

# 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 planethe 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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# 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.<sup>[2]</sup> 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;"<sup>{11}</sup> 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>3</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.[\[13\]](#) 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</sup><sub>4</sub>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.<sup>[15]</sup> 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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## St. Augustine

*Former Probe intern Tim Garrett explains that St. Augustine's The City of God and his Confessions reveal not only a brilliant mind, but demonstrate his abiding concern to announce God's righteousness in His dealings with man.*

### Who Was St. Augustine?

One of the most remarkable things about a close reading of Church history is that no one is beyond the reach of God's grace. In the New Testament we find that a man who called himself "the chief of sinners" due to his murderous hatred toward Christians was saved when Christ Himself appeared to him on the road to Damascus. What is clear from the account in the ninth chapter of the Book of Acts is that it was not Saul who was seeking Christ: instead, it was Christ who was seeking Paul.

In modern times we see a similar situation in the life of C. S. Lewis. In *Surprised by Joy*, he recounts the night that he knelt to admit that God was God by calling himself "the most dejected and reluctant convert in all England." Like the

Apostle Paul, we can see that Lewis was perfectly prepared to be an apologist for the faith, but that preparation occurred *before he ever became a Christian!* It is only after the fact that we see how God was actively seeking the sinner.

In this article we will examine another reluctant convert, a man whose life and ministry has been crucial to church history. His name was Aurelius Augustine: we know him as St. Augustine of Hippo. But until his conversion, Augustine was anything but a saint! Born in the year 354 in North Africa, Augustine was raised by a Christian mother and a pagan father. The father's main desire was that his son get a good education, while his mother constantly worried about her son's eternal destiny. Augustine indeed received a first class education, but his mother was tormented by his indulgent lifestyle. Augustine became involved with a concubine at the age of seventeen, a relationship which lasted thirteen years and produced one son. Recognizing that sexual lust was competing with Christ for his affections, Augustine uttered the famous prayer "Make me chaste Lord . . . but not yet."

While sexual passion ruled his heart, Augustine sought wisdom with his mind. After suffering enormous internal conflicts, Augustine submitted himself to Christ at the age of thirty-two, and soon thereafter became Bishop of Hippo. Augustine became a tireless defender of the faith, diligent in his role as a shepherd to the flock as well as one of the greatest intellects the Church has ever known.

In this look at the life of Augustine we will focus on two of his greatest books—the *Confessions*, and *The City of God*. As we will see, Augustine's life and work is a testimony to the boundless mercy and grace of the Lord Jesus Christ.

## **Augustine's Youth**

In a gripping television interview recently broadcast on *60 Minutes*, the man convicted of the Oklahoma City bombings spoke

of his grievances against the federal government. During the interview, Timothy McVeigh revealed that his lawyers have filed an appeal that maintains that pre-trial publicity prevented him from getting a fair trial. Like many of us, McVeigh seems intent on avoiding the penalty of his actions; but rather than doing so by insisting upon his innocence, he is attempting to have the verdict thrown out due to a technicality.

It was truly disturbing to see an articulate young man such as McVeigh coldly dismiss the mass murder of innocents on the basis of a legal technicality. In many respects, his demeanor reflects the contemporary shift in attitude toward sin and guilt that has had devastating consequences for society. As a nation, America has seen a shift from a worldview primarily informed by biblical Christianity to one in which the individual is no longer responsible for his actions. Now it is either society or how one is raised that is given emphasis.

Against this cultural backdrop it is truly therapeutic to read Augustine's *Confessions*. Throughout this wonderful book, which is written in the form of a prayer, Augustine freely admits his willful disobedience to God. Augustine's intent is to reveal the perversity of the human heart, but specifically that of his own. But Augustine was not intent on just confessing his sinfulness: this book is also the confession of his faith in Christ as well. Augustine, as he is moved from a state of carnality to one of redemption, marvels at the goodness of God.

One of the most telling incidents in the *Confessions* is Augustine's recollection of a decisive event in his youth. He and an assortment of friends knew of a pear tree not far from his house. Even though the pears on the tree didn't appeal to Augustine, he and his friends were intent on stealing the pears simply for the thrill of it. They had no need of the pears, and in fact ending up throwing them to some pigs. Augustine's account of this thievery reveals a penetrating



insight into our dilemma as human beings. Whereas today many want to blame their parents or their environment for their problems, Augustine admits that his sole motive was a love of wickedness: he *enjoyed* his disobedience.

