It has to do with *appropriateness*, with fitness and value.

But how do we measure appropriateness? Traditionally we have measured it by our view of the value of humankind. Does what comes off the artist's easel in some manner elevate our humanness? Or at least does it not degrade humanity? Do we treat people in a way which shows respect for them, which is the essence of good manners? To be in good taste is to be characterized by being appropriate to the situation. With respect to culture, it is to be appropriate given our nature. On the other hand, to be in poor taste is to be "unworthy of our humanness."[\[16\]](#) To appreciate the value in people and in their creative expression is to be cultured.

Should Christians be concerned about culture? While Christianity *per se* is indifferent to matters of culture (for the message is to all people of all cultures, and we should value the contributions of all cultures), Christians ourselves aren't to be indifferent. In our daily lives we should be demonstrating habits and tastes informed by the Gospel, and these should mark whatever we put their hands to. We are to treat people with respect as having been made in God's image.

We also apply ourselves creatively in imitation of God, and our creativity should reflect God's view of mankind and the world. Our creative activity in this world is what some refer to as the "cultural mandate." "When man harnesses the powers and resources of the world around him to build a culture and so enrich community life, he is fulfilling this mandate," say our authors.[\[17\]](#) In doing this we reflect the redemptive work God has been doing since Adam and Eve.

While, on the one hand, we should appreciate the cultural contributions of anyone which elevate mankind and more clearly reflect God's attitude toward us and our world, on the other hand we are under no obligation to accept anything and everything in the name of "creativity." We can't applaud the blasphemous or immoral. And this is where Christianity stands against secular humanism. For the latter, in its demotion of man to the level of animal and its elevation of human liberty above all transcendent standards, must allow wide freedom in creativity, whether it be crucifixes in urine or erotic performance art. But in doing so it ultimately degrades us rather than exalts us. A sweeping look at the 20th century with its horrific assaults on humanity offers a clue as to the strength of moral standards devoid of God's will.

A few important notes here. First, although the Bible doesn't teach standards of beauty, "it charges us to use our creativity to devise a pattern of life that will fitly express the substance of our godliness, for this is what subduing the earth, tending God's garden, and having dominion over the creatures means."[\[18\]](#) Second, "the Gospel is the great leveler."[\[19\]](#) There is no room for pride, for exalting one culture above others.

One final note. Even given all that has been said about the significance of culture and our contribution to it, it is important to note that the demonstration of God's goodness to those around us through love and works of service is more important than "cultural correctness." We cannot turn our nose



up at those who prefer comic books to classics or rap to Bach. For to do so is to deny the foundations of all we have been talking about, the inherent value of the individual person.

## The Sacred

### Convention, Taboos, and the Divine

In his book *The New Absolutes*, William Watkins argues that people today aren't truly relativists; they've merely swapped a new set of absolutes for the old.<sup>{20}</sup> It's fairly common for conventions and taboos to change over time, rightly or wrongly. One important question we need to ask, according to Packer and Howard, is this: "Which way of doing things does a greater service to what is truly human in us?"<sup>{21}</sup>

Taboos have to do with bedrock issues of fitness and decency. Packer and Howard tell us that our many social codes of behavior are "a secular expression of our awareness of the sacred, the inviolable, the authoritative, the 'numinous' as it is nowadays called—in short, the divine."<sup>{22}</sup>

Wait a minute. Isn't it a bit of an exaggeration to talk about taboos and conventions in terms of the divine? No, say our authors, for what we are seeking in all this is what is ultimate and fixed. Wherever there are conventions or attitudes which have such binding authority over us that to disregard them is taboo, "there you have what we called the footprints of the gods—an intuition, however anonymous and unidentified, of the divine."<sup>{23}</sup> As ideas and beliefs exert authority over our spirits, they become sacred.

We are a worshiping race. Because of our createdness we naturally find ourselves looking for the transcendent (although we typically look in the wrong places, and although secularists will deny they're looking for anything higher than what we ourselves can produce). We naturally find ourselves

giving obeisance to one thing or another, often without conscious thought. "You can no more have a tribe, community, or civilization without gods," say our authors, "than you can have one without customs." {24} It is the rare secularist who is never pushed to the point of offering up a prayer in hopes that there is Someone listening. An awareness of the reality of the sacred seems to be built in to us.

In our post-Christian world there are a number of substitute religions. Even secular movements like Marxism become religions of a sort with icons and symbols and sacred books. In shrinking the sacred down to our own proportions we lose what we sought, however, for as the theology becomes debased, so does the religion. And debased religion in turn debases its devotees. Note what Paul said about this in Romans chapter 1.

### The Meaning of Sacredness

With respect to God, sacredness refers to His holiness and inviolability and to the value that inheres in all He has made. He is set apart from and above us. "He is not to be profaned, insulted, defied, or treated with irreverence in any way." {25} God both *cannot* and *ought not* be challenged.

Furthermore, that which He has made is due a measure of honor, and those things which are set apart for special service are deserving of special honor. We wouldn't think of tearing up the original copy of the Constitution of the United States or of splashing paint on the Mona Lisa. Likewise—but even more so—we shouldn't think of abusing that which has come from the Maker's hand or treating that which has been set apart for His use as cheap. Here's an example of the latter: How many of us think of our church buildings and their furnishings as sacred in any sense? We no longer have the Temple; but are buildings erected expressly for the purpose of God's service really just cinder blocks and wood?

## Sin and the Sacred

If we aren't to treat the objects of this world as less than they deserve, much less should we mistreat those who have been made in His image. To sin against others is to violate their sacredness and our own, for in doing so "we profane and defile the sacred reality of God's image in us."[\[26\]](#)

For the secularist, as we've said before, without God all things have functional value only. As things or people outlive their usefulness they are to be discarded. The unborn who are malformed are of no use; they can be discarded. So, for example, the aged, now costing society rather than contributing to it, are to be assisted in death. But not so for the Christian. In taking seriously the sacredness of God and of what He has made, we preserve ourselves and provide protection against those things and ideas that would lessen or destroy us.

Freedom, dignity, culture, and the sacred—four aspects of the human experience. When we look at the Christian worldview and at secularism, it is clear which provides the greater promise for mankind. It is Christianity, and not secularism, which provides for human life in its fullness.

## Notes

1. J. I. Packer and Thomas Howard, *Christianity: The True Humanism* (Berkhamsted, Herts, England: Word Publishing, 1985).
2. Ibid., 38.
3. Ibid., 13.
4. Ibid., 37.
5. Ibid., 39.
6. Ibid., 44.
7. *Webster's New World College Dictionary*, 4th ed. (1999),

s.v. "free."

8. Packer and Howard, 60.

9. Ibid., 68.

10. *Webster's New World College Dictionary*, 4th ed. (1999), s.v. "dignity."

