# The Inspiration of the Bible

*What Jesus said of Scripture and the nature of apostolic teaching are two of the main issues in Rick Wade's examination of the inspiration of Scripture.*

A question we often encounter when talking with non-believers about Christ is, "Why should I believe the Bible?" Or a person might say, "You have your Bible; Muslims have their Koran; different religions have their own holy books. What makes yours special?" How would you answer such questions?



These questions fall under the purview of apologetics. They call for a defense. However, before giving a defense we need theological and biblical grounding. To defend the Bible, we have to know what it is.

In this article, then, we'll deal with the nature of Scripture. Are these writings simply the remembrances of two religious groups? Are they writings consisting of ideas conceived by Jews and early Christians as they sought to establish their religion? Or are they the words of God Himself, given to us for our benefit?

The latter position is the one held by the people of God throughout history. Christians have historically accepted both the Old and New Testaments as God's word written. But two movements of thought have undermined belief in inspiration. One was the higher critical movement that reduced Scripture to simply the recollections and ideas of a religious group. The more recent movement (although it really isn't organized enough to call it a "movement") is religious pluralism, which holds that all religions—or at least the major ones—are equally valid, meaning that none is more true than others. If

other religions are equally valid, then other holy books are also. Many Christian young people think this way.

Our evaluation of the Bible and other "holy books" is governed by the recognition that the Bible is the inspired word of God. If God's final word is found in what we call the Bible, then no other book can be God's word. To differ with what the Bible says is to differ with God.

What do we mean by *inspiration*? Following the work of the higher critics, many people—even within the church—have come to see the Bible as inspired in the same way that, say, an artist might be inspired. The artist sees the Grand Canyon and with her imagination now flooded with images and ideas hurries back to her canvas to paint a beautiful picture. A poet, upon viewing the devastation of war, proceeds to pen lines which stir the compassion of readers. Is that what we mean when we say the Bible is inspired?

We use the word *inspiration* because of 2 Timothy 3:16: "All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness." *Inspired* is translated from the Greek word *theopnuestos* which literally means "God-breathed." Some have said the word could be translated "ex-spired" or "breathed out." *Inspiration*, then, in the biblical sense, isn't the stirring of the imagination of the writer, but rather is the means by which the writers accurately wrote what God wanted written.

This idea finds support in 2 Peter 1: 20-21: "But know this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture is a matter of one's own interpretation, for no prophecy was ever made by an act of human will, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God."

What we need before proceeding is a working definition of inspiration. Theologian Carl F. H. Henry writes, "Inspiration

is a supernatural influence upon the divinely chosen prophets and apostles whereby the Spirit of God assures the truth and trustworthiness of their oral and written proclamation."{1} Furthermore, the writers were "divinely superintended by the Holy Spirit in the choice of words they used."{2} Although some things were dictated to the writers, most of the time the Spirit simply superintended the writing so that the writer, using his own words, wrote what the Spirit wanted.

## The Historical View of the Church

The first place to look in establishing any doctrine is, of course, the Bible. Before turning to Scripture to see what it claims for itself, however, it will be worthwhile to be sure this has been the view of the church throughout history. Because of the objections of liberal scholars, we might want to see whose position is in keeping with our predecessors in the faith.

Historically, the church has consistently held to the inspiration of Scripture, at least until the 19th century. One scholar has said that throughout the first eight centuries of the church, "Hardly is there a single point with regard to which there reigned . . . a greater or more cordial unanimity."{3} The great Princeton theologian B. B. Warfield said, "Christendom has always reposed upon the belief that the utterances of this book are properly oracles of God."{4} In the 16th century, the Reformers Martin Luther and John Calvin were explicit in their recognition of the divine source and authority of Scripture.{5} B. B. Warfield, Charles Hodge, J. Gresham Machen, Carl F. H. Henry, J. I. Packer and other very reputable scholars and theologians over the last century and a half have argued forcefully for the inspiration of Scripture. And as Warfield notes, this belief underlies all the creeds of the church as well.{6}

## The Witness of the Old Testament

Let's turn now to the Bible itself, beginning with the Old Testament, to see whether its own claims match the beliefs of the church.