This reflects one of Augustine's major contributions to Christian theology: his emphasis on the perversity of the human will. We would all do well to read Augustine's *Confessions* if only to remind us that evil isn't simply a sickness but a condition of the heart that only Jesus Christ can heal.

## **Augustine's Search for Wisdom**

In his fascinating book entitled *Degenerate Moderns*, author Michael Jones convincingly documents how many of the intellectual gurus of the modern era have conformed truth to their own desires. Jones research reveals how Margaret Mead, Alfred Kinsey, and other prominent trend-setters intentionally lied in their research in order to justify their own sexual immorality. Sadly, contemporary culture has swallowed their findings, leading many to conclude that sexual immorality is both normal and legitimate.

However, when we turn to Augustine's *Confessions*, we see someone who has subordinated his own desires to the truth. The *Confessions* is an account of how Augustine attempted to satisfy the longings of his heart with professional ambition, entertainment, and sex, yet remained unfulfilled. One of Augustine's most famous prayers is therefore the theme of the whole book: "Our hearts are restless until they find their rest in Thee, O God." Only by submitting his own desires to the Lordship of Christ did Augustine find the peace that he was seeking.

But that submission did not come easy. Throughout most of his adult life, Augustine had been seeking to discover wisdom. But two questions were especially disturbing for him: What is the

source of evil, and How can a Being without physical properties exist? Obviously, this second question was a barrier to his belief in the God of the Bible. In his search for answers, Augustine became involved with a group known as the Manichees, who combined Christian teaching with the philosophy of Plato. Plato's philosophy helped convince Augustine that existence did not require physical properties, but he found their answer to the question of evil problematic, and after eight years as a seeker left the Manichees.

Still, the most difficult barrier for Augustine was not intellectual, but a matter of the heart. He eventually came to the point where he knew he should submit himself to Christ, but was reluctant to do so if it meant giving up his relationship with his concubine. One day, while strolling through a walled garden, Augustine heard from the other side of the wall what sounded like a child's voice, saying "pick up and read, pick up and read." At first he thought it was a children's game. Then, acknowledging what he took to be a command of the Lord, he picked up a nearby Bible, and upon opening it immediately came to Romans 13:13-14, words tailor made for Augustine: "Not in riots and drunken parties, not in eroticisms and indecencies, not in strife and rivalry, but put on the Lord Jesus Christ and make no provision for the flesh in its lusts." Augustine's search for wisdom was complete, as he acknowledged that wisdom is ultimately a *person*: Jesus Christ. The wisdom of God had satisfied his deepest longings.

## **Augustine's Philosophy of History: *The City of God***

The United States is currently going through what some call a "culture war." On the one hand there are those who believe in eternal truth and the importance of maintaining traditional morality. At the other end of the spectrum are those who believe that the individual is autonomous and should be free to live as he pleases without anyone telling him what is right

or wrong. Until thirty years ago the first group held sway. Today, that same group is considered divisive and extreme by the “politically correct” mainstream culture.

But culture wars are not unique to modern America. In the year 410, mighty Rome was sacked by an invading army of Goths. Soon thereafter, the search was on for a scapegoat. In the year 381 Christianity superseded the ancient religion of the Romans as *the* state religion. This enraged those who favored the old state religion, who claimed that Rome had gained world supremacy due to the favor of the ancient gods. When Rome officially accepted the Christian God and forsook the gods, the gods were said to have withdrawn their favor and allowed the invading armies to breach the walls of Rome in order to demonstrate their anger at being replaced by the Christian God. Educated Romans found such an argument silly, but an even more serious charge was that Christians were disloyal to the state, since their allegiance was ultimately to God. Therefore, Christianity was blamed for a loss of patriotism since Christians believed themselves to ultimately be citizens of another kingdom<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub>the Kingdom of God.

Augustine responded to these accusations by writing his philosophy of history in a book entitled *The City of God*. Augustine spent thirteen years researching and writing this work, which takes its title from Psalm 87:3: “Glorious things are spoken of you, O City of God.” Augustine’s main thesis is that there are two cities that place demands on our allegiance. The City of Man is populated by those who love themselves and hold God in contempt, while the City of God is populated by those who love God and hold themselves in contempt. Augustine hoped to show that the citizens of the City of God were more beneficial to the interests of Rome than those who inhabit the City of Man.