11. Packer and Howard, 138-39.

12. Ibid., 160.

13. Ibid., 152.

14. Ibid., 155.

15. Ibid., 160.

16. Ibid., 167.

17. Ibid., 177.

18. Ibid., 178.

19. Ibid., 172.

20. William D. Watkins, *The New Absolutes* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Bethany House Publishers, 1996). An article I wrote on this book can be found at Probe's Web site at

[www.probe.org/the-new-absolutes/](http://www.probe.org/the-new-absolutes/). This article was reprinted in Jerry Solomon, ed., *Arts, Entertainment, and Christian Values: Probing the Headlines That Impact Your Family* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 2000).

21. Packer and Howard., 187.

22. Ibid., 187-88.

23. Ibid., 189.

24. Ibid., 188.

25. Ibid., 195.

26. Ibid., 206.

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# Archaeology and the New Testament

*Dr. Patrick Zukeran shows that numerous people, places and events described in the New Testament have been verified by archeology.*



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

There is an ongoing debate among scholars regarding the historical accuracy of the Bible. Some feel that the Bible is a fictitious work and should be read as a work of literary fiction. Others feel it is an accurate historical work divinely inspired by God. Archaeology has played a major role in determining the trustworthiness of the Bible. In a [previous article](#), we discussed archaeological confirmations of the Old Testament. In this one, we will look at the archaeological discoveries that have confirmed the historical accuracy of the New Testament. There is a great deal of evidence outside of the Bible that confirms the account of Jesus as written in the Gospels.

It is important to realize, however, that it is unrealistic to expect archaeology to back up every event and place in the New Testament. Our perspective is to look for what evidence exists and see whether or not it corresponds with the New Testament.

## Historical Confirmation of Jesus

The first evidence comes from the four Gospels which, themselves, are proven to be accurate.<sup>{1}</sup> Outside the biblical text are several witnesses as well. Jewish historian Josephus (37 A.D. 100 A.D.) recorded the history of the Jewish people in Palestine from 70 A.D. to 100 A.D. In his work *Antiquities*, he states:

Now there was about this time, Jesus, a wise man, if it be lawful to call him a man, for he was a doer of wonderful works, a teacher of such men as receive the truth with pleasure. He drew over to him both many of the Jews and many of the gentiles. He was the Christ and when Pilate, at the suggestion of the principal men amongst us, had condemned him to the cross, those that loved him at the first did not forsake him. For he appeared alive again the third day, as the divine prophets had foretold these and ten thousand other wonderful things concerning him; and the tribe of Christians, so named from him, are not extinct to this day.[\[2\]](#)

Although he mentions Jesus in a sarcastic way, Josephus confirms the facts that Jesus did do many great miracles, drew a following, was crucified, and was proclaimed alive on the third day.

Pliny the Younger, Emperor of Bythynia in northwestern Turkey, writing to Emperor Trajan in 112 A.D. writes:

They were in the habit of meeting on a certain fixed day before it was light, when they sang an anthem to Christ as God, and bound themselves by a solemn oath not to commit any wicked deed, but to abstain from all fraud, theft and adultery, never to break their word, or deny a trust when called upon to honor it; after which it was their custom to separate, and then meet again to partake of food, but ordinary and innocent kind.

One of the most important Romans historians is Tacitus. In 115 A.D. he recorded Nero's persecution of the Christians, in the process of which he wrote the following:

Christus, from whom the name had its origin, suffered the extreme penalty during the reign of Tiberius at the hands of one of our procurators, Pontius Pilatus, and a most mischievous superstition, thus checked for the moment, again

broke out not only in Judea, . . . but even in Rome.[{3}](#)

There are over 39 extra-biblical sources that attest to over one hundred facts regarding the life and teachings of Jesus.

## **Accuracy of the Gospels**

The accuracy of the Gospels has been supported by archaeology. The names of many of the Israelite cities, events, and people described in them have now been located. Here are a few examples.

The Gospels mention four neighboring and well-populated coastal cities along the Sea of Galilee: Capernaum, Bethsaida, Chorazin, and Tiberias. Jesus performed many miracles in the first three cities. Despite this testimony, these cities rejected Jesus and therefore were cursed by Him (Matt. 11:20-24; Luke 10:12-16). These cities eventually disappeared from history and their locations remained missing for centuries. Their demise fulfills the prophetic condemnation of Jesus.

Only recently has archaeology recovered their possible locations. Tell Hum is believed to be Capernaum. (A “tell” is a mound or elevated land that has arisen by repeated and long-term rebuilding of the same site. Layers of civilizations can be found at different strata). The locations of Bethsaida and Chorazin still remain unconfirmed, but the present site at a tell 1.5 miles north of the Galilean shoreline is believed to be Bethsaida, while Tell Khirbet Kerezah, 2.5 miles northwest of Capernaum, is thought to be Chorazin.

Matthew 2 states that Jesus was born during the reign of Herod. Upon hearing that a king had been born, the frightened Herod ordered all children under the age of two to be killed. His slaughter of innocents is consistent with the historical facts that describe his character. Herod was suspicious of anyone whom he thought may take his throne. His list of

victims included one of his ten wives, who was his favorite, three of his own sons, a high priest, an ex-king, and two of his sister's husbands. Thus, his brutality portrayed in Matthew is consistent with his description in ancient history.

John's accuracy has also been attested to by recent discoveries. In John 5:1-15 Jesus heals a man at the Pool of Bethesda. John describes the pool as having five porticoes. This site had long been in dispute until recently. Forty feet underground, archaeologists discovered a pool with five porticoes, and the description of the surrounding area matches John's description. In 9:7 John mentions another long disputed site, the Pool of Siloam. However, this pool was also discovered in 1897, upholding the accuracy of John.

Evidence for Pontius Pilate, the governor who presided over the trial of Jesus, was discovered in Caesarea Maritima. In 1961, an Italian archaeologist named Antonio Frova uncovered a fragment of a plaque that was used as a section of steps leading to the Caesarea Theater. The inscription, written in Latin, contained the phrase, "Pontius Pilatus, Prefect of Judea has dedicated to the people of Caesarea a temple in honor of Tiberius." This temple is dedicated to the Emperor Tiberius who reigned from 1437 A.D. This fits well chronologically with the New Testament which records that Pilot ruled as procurator from 2636 A.D. Tacitus, a Roman historian of the first century, also confirms the New Testament designation of Pilate. He writes, "Christus, from whom the name had its origin, suffered the extreme penalty during the reign of Tiberius at the hands of one of our procurators, Pontius Pilatus. . . ."

## **Confirmation Regarding the Crucifixion**

All four Gospels give details of the crucifixion of Christ. Their accurate portrayal of this Roman practice has been confirmed by archaeology. In 1968, a gravesite in the city of Jerusalem was uncovered containing thirty-five bodies. Each of



the men had died a brutal death which historians believe was the result of their involvement in the Jewish revolt against Rome in 70 A.D.