The clear intent of the Old Testament writers was to convey God's message. Consider first that God was said to *speak* to the people. "God says" (Deut. 5:27), "Thus says the Lord" (Exod. 4:22), "I have put my words in your mouth" (Jer. 1:9), "The word of the Lord came to him" (Gen. 15:4; 1 Kings 17:8). All these references to God speaking show that He is interested in communicating with us verbally. The Old Testament explicitly states 3,808 times that it is conveying the express words of God.{7}

Furthermore, God was so interested in people preserving and knowing His word that at times He told people to write down what He said. We read in Exodus 17:14: "Then the Lord said to Moses, 'Write this in a book as a memorial and recite it to Joshua, that I will utterly blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven.'" (See also 24:3-7, 34:27; Jer. 30:2; 36:2.)

The clear testimony of Old Testament writings is that God spoke to people, and He instructed them to write down the things He said. These writings have been handed down to us.

Of course, we shouldn't think of all the Old Testament—or the New Testament either—as having been dictated to the writers. In fact, most of the Bible was not. What we want to establish here is that God is a communicating God, and He communicates verbally. The idea that God is somehow unable or unwilling to communicate propositionally to man—which is what a number of scholars of this century continue to hold—is foreign to the Old Testament. God spoke, and the people heard and understood.

We should now shift to the New Testament to see what it says about inspiration. Let's begin with the testimony of Jesus.

## The Witness of Jesus

Did Jesus believe in the doctrine of inspiration?

It is clear that Jesus acknowledged the Old Testament writings as being divine in nature. Consider John 10:34-36: “Jesus answered them, ‘Is it not written in your Law, “I have said you are gods”? If he called them “gods” to whom the word of God came—and the Scripture cannot be broken—what about the one whom the Father set apart as his very own and sent into the world?’” Jesus believed it was *God’s* word that came to the prophets of old, and He referred to it as Scripture that could not be broken. In Matt. 5:17-19, He affirmed the Law as being fixed and above the whims of men.

Jesus drew on the teachings of the Old Testament in His encounter with Satan (Matt. 4:1-11). His responses, “Man shall not live on bread alone” (Deut. 8:3), “You shall worship the Lord your God and serve Him only” (Deut. 6:13), and “You shall not put the Lord your God to the test” (Deut. 6:16) are all drawn from Deuteronomy. Each statement was prefaced by “It is written” or “It is said.” Jesus said that he only spoke what the Father wanted Him to (John 12:49). By quoting these passages as authoritative over Satan, He was, in effect, saying these were God’s words. He also honored the words of Moses (Mark 7:10), Isaiah (Mark 7:6), David (Mark 12:36), and Daniel (Matt. 24:15) as authoritative, as carrying the weight of God’s words.{8} Jesus even referred to an Old Testament writing as God’s word when this wasn’t explicitly attributed to God in the Old Testament itself (Gen. 2:24; Matt. 19:4,5).

In our consideration of the position of Jesus on the nature of Scripture, we also need to look at His view of the New Testament. But one might ask, “It hadn’t been written yet, how could Jesus be cited in support of the inspiration of the New Testament?

To get a clear picture of this we need to realize what Jesus

was doing with His apostles. His small group of twelve was being trained to carry on the witness and work of Jesus after He was gone. They were given a place of special importance in the furthering of His work (Mark 3:14-15). Thus, He taught them with clarity while often teaching the crowds in parables (Mark 4:34). He sent them as the Father had sent Him (John 20:21) so they would be witnesses of "all these things" (Luke 24:48). Both the Spirit and the apostles would be witnesses for Christ (John 15:26ff; cf. Acts 5:32). He promised to send the Spirit to help them when He left. They would be empowered to bear witness (Acts. 1:4,5,8). The Spirit would give them the right things to say when brought to trial (Matt. 10:19ff). He would remind them of what Jesus had said (John 14:26) and would give them new knowledge (John 16:12ff). As John Wenham said, "The last two promises . . . do not of course refer specifically or exclusively to the inspiration of a New Testament Canon, but they provide in principle all that is required for the formation of such a Canon, should that be God's purpose."{9}

Thus, Jesus didn't identify a specific body of literature as the New Testament or state specifically that one would be written. However, He prepared the apostles as His special agents to hand down the truths He taught, and He promised assistance in doing this. Given God's work in establishing the Old Testament and Jesus' references to the written word in His own teaching, it is entirely reasonable that He had plans for His apostles to put in writing the message of good news He brought.