For anyone interested in the current debate between secularists and the “Religious Right,” Augustine’s argument is a masterful combination of historical research and literary

eloquence. Christians in particular would be well served by studying this important document, since believers are often accused of being divisive and extreme, characteristics considered by some as un-American.

In Augustine's time, it was asserted that the values of Christianity were not consistent with good Roman citizenship. But Augustine's historical investigation revealed that it is sin that is at the root of all our problems: starting with Cain's murder of Abel, the sin of Adam has borne terrible consequences.

Much of Augustine's task was to demonstrate the consequences of a society that loses its moral compass. Augustine took it upon himself to demonstrate the falsity of the assertion that the Christian worldview is incompatible with civic life. Those who maintained that the acceptance of Christian virtues had had a direct bearing on Rome's fall did so primarily from a very limited perspective. The clear implication was that Christianity, a religion that asks its adherents to love their neighbor and pray for their enemies, had fostered a society incapable of defending itself against its more vicious neighbors.

Augustine's response was to demonstrate that Rome had suffered through numerous catastrophes *long* before Christianity ever became the religion of the Romans. Actually, it was due to the respect of the Goths for Christianity that their attack wasn't worse than it was: they relented after only three days. Against those who claimed that Christians could not be loyal citizens due to their higher allegiance to God, Augustine reminded them that the Old and New Testament Scriptures actually *command* obedience to the civil authorities. And any assertion that Christianity had weakened the defense of the empire failed to acknowledge the real cause of Rome's collapse, namely that Rome's moral degeneracy had created a society where justice was no longer valued. Augustine quotes the Roman historians as themselves recognizing the brutality

at the very root of the nation, beginning with Romulus' murder of his brother Remus.

Augustine's analysis came to conclude that the virtues of Christianity are most consistent with good citizenship, and then went on to show the biblical distinction between the founding of Rome and that of the City of God. Just as Rome's origins date back to the dispute between Romulus and Remus, the City of God had its origin in the conflict between Cain and Abel. The City of Man and the City of God have intermingled ever since, and only at the final judgment of Christ will "the tares be separated from the wheat." For Augustine, the ultimate meaning of history will be borne out only when each one of us acknowledges who it was that we loved most: ourselves, or God.

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## Churches That Equip

I STILL REMEMBER THE SINKING FEELING IN THE PIT OF MY STOMACH. I was a university student, a young believer, and my faith in Christ seemed like a house of cards that had just crumbled. For awhile, the Christian life that had been so exciting and joyful became a myth. I felt rootless, adrift, and confused.

One of my fraternity brothers had just asked me some questions about Christianity that I couldn't answer. This bothered me deeply until Bob Prall, a pastor and campus Christian worker, answered them for me. "Always remember," he advised as he finished, "just because you don't know the answer, doesn't mean there is no answer."

For the next two years I followed him around, watching as he

shared Christ with skeptics, listening to his speeches, and observing how he dealt with non-Christians. Bob's loving, learned example and teaching helped me sink my spiritual roots deeply into God's truth and provided a foundation for three decades of interaction with unbelievers. I shall always be grateful to him for equipping me in this way.

Just as Bob helped me, a number of churches across North America are helping equip their members to answer effectively questions that non-Christians ask. Maybe their stories will encourage you.

## **Conversation and Cuisine**

Dennis McCallum pastors Xenos Christian Fellowship in Columbus, Ohio. He is keenly interested in reaching "postmoderns" for Christ, and Xenos members have developed some successful methods of equipping members for outreach. In his book, *The Death of Truth*, McCallum outlines a practical plan using dinner-party discussion groups. "It's not impossible to communicate with postmodern culture," he claims, "it's just more difficult." Just as missionaries need to learn the language and customs and build relationships with those they seek to reach, so we must understand and befriend today's postmoderns.

Xenos' "Conversation and Cuisine" gathers Christians in a home with non-Christian friends for food and discussion. Guests are assured it's not a church service and that all opinions are welcome. Topics include "To judge or not to judge," "Forgiveness in relationships," "Views of the afterlife," and current events.