The inscription identified one individual as Yohan Ben Ha'galgol. Studies of the bones performed by osteologists and doctors from the Hadassah Medical School determined the man was twenty-eight years old, stood five feet six inches, and had some slight facial defects due to a cleft right palate.

What intrigued archaeologists were the evidences that this man had been crucified in a manner resembling the crucifixion of Christ. A seven-inch nail had been driven through both feet, which were turned outward so the nail could be hammered inside the Achilles tendon.

Archaeologists also discovered that nails had been driven through his lower forearms. A victim of a crucifixion would have to raise and lower his body in order to breathe. To do this, he needed to push up on his pierced feet and pull up with his arms. Yohan's upper arms were smoothly worn, indicating this movement.

John records that in order to expedite the death of a prisoner, executioners broke the legs of the victim so that he could not lift himself up by pushing with his feet (19:31-33). Yohan's legs were found crushed by a blow, breaking them below the knee. The Dead Sea Scrolls tell that both Jews and Romans abhorred crucifixion due to its cruelty and humiliation. The scrolls also state it was a punishment reserved for slaves and any who challenged the ruling powers of Rome. This explains why Pilate chose crucifixion as the penalty for Jesus.

Relating to the crucifixion, in 1878 a stone slab was found in Nazareth with a decree from Emperor Claudius who reigned from 41-54 A.D. It stated that graves must not be disturbed nor bodies to be removed. The punishment on other decrees is a fine but this one threatens death and comes very close to the

time of the resurrection. This was probably due to Claudius investigating the riots of 49 A.D. He had certainly heard of the resurrection and did not want any similar incidents. This decree was probably made in connection with the Apostles' preaching of Jesus' resurrection and the Jewish argument that the body had been stolen.

Historian Thallus wrote in 52 A.D. Although none of his texts remain, his work is cited by Julius Africanus' work, *Chronography*. Quoting Thallus on the crucifixion of Christ, Africanus states, "On the whole world, there pressed a most fearful darkness, and the rocks were rent by an earthquake, and many places in Judea and other districts were thrown down." [\[4\]](#) Thallus calls this darkness, "as appears to me without reason, an eclipse of the sun." [\[5\]](#)

All the discoveries made are consistent with the details in the crucifixion account given by the writers of the Gospels. These facts lend indirect support for the biblical accounts of Jesus' crucifixion and that the tomb was empty.

## Historical Accuracy of Luke

At one time, scholars did not view Luke's historical accounts in his Gospel and Acts as accurate. There appeared to be no evidence for several cities, persons, and locations that he named in his works. However, archaeological advances have revealed that Luke was a very accurate historian and the two books he has authored remain accurate documents of history.

One of the greatest archaeologists is the late Sir William Ramsay. He studied under the famous liberal German historical schools in the mid-nineteenth century. Known for its scholarship, this school taught that the New Testament was not a historical document. With this premise, Ramsay investigated biblical claims as he searched through Asia Minor. What he discovered caused him to reverse his initial view. He wrote:

I began with a mind unfavorable to it [Acts], for the ingenuity and apparent completeness of the Tübingen theory had at one time quite convinced me. It did not then in my line of life to investigate the subject minutely; but more recently I found myself often brought into contact with the Book of Acts as an authority for the topography, antiquities, and society of Asia Minor. It was gradually borne in upon me that in various details the narrative showed marvelous truth.[\[6\]](#)

Luke's accuracy is demonstrated by the fact that he names key historical figures in the correct time sequence as well as correct titles to government officials in various areas: Thessalonica, politarchs; Ephesus, temple wardens; Cyprus, proconsul; and Malta, the first man of the island.

In Luke's announcement of Jesus' public ministry (Luke 3:1), he mentions, "Lysanius tetrarch of Abilene." Scholars questioned Luke's credibility since the only Lysanius known for centuries was a ruler of Chalcis who ruled from 40-36 B.C. However an inscription dating to be in the time of Tiberius, who ruled from 14-37 A.D., was found recording a temple dedication which names Lysanius as the "tetrarch of Abila" near Damascus. This matches well with Luke's account.

In Acts 18:12-17, Paul was brought before Gallio, the proconsul of Achaia. Once again archaeology confirms this account. At Delphi an inscription of a letter from Emperor Claudius was discovered. In it he states, "Lucius Junius Gallio, my friend, and the proconsul of Achaia . . ."[\[7\]](#) Historians date the inscription to 52 A.D. which corresponds to the time of the apostle's stay in 51.

In Acts 19:22 and Romans 16:23, Erastus, a coworker of Paul, is named the Corinthian city treasurer. Archaeologists excavating a Corinthian theatre in 1928 discovered an inscription. It reads, "Erastus in return for his aedilship laid the pavement at his own expense." The pavement was laid

in 50 A.D. The designation of treasurer describes the work of a Corinthian aedile.

In Acts 28:7, Luke gives Publius, the chief man on the island of Malta, the title, "first man of the island." Scholars questioned this strange title and deemed it unhistorical. Inscriptions have recently been discovered on the island that indeed gives Publius the title of "first man."

"In all, Luke names thirty-two countries, fifty-four cities, and nine islands without error." [\[8\]](#) A. N. Sherwin-White states, "For Acts the confirmation of historicity is overwhelming. . . . Any attempt to reject its basic historicity must now appear absurd. Roman historians have long taken it for granted." [\[9\]](#)

## **The Shroud of Turin**

The Gospels record that after His crucifixion Jesus was wrapped in a long linen cloth and placed in the tomb (Matt. 27:59). John records that when Peter investigated the empty tomb, he found the burial cloth folded neatly next to where Christ once laid (20:6-7).

A linen shroud called the Shroud of Turin, on display at the Vatican, has been claimed to be that burial cloth. It is 14.25 feet long and 3.5 feet wide. On it is an image with pierced wrists and ankles believed to be that of Christ.

The shroud first appeared for public display sometime after 1357 in Lirey, France. A knight named Geoffrey de Charny brought the shroud to France. In 1453 de Charny's granddaughter gave the shroud to the Duke of Savoy who then in 1578 brought it to Turin, Italy. In 1983, it was willed to the Vatican.

In 1898, Secondo Pia photographed the shroud and believed the image was a negative image like that of a photograph. This added to the mystery of the shroud since photography had not

been invented during medieval times. In 1973 a group of experts confirmed the fact that no pigment of paint was found even under magnification. For many, this was proof of the shroud's authenticity.

The most extensive study was undertaken in 1977. An international team of Swiss, American, and Italian scientist studied the shroud for five days at the Savoy Royal Palace at Turin. They used six tons of equipment and 2.5 million dollars for their research. It has been one of the most intensely studied artifacts of all time.