After dinner the facilitator presents several scenarios for discussion. For instance, in a session on judging, he might describe a situation of racism in the workplace and ask participants to decide "OK" or "bad." Next the facilitator tells of a mother who chooses to leave her husband and

children for another man. The participants also vote. The point is to create a bit of confusion and help participants realize that—in contrast to today’s “tolerate all viewpoints” mindset—they themselves sometimes make judgments that they feel are entirely appropriate.

This dialogue can lead to discussions of, for instance, Hitler’s Germany. Was killing Jews merely a cultural tradition that should be respected?

The aim is not to preach, but gently to lead non-Christians to rethink their presuppositions. Sessions don’t always include a gospel presentation. They may be “pre-evangelistic”—helping unbelievers reconsider their own relativism, appreciate that some universal or absolute truths might be necessary, and realize that Christians may have some answers. Church members can then continue the relationships and share Christ as appropriate. “Once people’s thinking has been thawed—or even shocked—out of their totalistic postmodern pattern,” claims McCallum, “they will have a new receptiveness to the gospel.”

Xenos is also committed to grounding youth in God’s Word. Its curriculum uses age-appropriate games, stories, and study to help grade-school through university students understand and explain God’s truth. High school home meetings designed for secular audiences involve adult-student team teaching: kids reaching kids. Campus Bible studies reach Ohio State students.

Kellie Carter’s New Age background could not save her mom from breast cancer. Disillusioned with God after her mother’s death, Kellie sought answers in crystal healing, astrology, and meditation. Then a friend invited her to a Xenos campus Bible study, where she debated Christianity with attendees.

“The amazing thing here was that I was getting answers,” Kellie recalls. “These people knew what they believed and why. I wanted that.” Scientific and historical evidences for Christianity prompted her to trust Christ as Savior.

Kellie later invited Jeremy (“Germ”) Gedert to a Xenos meeting about anger, a problem he recognized he had. Subsequent Bible studies on fulfilled prophecy pointed Germ to faith in Christ. Now Germ claims God has given him “great relationships, controlled temper, and a real vision for my life with Christ” plus “an awesome wife (named Kellie Gedert).” Equipped students are reaching students.

Xenos offers courses, conferences, papers, and books to help Christians understand and communicate the gospel in modern culture. For information visit their web site at [www.xenos.org](http://www.xenos.org).

## **Spreading the Passion**

When George Haraksin became a Christian while studying at California State University Fullerton, he switched his major to comparative religions so he could investigate Christianity’s truth claims. Through his involvement in New Song Church in nearby San Dimas, he found his biblical and apologetic knowledge strengthened and was able to teach classes on New Age thinking. Study in philosophy and ethics at Talbot Seminary fanned his passion for communicating biblical truth, which Haraksin now spreads as New Song’s Pastor of Teaching and Equipping.

“Ephesians tells us to equip the church,” he notes. “People learn on three levels: a classroom level, a relational level, and at home.” He and his co-workers seek to use all three levels to help prepare members to be ready to answer questions non-Christians ask.

New Song’s leaders integrate equipping the saints into their regular gatherings. Some sermons handle apologetic themes. Weeknight classes cover such topics as “Evangelism and the Postmodern Mindset.” Monthly men’s breakfasts may deal with “Evidences for the Resurrection” or “Is Jesus the Only Way?” New Song has also invited faculty from the International



School of Theology to teach courses on “Developing a Christian World View” and other theological topics.

“I’m trying to find people within the church who have that sort of passion (for apologetics) and gifts for teaching,” Haraksin explains. “As I identify them, I’m trying to come alongside them, develop that passion, and develop them as leaders.”

If people have questions about science and Christianity, he wants to be able to refer them to a member with that specialty who can help them. He’s setting up an apologetics network at the local church level.

New Song member Jeff Lampman received a phone call and letter from a cousin with unusual perspectives on the Bible. “I had no idea how to respond to him,” Jeff recalls. He showed the letter to Haraksin, who recognized Jehovah’s Witness doctrines. When two Jehovah’s Witness members showed up at Jeff’s door, he invited them to meet with him and Haraksin. “I was very uncomfortable at first,” Jeff explains, but he grew in his knowledge of the Bible as he watched Haraksin in action over the next six months.

The experience “taught me why I believe what I believe,” Jeff remembers. “Before, if somebody asked me why I believe what I do, I wouldn’t have a clue as to how to respond to them. Now I do. George [Haraksin] was a tremendous help. I feel a lot more confident now and know where to go to get resources to defend the faith effectively.” He continues to apply what he’s learned as he interacts with skeptical co-workers and helps equip and encourage other Christians to learn.

Not everyone at New Song is interested in apologetics. Haraksin estimates that about 10 to 20 percent are thirsty enough to attend weekly meetings if personally encouraged to do so. Others want answers on a more spontaneous basis when they encounter a skeptic. Still others have little or no

interest.

“There is still an anti-intellectualism in the church,” Haraksin notes. People want to know “Why can’t I just love God? Why do I need to know all this other stuff?” Society is on information overload, and some “people don’t want to take the time to read and study,” which can be frustrating to a pastor with a burning desire to see people learn.

Haraksin tells of a woman who questioned Jesus’ deity. At another church she had been told not to ask questions but to spend time in personal devotions. Haraksin answered some of her concerns individually and encouraged her to enroll in New Song’s “Jesus Under Fire” class, which she did. She could ask questions without fear of causing offense. Soon she became a solid Christian, committed to the church.

“We’re relational people in a relational culture,” Haraksin notes. We’re still learning.” This product of his own church’s equipping ministry is helping to light some fires.

## Issues and Answers

Barry Smith is Pastor of Discipleship Ministries at Kendall Presbyterian Church in Miami. He has a keen desire to see adults and youth understand Christianity’s truth. Sunday schools have featured quarters on apologetics and on Christian ethics. The heart of Kendall’s apologetics emphasis is “Issues and Answers,” monthly dinner discussions relating faith to the secular world.

The meetings arose out of conversations between Smith and hospital chaplain Phil Binie, who had served on the staff of L’Abri in Switzerland and Holland. (L’Abri is a network of Christian study centers founded by the late Dr. Francis Schaeffer.) The core group is composed of Kendall members—both men and women—who are professionals in the community. Leaders include a *Miami Herald* editor, a federal judge, a medical

professional, University of Miami professors, an attorney, and a musician.

Core members invite friends and colleagues to join them. Families, including children, gather at a home and enjoy mealtime conversation. After the 45-minute dinner, youth workers spend time with the children while a group member guides an hour-long presentation for the adults. Smith led one on the problem of evil: "If God is good, where did evil come from?"

Journalistic ethics dominated another discussion. A judge handled the separation of church and state. An English professor covered "deconstructionism" and literary analysis as they apply to the Bible, a somewhat perplexing but highly relevant theme. (Deconstructionism includes a tendency to seek a text's meaning not in what the original author likely intended, but in what readers today want it to say.)

Smith says that at least one person has professed faith in Christ through a personal search that attending the group prompted. All of the non-clergy members at first felt uncomfortable sharing their faith outside the church; now all feel more at ease. Smith especially notes one couple (a psychology professor and an attorney) who began the program as young Christians and have experienced dramatic growth as they have understood how Christianity makes sense in their work settings.

Smith emphasizes that the "Issues and Answers" format is easy to replicate and need not involve professional clergy leadership. It started informally and at first was not even an official church ministry. "The idea," he explains, "was simply to find people trying to contextualize their Christianity in the marketplace who could share with us how they do that."

Scheduling seems the biggest obstacle; professionals' crowded calendars can be hard to mesh. But Smith is encouraged by what

the program has accomplished in its two years. He sees a revival of interest in the works of Francis Schaeffer and enthusiastically recommends them to both believers and seekers.

The apostle Peter told believers, "Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect" (1 Peter 3:15). Paul wrote that God gives spiritual leaders to the church "to prepare God's people for works of service" (Eph. 4:12). Xenos, New Song, and Kendall churches are taking those admonitions seriously and are seeing fruit for God's kingdom.

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# Faith and Reason

## Friends or Foes?

One of the more intriguing aspects of the *Indiana Jones* film trilogy is its focus on religious themes. In the third installment, *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*, Indy is involved in a search for the Holy Grail, the cup from which Christ drank at the Last Supper. As the film reaches its climax, Indy must go through three tests in order to reach the Grail. After overcoming the first two obstacles, the final test required Indy to "step out" in faith, even though he was on one side of a cavern that appeared to be thirty feet across, without any visible way to reach the other side.