The study could not determine the authenticity of the fabric. Experiments that followed proved the image contained blood as well as aragonite, a particular calcium carbonate that is found in Jerusalem's first century tombs. Swiss criminologist Max Frei found forty-eight samples of pollen, of which seven could have come from plants in Palestine. The weave of the cloth was herringbone twill, a style that existed in ancient times.

Although these findings supported the authenticity of the shroud, other findings testified otherwise. In 1987, the shroud was carbon 14 tested to verify its date. Laboratories in Oxford, Zurich, and the University of Arizona tested the cloth. The result indicated a fourteenth century date for the shroud. This conclusion continues to be challenged and future tests are sure to follow. Another problem is that coins minted by Pontius Pilate were placed over the eyes of the figure. This was not a Jewish custom, nor does it seem likely that Joseph of Arimathea or Nicodemus would have placed on Jesus' eyes a coin with the image of the leader who condemned him.

Despite the fourteenth century date, scientists are still unable to explain how the negative image was created. The shroud remains a mystery as well as a lesson for us as believers that we should not put our faith in mysterious articles.

## Notes

1. See “[Authority of the Bible](http://probe.org/authority-of-the-bible-a-strong-argument-for-christianity/)” at [probe.org/authority-of-the-bible-a-strong-argument-for-christianity/](http://probe.org/authority-of-the-bible-a-strong-argument-for-christianity/).
2. Josephus, Book 18, Chapter 3:3
3. Tacitus, *Annals*, 15.44
4. Julius Africanus, *Chronography*, 18:1.
5. Ibid.
6. William Ramsay, *St. Paul the Traveler and the Roman Citizen* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1982), 8.
7. John McRay, *Archaeology and the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI.: Baker Books, 1991), 227.
8. Norman Geisler, *Baker Encyclopedia of Apologetics* (Grand Rapids, MI.: Baker Books, 1999), 47.
9. A. N. Sherwin-White, *Roman Society and Roman Law in the New Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1963), 189.

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# A Conversation with an Atheist

*Rick Wade distills an in-depth e-mail dialog with an atheist in which he addresses her doubts and arguments concerning the existence of God.*



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

## About Our Dialogue

*The Conversation Begins*

In the fall of 1999 I became involved in an e-mail

conversation with an atheist who wrote in response to a program I'd written titled [\*The Relevance of Christianity\*](#). In this program [Ed. note: The transcripts for our radio programs become the online articles such as the one you are reading.] I contrast Christianity and naturalism on the matters of meaning, morality, and hope.[\[1\]](#) She wrote to say that she was able to find these things in her own philosophy of life without God. If such things can be had without God, why bother bringing Him in, especially given all the trouble religion causes?

Stephanie has an undergraduate degree in philosophy, and is pursuing her doctorate in physics.[\[2\]](#) Our conversation has been quite cordial, and in our over two-month long conversation I've grown to respect her. She isn't just out to pick a fight. I try to keep in mind that, if her ideas seem grating on me, mine are just as grating on her.

Stephanie seems genuinely baffled by theistic belief. If God is there, He is outside the bounds of what we can know. While someone like Kierkegaard saw good reason to take a "leap of faith" into that which can't be proved, she sees no reason to do that. "I think that if I had faith it would be like his," she says, "but the leap seems, at this point, both futile and risky."

Stephanie has three general objections to belief in God. First, she believes that the evidence is insufficient. The evidence of nature is all she has, and God is said to have attributes beyond the natural. There's no way to know about such things. Second, she believes that theistic belief adds nothing of importance to our lives or to what we can know through science. I asked her, "What is it about Christianity that turns you off to it?" And she replied, "I imagine believing, and I am no more fulfilled and no less worried than I am when I am not believing. God just does not seem to be a useful, beneficial, or tenable idea." Third, she believes that religion is morally bad for people. It grounds morality in

fear, she believes, and it produces a dogmatism in adherents that prompts such behavior as killing abortion providers.

Stephanie began our correspondence not to be given proofs for the existence of God, but for me “to explain more personally His relevance.” What is called for, then, is defense and explication rather than persuasion.

### *Basic Elements of Stephanie's Atheism*

There are three main elements underlying Stephanie's atheism. The first is *reason*, which she believes is sufficient for understanding our world, for morality, and for understanding and cultivating human qualities such as “aesthetic appreciation, compassion, and love.” It is, of course, the final authority on religion as well. Reason does not admit faith. Insofar as one has admitted faith into the equation, one has moved toward irrationalism. As George Smith wrote, “I will not accept the existence of God, or any doctrine, on faith because I reject faith as a valid cognitive procedure. . . . If theistic doctrines must be accepted on faith, theism is necessarily excluded.”[\[3\]](#)

The second element, *nature*, is reason's best source for information. Stephanie says, “I have no access to anything outside of the natural universe and my own mind.”

The package is complete with Stephanie's commitment to *science*, which is the tool reason uses to understand nature. It alone is capable of giving us “objective, investigable knowledge,” she says. In fact, I think it is fair to label Stephanie's approach to knowledge “scientistic.” There seems to be no area of life which need not be submitted to science to be considered rational, and for which scientific investigation isn't sufficient.

The reason/nature/science triumvirate provides the structure for acquiring knowledge. To go beyond it is to move into irrationalism, Stephanie believes. There's certainly no reason



to add God. She says, "As I understand it, the idea of God as a creator or guarantor adds nothing but unjustified mysticism to my knowledge."[\[4\]](#)

Theists have no problem with using reason to understand our world, or with the study of nature, or with using the tools of science. The problem comes when Stephanie concludes that nothing can be known beyond nature analyzed scientifically. She believes that nature is all that is there or at least all that is knowable. Stephanie says she doesn't consciously start with naturalism; she has no desire to "champion naturalism as a dogma," she says. However, since science "only permits investigation of natural, repeatable phenomena," and she is satisfied with that, her view is restricted to the scope of nature. She even goes so far as to say, "I equate rationality and naturalism."

It seems, then, that the deck is stacked from the beginning. Stephanie's emphasis on science doesn't necessarily prevent her from finding God, but her naturalism does.

## **Insufficient Evidences**

### *The Evidentialist Objection*

Let's look at Stephanie's three basic objections to theistic belief, beginning with the charge that there is insufficient evidence to believe. Rather than offer a defense for theistic belief, let's look at the objection itself.

Stephanie's argument is called the "evidentialist objection." She quotes W. K. Clifford, a 19<sup>th</sup> century scholar who wrote, "It is wrong always, everywhere, and for everyone, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence."[\[5\]](#) Stephanie's objection is that there isn't enough evidence to believe in God. The first question, of course, is what constitutes good evidence. Another question is whether we should accept Clifford's maxim in the first place.

Some atheists believe they don't bear the same burden of adducing evidences for their beliefs as theists do. They say atheism is the "default" position. To believe in God is to *add* a belief; to *not* add that belief is to remain in atheism or perhaps agnosticism.[\[6\]](#) But atheism isn't a "zero belief" system. Western atheism is typically naturalistic. Atheists hold definite views about the nature of the universe; there's no reason to think that atheism is where we all automatically begin in our thinking, such that to move to theism is to add a belief while to *not* believe in God is to remain in atheism. It's hard not to agree with Alvin Plantinga that the presumption of atheism "looks like a piece of merely arbitrary intellectual imperialism."[\[7\]](#) If theists have to give evidences, so do atheists.

Stephanie, however, doesn't defend her atheism or naturalism this way. She believes that reason using the tools of science is the only reliable means of attaining knowledge. The result of her observations, she says, is naturalism. There simply aren't sufficient evidences for believing in God, at least the kinds of evidences that are trustworthy. Which kind are trustworthy? Stephanie wants evidences in nature, because in nature one finds "objective, investigable knowledge." However, she doesn't believe evidences for God can be found there. God must be outside of nature if He exists. She said, "You may rightly ask what kind of naturalistic evidence I would ever accept for God, and I would have to answer, none.' Because once a naturalistic investigation turns to God with its hands up, it ceases to be naturalistic, and so it ceases to refer to anything that I can hope to investigate. I lack a sense for God and I have no access to anything outside of the natural universe and my own mind." She said in a later letter that the cause of the universe may have had an agent. But when we begin adding other attributes to this agent, attributes which can't be studied scientifically, we get into trouble. "As soon as you talk about God as having infinite attributes, those attributes actually begin to lose meaning," she says. "My

view," she says, "is that it's just as well to call the unknown cause what it is—an unknown cause—until the means to investigate it are developed." And by this she means natural means. *A Naturalistic Twist*

The first problem here is obvious: Stephanie has biased the argument in her favor by her restrictions on knowledge to the realm of nature. She reduces our resources for knowledge to the scientifically verifiable. Such reductionism is arbitrary. By reducing all knowledge to that which can be discovered scientifically, Stephanie has cut out significant portions of our knowledge. Philosopher Huston Smith said this: "It is as if the scientist were inside a large plastic balloon; he can shine his torch anywhere on the balloon's interior but cannot climb outside the balloon to view it as a whole, see where it is situated, or determine why it was fabricated."[\[8\]](#) Science can't tell us what the final cause (or purpose or goal) of a thing is; in fact it can't tell whether there are ultimate purposes. It cannot determine ultimate or existential meaning. While it can describe the artist's paintbrush and pigments and canvas, it can't measure beauty. *Clifford's Folly*

Beyond this difficulty is the fact that Clifford's maxim *itself* has problems.

First, the evidentialist approach is unreasonably restrictive. If we have to be able construct an argument for everything we believe<sup>3</sup>and upon which we act—we will believe little and act little.

Second, this approach might have validity in science, but it leaves out other significant kinds of beliefs. Kelly Clark lists perceptual beliefs, memory beliefs, belief in other minds, and truths of logic as other kinds of "properly basic" beliefs that we hold without inferring them from other beliefs.[\[9\]](#) Beliefs involved in personal relationships are another example. Relationships often require a willingness to believe in a friend apart from sufficient evidences. In fact,

the willingness to do so can have a positive effect on developing a good relationship. Beliefs *about* persons are still another example. I accept without proof that my wife is a person, that she isn't an automaton, that she has intrinsic value, etc. These kinds of beliefs don't require amassing evidences to formulate an inductive or deductive proof. Clifford's maxim works well in scientific study, but not for beliefs about persons.

More to the point, religious beliefs don't fit so neatly within evidentialist restrictions. They are more like relational beliefs since, in confronting a Supreme Being, one is not confronting a hypothesis but a Person.

Fourth, Stephanie's use of Clifford's evidentialism is biased in her favor because, as we discussed above, her satisfaction with the deliverances of scientific investigation means she will only accept evidences in the natural order. *Do We Have Good Reasons for Believing?*

Some Christian scholars are saying that we don't *have* to have evidences for belief, meaning that we don't have to be able to put together an argument whereby God's existence is inferred from other beliefs. Our direct experience of God is sufficient for rational belief (using "experience" in a broader sense than emotional experience).[\[10\]](#) Belief in God is therefore properly basic.

This is *not* to say there are no *grounds* for believing, however. Drawing from John Calvin, Alvin Plantinga says that we have an ingrained tendency to recognize God under appropriate circumstances. Of course, there *are* a number of reasons or grounds for believing. These include direct experience of God, the testimony of a people who claim to have known God, written revelation which makes sense (if one is open to the supernatural), philosophical and scientific corroboration, the historical reality of a man named Jesus who fulfilled prophecies and did miracles, etc. Am I reversing

myself here? Do we need reasons or not? The point is this: while there are valid reasons for believing in God, what we do *not* need to do is submit our belief in God ultimately to Clifford's maxim, especially a version of it already committed to naturalism. We can recognize God in our experience, and this belief can be confirmed by various reasons or evidences. Rather than view our belief as guilty until proven innocent, as the evidentialist objection would have it, we can view it as innocent until proven guilty. Let the atheists prove we're wrong.

## Theism Adds Nothing

The second general objection to belief in God Stephanie offers is that it adds nothing of value to life and to what we can know by reason alone. Is this true? *Meaning*

Consider the subject of *meaning*. Stephanie said she finds meaning in the everyday affairs of life without worrying about God. Let me quote an extended passage from Stephanie's first letter on the subject of meaning. Her reference in the first line is to a quotation from a book by Albert Camus.

Your quote from *The Stranger* ("I laid my heart open to the benign indifference of the universe") expresses well a feeling that I have had often. The universe is not concerned with me, so I do not need to bow and cater to anything in it; I can merely be grateful (yes, actually grateful to nothing in particular) that I can walk along a path with trees and breathe in the crisp late autumn, that I can watch cotton motes fly into my face, facing the sun, that I can struggle and wrangle my way into knowing that Heisenberg's uncertainty principle is that which keeps atoms from collapsing (in nanoseconds!!). I find meaning in my relationship with my parents, brothers, and in my marriage; my husband is the most kind, capable, ethical, and wise person I've ever met. These things are sufficiently meaningful for me; I do not think that true meaning is

necessarily eternal and I do not demand recognition from the universe or the human notion of its maker. I am convinced that belief in a personal god could do nothing but dilute these things by subordinating them to something as slippery as God.

Thus, Stephanie believes that God isn't necessary for her to find meaning in life.