Following the instructions from his father's diary, Indy stepped into the void, and to his amazement, his foot came down on solid ground. It turned out that there was a bridge across the cavern but because the rocky texture of the bridge perfectly matched the facing wall of the cavern, the bridge was invisible from Indy's perspective.

According to this scene, and enforced by general opinion, religious faith and human reason are opposites. Indiana Jones simply could not understand how it was possible to reach the Grail without any visible means to do so; the implication is that his decision to step out was a forfeiture of his intellect. This idea that Christian faith is a surrender of our reasoning abilities is a common one in contemporary culture.

For many Christians, the scene that we've been discussing is a disturbing one. On the one hand, it is a moment of triumph. It seems to lend credence to the importance of religious faith. Then again, it portrays faith as being a mindless exercise. Indiana Jones is an intellectual college professor who is interested in the Grail primarily as an historical artifact. His leap of faith goes against everything he stands for. This reveals a tension that has existed in the church for centuries. Is faith in Christ a surrender of the intellect? Is godly wisdom in complete opposition to what Scripture calls "worldly wisdom"? There are many who question whether the Christian should even expose himself to teaching that is not consistent with the Word of God. For example, it is a frightening prospect for many Christian parents to consider sending their children off to a secular college where the Christian faith is often ridiculed or condemned. Still others want their children to be challenged by a secular education. They consider it part of the Christian's missionary mandate to confront secular culture with their very presence. In their mind, the tendency of Christians to separate themselves from secular environments leads to an isolationist mentality that

fails to reach the lost for Christ.

As we examine the relationship of faith and reason for the Christian in this discussion, there are several questions to keep in mind. Is there such a thing as Christian philosophy, or is philosophy primarily opposed to theology? Should believers read literature that is not explicitly religious, or should we only read Christian literature? What about secular music or films? How we view the relationship between faith and reason will reveal itself in how we answer these questions. We will try to shed light on these issues as we examine three distinctive positions that have been prominent throughout church history.

Earlier, we mentioned that in the popular film, *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*, Indy had to make a literal leap of faith. When he stepped into the “void” in order to reach the Grail, he was unable to see the pathway to the Grail, but his “blind faith” was rewarded when it turned out that the pathway was hidden by an optical illusion. He did what most people would consider suicidal. But is this a true picture of religious faith? Is faith or religious belief irrational? In the next section we will look at the answer of Tertullian, a Christian apologist from the early church who has been accused of saying this very thing.

## **Tertullian's Dilemma**

Tertullian was a lawyer who converted to Christ sometime around the year A.D. 197. It was he who asked the famous questions, “What does Athens have to do with Jerusalem? What have heretics to do with Christians?” Tertullian's major distinction was to create a metaphorical contrast between Athens, the home of pagan Greek philosophy, and Jerusalem, the central locale of divine revelation. Tertullian was convinced that the Christian faith and human wisdom were polar opposites. It was his conviction that God had revealed His plan of salvation in Scripture alone; to mix Scripture with

the philosophy of pagans could only distort God's message. But does this mean that Tertullian believed that human wisdom is irrational? Let's look at the evidence.

Contemporary theologians who deny the rationality of Christian belief often quote Tertullian's statement that the crucifixion should be believed because it is absurd. He also said the fact of the Resurrection is certain because it is impossible. But these statements must be understood from the context of Tertullian's own life and work. He himself utilized elements of Greek philosophy and logic that he believed to be compatible with Christian belief. The major emphasis in his writings was to contrast the coherence of Christianity with the inconsistency of his heretical opponents. When he does speak of the absurdity of Christian belief, he is actually referring to the unlikelihood that any human mind could conceive of God's redemptive plan. Like C. S. Lewis, he was convinced of the truth of the gospel by the very fact that no human being could possibly concoct such a story as is presented in Scripture. Certainly the Jews could not; the claim of Christ that He was God in the flesh was blasphemous to many of them. Nor could the Greeks create such a story; for them, the material world was inferior to the divine realm. God could not possibly assume human flesh in their philosophical reasoning. But for Tertullian, this was compelling evidence that the gospel is true! The religious and philosophical systems contemporary with the advent of Christianity would have prevented any human from simply making up such a fantastic tale. He concluded that the gospel had to originate in the mind of God himself.