I replied that her naturalism provides no meaning beyond what we impose on the universe. We can *pretend* there is purpose behind it all, but a universe that doesn't care about us doesn't care about our superimposed meanings either. What does she do when the meaning she has given the universe doesn't find support in the universe itself? I wrote:

You might see this earth as a beautiful 'mother' of sorts which nourishes and sustains its inhabitants. Do people who suffer through hurricanes or earthquakes or tornadoes see it as such? Do people who live in almost lifeless deserts who have to spend their days walking many miles to get water and who struggle to eke out a meager existence from the land find beauty and meaning in it? Often people who live close to the land do indeed find a special meaning in nature itself, but by and large they also believe there is a higher power behind it who not only gives meaning to the universe but who gives meaning to the struggle to survive and to the effort to preserve nature.

When I said that all her efforts at accomplishing some good could come to naught, and thus be ultimately meaningless, her response was, "That's OK. . . . I'm not looking for universal or eternal meaning."

It's hard to know what to say to that. We might follow Francis Schaeffer's advice and "take the roof off;"[\[11\]](#) in other words, expose the implications of her beliefs. Stephanie says she isn't a nihilist (one who believes that everything is

thoroughly meaningless and without value); perhaps she could be called an “optimistic humanist” to use J. P. Moreland’s term.<sup>{12}</sup> She believes there are no ultimate values; rather, we give life whatever meaning we choose. However, this position has no rational edge on nihilism. It simply reflects a decision to *act* as if there is meaning. Such groundless optimism is no more rationally justifiable than nihilism. It is just intellectual make-believe designed to help us be content with our lot<sup>34</sup> adult versions of children’s fairy tales.

Since the loss of absolute or transcendent meaning undercuts all absolute value, each person must choose his or her own values, moral and otherwise. As I told Stephanie, others might not agree with her values. The Nazis thought there was valid meaning in purifying the race. What did the Jews think?

What can be seen as meaningful for the *moment* is just that—meaningful for the moment. Death comes and everything that has gone before it comes to nothing, at least for the individual. Sure, one can find meaning in, say, working to discover a cure for a terrible disease knowing that it will benefit countless people for ages to come. But those people who benefit from it will die one day, too. And in the end, if atheists are correct, the whole race will die out and all that it has accomplished will come to naught.<sup>{13}</sup> Thus, while there may be *temporal* significance to what we do, there is no *ultimate* significance. Can the atheist really live with this?

By contrast, the eternal nature of God gives meaning beyond the temporal. What we do has eternal significance because it is done in the context of the creation of the eternal God who acts with purpose and does nothing capriciously. More specifically, belief in God locates our actions in the context of the building of His kingdom. There is a specific end toward which we are working that gives meaning to the specific things we do.

Strictly speaking, then, we might agree with Stephanie that

it's true God doesn't *add* anything. Rather, He is the very *ground* of meaning. *Morality*

What about *morality*? Although Stephanie says that naturalistic morality is superior, when pressed to offer a standard she was only able to offer a basic impulse to kindness. In addition, she said, "I think that it is sufficient to have an internal sense of the golden rule, and I think that's a natural development." She used the metaphor of a child growing up to illustrate our growth in morality. Reason is all that is needed for good moral behavior. If biblical moral principles agree with reason they are unnecessary. If they don't, "they are absurd."

In response I noted that we can measure the growth of a child by looking at an adult; the adult we might call the *telos* or goal of the child. We know what the child is supposed to become. What is the goal or end, in her view, of morality? What is the standard of goodness to which we should attain? Stephanie accepts the golden rule but can give me no reason why *I* should. Reason by itself doesn't direct me to. The golden rule assumes a basic equality between us all. Where does *this* idea come from? Even if it is employed only to safeguard the survival of the race, by what standard shall we say *that's* a good thing? Maybe we need to get out of the way for something else.

God, however, provides a standard grounded in His character and will to which we all are subject. He doesn't change on fundamental issues (although God has pressed certain moral demands on His people more at one time than another in keeping with the progress of revelation<sup>{14}</sup>), and His law is suited to our nature and our needs. The universe doesn't necessarily stand behind Stephanie's chosen morality, but God—and the universe<sup>3/4</sup>stand behind His.

One final note. Showing the weaknesses of naturalism with respect to morality is *not* to say that all atheists are evil



people. In her first letter, Stephanie wrote, "I take offense at your statement that the relativism of a godless morality permits things like the destruction of the weak and the development of a master race.' . . . I find this charge of atheist amorality from Christians to be horribly persistent and unfair." I noted that I never said in the *Relevance* radio program that all atheists are immoral or amoral. What I said was that "atheism itself makes no provision for fixed moral standards." I asked Stephanie to show me what kind of moral standard naturalism offers. In fact, it offers none. As I noted earlier, Stephanie doesn't want to "champion naturalism." She knows it has nothing to offer. In fact, in one of her latest posts, she admitted that her philosophy only leaves her with "a frail pragmatism" and even "a certain moral relativism" because she doesn't have "the absolute word of God to fall back upon." She only has her own moral standards that have no hold on anyone else. Until she can show me what universal standard naturalism offers, I'll stand behind what I said about what naturalism allows. *Hope*

Let's turn our attention now to *hope*. Stephanie says that when she dies she will cease to exist. She thus has to be satisfied with the here and now. If there *is* nothing else, one must make do. Stephanie said, "I am satisfied with the time that I have here and now to think and feel and explore. You say, 'an impersonal universe offers no rewards,' but I am simply unable to comprehend the appeal of the vagaries of the Christian Heaven, especially with the heavy toll that they seem to of necessity take on intellectual honesty. If your notion of true hope requires a belief that one is promised eternal glory and fulfillment, then I cannot claim it. I am unable to comprehend what that could mean." Maybe the reason she is unable to comprehend it is her scientific approach. Heaven isn't something one can analyze scientifically. P>In response I noted that she stands apart from the majority of people worldwide. There is something in us that yearns for immortality, I said. Of course, the various religions of the

world have different ways of defining what the eternal state is and how to attain it. Christians believe we were created to desire it; it is a part of our make-up because we were created by an immortal God to live forever. If naturalism is true, I asked, how do you explain the desire for immortality?

If we had no good reason to believe in “the vagaries of the Christian Heaven,” I suppose it would be foolish to allow it to govern one’s life. However, we *do* have good reasons: the promise of God who doesn’t lie, and the resurrection of Jesus. We also have the witness of “eternity set in our hearts.” (Eccles. 3:11) Because of this hope—which isn’t a “cross your fingers” kind of hope, but is justified confidence in the future—our labors here for Christ’s kingdom will not die with us, but will have eternal significance. They are what is called “fruit that remains” (John 15:16), or the work which is “revealed with fire.” (1 Cor. 3:13-14) *Science*

We’re still thinking about what belief in God adds to our lives and our knowledge. One area in which even some theists don’t want to bring God is science itself. Does theistic belief add anything to science, or is its admission a source of trouble?

Much ink has been spilled over this question. Aside from naturalistic evolutionists, some theistic scientists believe that to go beyond what is called “methodological naturalism” is risky.[\[15\]](#) That’s the belief that, for the purposes of scientific investigation, the scientist should not fall back on God as an explanation, but should stay within the bounds of that which science can investigate. However, not everyone is of this opinion. As scholars active in the intelligent design movement are showing today, it isn’t necessarily so that the supernatural has no place in science.

William Dembski, a leader in the intelligent design movement, says that, far from harming scientific inquiry, design *adds* to scientific discovery. For one thing, it fosters inquiry where

a naturalistic view might see no need. Dembski names the issues of “junk DNA” and vestigial organs as examples. Is this DNA really “junk”? Did these vestigial organs have a purpose or do they have a purpose still? Openness to design also raises a new set of research questions. He says, “We will want to know how it was produced, to what extent the design is optimal, and what is its purpose.” Finally, Dembski says, “An object that is designed functions within certain constraints.” So, for example, “If humans are in fact designed, then we can expect psychosocial constraints to be hardwired into us. Transgress those constraints, and we as well as our society will suffer.”[\[16\]](#)

In sum it simply isn't true that belief in God adds nothing of value to our lives and our knowledge. After all, whereas Stephanie is restricted to explanations arising from the natural order, we have the supernatural order in addition.

## **Moral Problems with Theism**

### *It Doesn't Live up to Its Promises*

A third general objection Stephanie has to theistic belief has to do with moral issues. Atheists say there are moral factors that count against believing in God. To show a contradiction between what the Bible teaches about God's character and what He actually does is to show either that He really doesn't exist or that He isn't worthy of our trust.

One argument says that the Bible doesn't live up to its promises. Stephanie pointed to the matter of unanswered prayer. She referred to a man who claimed to have been an evangelical who lost his faith primarily because of “the inefficacy of prayer.” She has concluded that “hoping at God gives you the same results' that hoping at the indifferent universe does—none that are consistent enough to be useful!”

In response, I noted first that people often put God to the

test as if He is the one who has to prove Himself. Do we have the right to expect Him to answer our prayers 1) just because we pray them, or 2) when we haven't done what He has called us to do? People can't live the way *they* want to and then expect God to jump when they pray. Second, God has promised *His* people that He will hear them and answer, but He doesn't always answer prayers the way we expect or when we expect. Answers might be a long time coming, or they might come in totally unexpected ways. Or it might be that over time our understanding of the situation or of God's desires changes so that we realize that we need to pray differently. *Evil*

The problem of evil is a significant moral issue in the atheist's arsenal. We talk about a God of goodness, but what we see around us is suffering, and a lot of it apparently unjustifiable. Stephanie said, "Disbelief in a personal, loving God as an explanation of the way the world works is reasonable—especially when one considers natural disasters that can't be blamed on free will and sin." [\[17\]](#)

One response to the problem of evil is that God sees our freedom to choose as a higher value than protecting people from harm; this is the freewill defense. Stephanie said, however, that natural disasters can't be blamed on free will and sin. What about this? Is it true that natural disasters can't be blamed on sin? I replied that they *did* come into existence because of sin (Genesis 3). We're told in Romans 8 that creation will one day "be set free from its slavery to corruption," that it "groans and suffers the pains of childbirth together until now." The Fall caused the problem, and, in the consummation of the ages, the problem will be fixed.

Second, I noted that on a naturalistic basis, it's hard to even know what evil *is*. But the reality of God explains it. As theologian Henri Blocher said,

The sense of evil requires the God of the Bible. In a novel

by Joseph Heller, “While rejecting belief in God, the characters in the story find themselves compelled to postulate his existence in order to have an adequate object for their moral indignation.” . . . When you raise this standard objection against God, to whom do you say it, other than *this* God? Without this God who is sovereign and good, what is the rationale of our complaints? Can we even tell what is evil? Perhaps the late John Lennon understood: “God is a concept by which we measure our pain,” he sang. Might we be coming to the point where the sense of evil is a proof of the existence of God?[{18}](#)

So, while it’s true that no one (in my opinion) has really nailed down an answer to the problem of evil, if there is no God, there really is no problem of evil. Does the atheist ever find herself shaking her fist at the sky after some catastrophe and demanding an explanation? If there is no God, no one is listening.

## **Biblical Morality**

### *Moral Character of God*

Another direction atheistic objections run with respect to moral issues is in regard to the character of God. Is He good like the Bible says?

The “Old Testament God” is a favorite target of atheists for His supposed mean spirited and angry behavior, including stoning people for picking up sticks on Sunday, and having prophets call down bears on children.[{19}](#) The story of Abraham and Isaac is Stephanie’s favorite biblical enigma. She asked if I would take a knife to my son’s throat if God told me to. Clearly such a God isn’t worthy of being called good.

Let’s look more closely at the story of Abraham. Remember first of all that God did not let Abraham kill Isaac. The text says clearly that this was a test; God knew that He was going

to stop Abraham.

But why such a difficult test? Consider Abraham's cultural background. As one scholar noted, "It must be ever remembered that God accommodates His instructions to the moral and spiritual standards of the people at any given time."[\[20\]](#) In Abraham's day, people offered their children as sacrifices to their gods. While the idea of losing his promised son must have shaken him deeply, the idea of sacrificing him wouldn't have been as unthinkable to him as to us. Think of an equivalent today, something God might call us to do that would stretch us almost to the breaking point. Whatever we think of might not have been an adequate test for Abraham. God needed to go to the extreme with Abraham and command him to do something very difficult that wasn't beyond his imagination given his cultural setting.

Next, notice that Abraham said to the men with him "we will worship and return to you." (Gen. 22:5) The book of Hebrews explains that "He considered that God is able to raise people even from the dead, from which he also received [Isaac] back as a type" (11:17-19). Abraham believed what God had told him about building a great nation through Isaac. So, if Isaac died by God's command, God would raise him from the dead.

Stephanie also objected to stories that told how God commanded the complete destruction of a town by the Israelites. The only way to understand this is to put it in the context of the nature of God and His opinion of sin, and the character of the people in question. God is absolutely holy, and He is a God of justice as well as mercy. To be true to His nature, He must deal with sin. Read too about the people He had the Israelites destroy. They were evil people. God drove them out because of their wickedness (Deut. 9:5). Walter Kaiser explains why the Canaanites were dealt with so severely.