To conclude, let's put Tertullian in the shoes of Indiana Jones. What would Tertullian do if faced with the prospect of crossing over the invisible bridge? My guess is that he would see such a step as consistent with God's way of directing His people. The key to understanding Tertullian's view of faith and reason is to consider what the unbeliever would think.

Since most unbelievers would consider what Indiana Jones did as unreasonable, he would probably consider such an attitude as compelling proof that the person of faith must take such a step.

Tertullian, the early church apologist, was convinced that belief in the Scripture was the basis for the Christian life. He also considered Greek philosophy to be the basis for heresy in the Church. Unfortunately, he seemed to assume that all Christians intuitively understood Scripture in the same way. His motto might have been "God said it, I believe it, that settles it." But it is one thing to believe; it is another thing to understand what we believe. Next, we will consider the ideas of Augustine, who is known by the phrase "faith seeking understanding."

## **Augustine's Solution**

Augustine, who died in the year A.D. 430, recounts in his famous *Confessions* how as a young man he was constantly seeking for a philosophy that would be consistent and guide him to truth. At one point he abandoned any hope in his search and became a skeptic. But at the age of 33, Augustine came to accept the truth of the gospel. He recognized that the speculation of Greek philosophy was incapable in itself of bringing him to salvation. But, on the other hand, he could see that it had prepared him to distinguish between truth and falsehood, and laid the groundwork by which he came to accept the claims of Christ. Augustine believed that the Scripture was the authoritative Word of God, but in interpreting difficult scriptural concepts such as the Trinity, he found it necessary to utilize his own philosophical training to explain the teaching of Scripture.

Whereas Tertullian considered faith in Christ's revelation of himself to be the only thing worth knowing, Augustine emphasized both the priority of faith and its incompleteness without the help of reason. One of his great insights is that



faith is the foundation for all knowledge. Christians are often ridiculed for their faith, as if “faith” and “gullibility” were synonyms. But Augustine reminds us that each of us must trust some authority when making any truth claim, and that “faith” and “trust” are synonyms.

Consider a few examples: Christians and non-Christians alike agree that water freezes at zero degrees centigrade. However, I myself have never performed that experiment; I simply trust what reliable scientific studies have confirmed. Likewise, no one living today was present at the signing of the Declaration of Independence, but all Americans celebrate that day as having been July 4, 1776. We trust the witness of those who were actually there. In other words, our knowledge *begins* with faith in some authority, just as Augustine emphasized.

But Augustine distinguished himself from Tertullian by acknowledging that philosophy does have a role in how the Christian understands God’s revelation. Because humanity is made in the image of God, we are all capable of knowing truth. Augustine found in pagan philosophy helpful ideas that enabled him to elaborate God’s Word. But it must be emphasized that his interest in pagan philosophy was not an end in itself, but rather a tool by which to grasp more deeply the meaning of Scripture.

What would Augustine have done if he had faced the choice of Indiana Jones? First, he would have needed scriptural support for such a choice. Secondly, he would have considered the logic of such a decision. Whereas Tertullian considered God’s mind to be contrary to the philosophies of man, Augustine believed God created us to think His thoughts after Him. His was a reasonable faith. This is why his motto has been described as “faith seeking understanding.”

## **The Synthesis of Thomas Aquinas**

Now we turn to look at the teaching of the twelfth-century

scholar Thomas Aquinas, whose own slogan has been called, "I understand in order to believe."

A good way to get a handle on Thomas's position is to recognize that his own motto is a reversal of Augustine's *faith seeking understanding*. It was Augustine who first explained the concept of *original sin*, which states that we are alienated from God at birth because we have inherited a sin nature from Adam. Thomas agreed that our moral conformity to God had been lost, but he believed that sin had not completely corrupted our intellect. Thomas believed, therefore, that we could come to a basic knowledge of God without any special revelation. This is not to say that Thomas did not hold a high view of Scripture. Scripture was authoritative for Thomas. But he seemed to believe that divine revelation is a fuller explanation of what we are able to know about God on our own. For example, his attempts to prove the existence of God were based on the aftereffects of God's action in the world, such as the creation, rather than in the sure Word of Scripture. In contrast to Tertullian and Augustine, who placed faith in God's revelation of Christ as the foundation for knowledge, Thomas started with human reason and philosophy. His hope was to show that even people who reject the Scripture could come to believe in God through the use of their intellects. But the Scriptures were necessary since the human mind cannot even conceive of concepts such as the Trinity.