They were cut off to prevent Israel and the rest of the world from being corrupted (Deut. 20:16-18). When a people

starts to burn their children in honor of their gods (Lev. 18:21), practice sodomy, bestiality, and all sorts of loathsome vices (Lev. 18:23,24; 20:3), the land itself begins to “vomit” them out as the body heaves under the load of internal poisons (Lev. 18:25, 27-30). . . . [William Benton] Greene likens this action on God’s part, not to doing evil that good may come, but doing good in spite of certain evil consequences, just as a surgeon does not refrain from amputating a gangrenous limb even though in so doing he cannot help cutting off much healthy flesh.{21}

Kaiser goes on to note that when nations repent, God withholds judgment (Jer. 18:7,8). “Thus, Canaan had, as it were, a final forty-year countdown as they heard of the events in Egypt, at the crossing of the Red Sea, and what happened to the kings who opposed Israel along the way.” They knew about the Israelites (Josh. 2:10-14). “Thus God waited for the ‘cup of iniquity’ to fill up—and fill up it did without any signs of change in spite of the marvelous signs given so that the nations, along with Pharaoh and the Egyptians, ‘might know that He was the Lord.’”{22}

One more point. Stephanie seemed to think that God still does things today as He did in Old Testament times. When I told her that God does not require all the same things of us today that He required of the Israelites, she said that “the advantage of the absoluteness of the biblical morality you wish to trumpet is negated by your softening of OT law and by your making local and relative the very commandments of God.” In other words, we say there are absolutes, but we give ourselves a way out. I simply noted that where it was commanded by God, for example, to put a rebellious son to death, we do not soften that command at all. But when in God’s own economy He brings about change, we go with the new way. God doesn’t change, but His requirements for His people have changed at times. This doesn’t leave everything open, however. The question is, What has God called us to do today?

## *Its Harmful Effects on Us*

For Stephanie, biblical instruction on morality not only reveals a God she can't trust, it also is harmful for us, too. So, for example, she says, "The desire not to harm can be overcome by the desire to do right by [one's] idea of God (look at Abraham, my favorite enigma). That's where the real harm to society can creep in." She believes that the certainty of religious dogmatism regarding its own rightness encourages "excesses," such as "holy wars and terrorism for possession of the holy land, and the killing of doctors and homosexuals for their own good." She said that Christianity permits the kind of horrors we accuse atheists of perpetrating but with the endorsement of God. "Hitler was a very devout Catholic, as I understand it," she said.

There is serious confusion here. Loaded words like "terrorism" bias the issue unfairly, and Stephanie takes some "excesses" to be rooted in Scripture when in fact they have nothing to do with biblical morality. It is unfair of her and other atheists to ignore the commands of Scripture that clearly reflect God's goodness while ignoring sound interpretive methods for understanding the harder parts. It's also wrong to let religious fanaticism in general count against God. Just as some atheists aren't going to live up to Stephanie's high standards, some Christians don't live up to God's. Gene Edward Veith says that, while Hitler had a "perverse admiration for Catholicism," he "hated Christianity."[\[23\]](#) What is clear is that there is no biblical basis for Hitler's atrocities. To return to the point I tried to make earlier, if he looked, Hitler *could* have found moral injunctions in Christianity to oppose his actions. Naturalists, on the other hand, have no such standard by which to measure anyone's actions. Conclusion

We have attempted to respond to Stephanie's three main objections to believing in God: there's not enough evidence; it adds nothing to what we can know from science; and theism is bad for people. These are stock objections atheists



present. I think they have good answers. The next step is to try to take the atheist to the place where she or he can “see” God. Removing the reasons for rejecting God is one step in the process. The next step is to show her God. I can think of no better way to do that than to take her to Jesus, who “is the radiance of His glory and the exact representation of His nature” (Heb. 1:3). I recommended that Stephanie read one or more of the Gospels, and she said she would read John. This is the point of apologetics, to take people to the Lord in the presence of whom they must make a choice. Now we’ll wait to see what happens.

## Notes

1. Rick Wade, [\*The Relevance of Christianity\*](#) (Probe Ministries, 1998).
2. Stephanie is aware of this program, and has given me permission to use her name.
3. George Smith, *Atheism: The Case Against God* (Buffalo, N.Y.: Prometheus Books, 1989), 98.
4. One is reminded of the time when the eighteenth century mathematician and physicist the Marquis de Laplace was asked where God fit in his theory of celestial mechanics. He replied, “I have no need of that hypothesis.”
5. W. K. Clifford, “The Ethics of Belief,” in *Readings in the Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Baruch A. Brody (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1974), 246.
6. Antony Flew, “The Presumption of Atheism,” in *Faith and Reason* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 337-38. See also George Smith, *Atheism: The Case Against God* (Buffalo, N.Y.: Prometheus Books, 1989), 7-8.
7. Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Faith and Rationality: Reason and Belief in God* (Notre Dame: Univ. of

Notre Dame Press, 1983), 28.

8. Huston Smith, *Beyond the Post-Modern Mind*, rev. ed. (Wheaton: Quest Books, 1989), 85.

9. Kelly James Clark, *Return to Reason* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 126-28. I am indebted to this book for this portion of my discussion.

10. A good introduction to the evidentialist objection and this kind of response to it (what is being called Reformed epistemology) is found in Clark, *Return to Reason*. See also J.P. Moreland, *Scaling the Secular City; A Defense of Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987), 116-17. The seminal work is Plantinga and Wolterstorff, *Faith and Rationality*.

11. Francis A. Schaeffer, *The God Who is There* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1968), 128-130.

12. Moreland, *Scaling the Secular City*, 120ff.

13. William Lane Craig, *Reasonable Faith: Christian Truth and Apologetics*, rev. ed. (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1994), 59.

14. Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., *Toward Old Testament Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983), 60-64.

15. Papers from the "Naturalism, Theism and the Scientific Enterprise" conference in Austin, Texas in 1997, which included several presentations on this subject can be accessed on the Web at [www.dla.utexas.edu/depts/philosophy/faculty/koons/ntse/ntse.html](http://www.dla.utexas.edu/depts/philosophy/faculty/koons/ntse/ntse.html).

16. William A. Dembski, "Science and Design," *First Things* 86 (October 1998): 26-27.

17. There is an article on Probe's web site about the problem of evil, so I'll only make a few comments here. See Rick Rood, [The Problem of Evil: How Can A Good God Allow Evil?](#) (Probe

Ministries, 1996).

18. Henri Blocher, *Evil and the Cross* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 102-03.

19. For a in-depth discussion of the moral difficulties in the Old Testament, the reader might want to refer to Kaiser, *Toward Old Testament Ethics*, in which he devotes three chapters to such difficulties.

20. W. H. Griffith Thomas, *Genesis: A Devotional Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1946), 197.

21. Kaiser, 267-68.

22. Kaiser, 268.

23. Gene Edward Veith, *Modern Fascism: Liquidating the Judeo-Christian Worldview* (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1993), 50.

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