Thomas lived at a time when most of Aristotle's philosophy was first being introduced into the Latin language. This created quite a stir in the universities of the day. Up until that time, Augustine's emphasis on an education centered on Scripture was the dominant view. Thomas himself was educated in the tradition of Augustine, but he appreciated the philosophy of Aristotle as a witness to the truth. He found Aristotle to be more balanced in his approach to philosophy than Augustine had been. Whereas Augustine emphasized the

eternal realm in his own philosophy, Aristotle's philosophy confirmed the importance of the natural world as well and assisted Thomas in his effort to create a comprehensive Christian philosophy which recognized that the material world was important because it had been created by God and was the arena in which His redemptive plan was to be fulfilled. Prior to Thomas, the tendency had been to downplay the physical world as greatly inferior to the spiritual world.

If we were to place Thomas in the shoes of Indiana Jones, it is likely that he would have stepped out as well. But he would have arrived at the decision for different reasons than Tertullian or Augustine. Because of his emphasis on the thinking ability of the human race and his emphasis on physical reality, he might have knelt down on the ground and felt for the hidden pathway before actually stepping out. Since he leaned toward utilizing reason and his own understanding to discover the bridge, he would not have depended solely on revelation to cross over like the others.

We will conclude our series as we evaluate the implications of the three different views of faith and reason that we have been examining in this discussion.

## Implications

We have been examining three distinctive positions on the question of faith and reason. Basically, we have been attempting to discern whether or not human reason, as expressed in pagan philosophy, is a help or a hindrance to Christian theology.

The first position we addressed was that of Tertullian, who viewed the combination of divine revelation and Greek philosophy as the root of all false teaching in the church. We then showed that even though Augustine agreed with Tertullian that faith in divine revelation is primary for the Christian, they differed in that Tertullian emphasized *belief in* the

Scriptures, while Augustine focused on the *understanding* of what one believes. That is why he was willing to incorporate pagan philosophy to help further his understanding of Christian theology. He was delighted to find pagans whose philosophy, though not Christian in and of itself, was in some way compatible with Christianity.

The third and final position we examined was that of Thomas Aquinas, who believed that all people could have a basic knowledge of God purely through natural reason. He did not agree with Augustine that the human mind had been totally corrupted by sin at the Fall. This belief led to his elevation of the power of the mind and his appreciation of philosophy. Theology is the higher form of wisdom, but it needs the tools of science and philosophy in order to practice its own trade. Theology learns from philosophy, because ultimately theology is a human task.

How we view the relationship between faith and reason can have powerful implications for how the Christian engages society with the gospel. One of the problems with the apologetics of Tertullian is that he seemed to view all that opposed him to be enemies of the gospel, rather than as potential converts. This is in stark contrast to the behavior of the Apostle Paul in Acts 17, when he proclaimed the gospel among the Greeks at Mars Hill. He did not condemn them for their initial failure to accept the Resurrection. Instead, he attempted to reach common ground with them by quoting some of their own philosophers, picking out isolated statements from pagan thinkers which were consistent with Scripture, while still maintaining the absolute truth of Scripture as his foundation. In this way, he was able to gain a hearing with some of his listeners. But this presupposes some familiarity with pagan thought. This familiarity made Paul a more effective witness to his audience.

Paul's attitude toward pagan philosophy seems to be consistent with those of Augustine and Aquinas. All three felt it was

beneficial to know what the non-believer thought in order to communicate the gospel. How then can believers apply this attitude today without compromising their values? Perhaps it involves Christian parents listening with their children to the music they enjoy, and then constructively discussing its message. After all, many contemporary musicians utilize their music to proclaim their own philosophies of life. Or maybe it will mean watching a popular movie that has taken the country by storm, with the goal of discerning its importance to the average viewer. Rather than criticizing literature, philosophy, film, or music that is not explicitly Christian, we may find that by attempting to appreciate their value or worth, no matter how meager, we may be better able to dialogue with, and confront, our post-Christian culture with the claims of Christ.

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