## The Witness of the Apostles

Finally, we need to see what the apostles tell us about the nature of Scripture. To understand their position, we'll need to not only see what they *said* about Scripture, but also understand what it meant to be an apostle.

The office of apostle grew out of Jewish jurisprudence wherein a *sjaliach* ("one who is sent out") could appear in the name of another with the authority of that other person. It was said that "the *sjaliach* for a person is as this person himself."{10} As Christ's representatives the apostles ( *apostle* also means "sent out") carried forth the teaching they had received. "This apostolic preaching is the foundation of the Church, to which the Church is bound" (Matt. 16:18; Eph. 2:20).{11} The apostles had been authorized by Jesus as special ambassadors to teach what he had taught them (cf. John 20:21). Their message was authoritative when spoken; when written it would be authoritative as well.

As the apostles were *witnesses* of the gospel they also were bearers of *tradition*. This isn't "tradition" in the contemporary sense by which we mean that which comes from man and may be changed. *Tradition* in the Hebrew understanding meant "what has been handed down with authority."{12} This is what Paul referred to when he praised the Corinthians for holding to the traditions they had been taught and exhorted the Thessalonians to do the same (1 Cor. 11:2; 2 Thess. 2:15). Contrast this with the tradition of men which drew criticism from Jesus (Mark 7:8).

Paul attributed what he taught directly to Christ (2 Cor. 13:3). He identified his gospel with the preaching of Jesus (Rom. 16:25). And he said his words were taught by the Spirit (1 Cor. 2:13). What he wrote to the Corinthians was "the Lord's commandment" (1 Cor. 14:37). Furthermore, Paul, and John as well, considered their writings important enough to call for people to read them (Col. 4:16; 1 Thess. 5:27; John 20:31; Rev. 1:3). Peter put the apostolic message on par with the writings of the Old Testament prophets (2 Pet. 3:2).

What was the nature of Scripture according to the apostles? Many if not most Christians are familiar with 2 Timothy 3:16: "All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness."

This is the verse most often cited in support of the doctrine of the inspiration of Scripture. Paul was speaking primarily of the Old Testament in this passage. The idea of God "breathing out" or speaking wasn't new to Paul, however, because he knew the Old Testament well, and there he could read that "the 'mouth' of God was regarded as the source from which the Divine message came."{13}Isaiah 45:23 says, "I have sworn by Myself, The word has gone forth from My mouth in righteousness and will not turn back" (see also 55:11). Paul also would have known that Jesus quoted Deuteronomy when He replied to the tempter, "Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God" (Matt. 4:4; cf. Deut. 8:3).

Peter also taught that the Scriptures were, in effect, the speech of God. In 2 Peter 1: 20-21, he noted that prophecy was made by "men moved by the Holy Spirit [who] spoke from God." It didn't originate in men.

One further note. The Greek word *graphe* in the New Testament only refers to sacred Scriptures. This is the word used in 1 Timothy 5:18 and 2 Peter 3:16 to refer to the writings of the apostles.

The apostles thus were the ambassadors of Christ who spoke in His stead and delivered the message which was the standard for belief and practice. They had both their own recollections of what they witnessed and heard and the empowerment of the Spirit. The message they preached was the one they wrote down. The New Testament, like the Old, claims very clearly to be the inspired word of God.

## Making a Defense

We now come to a very important part in our discussion of the inspiration of Scripture. It's one thing to establish the biblical teaching on the nature of the Bible itself. It's

quite another to give a defense to critics.

As I noted earlier, we frequently hear questions such as “Many religions have their own holy books. Why should we believe the Bible is special?”

When this objection comes from someone who holds to religious pluralism, before answering the question about the Bible we will have to question him on the reasonableness of pluralism itself. No amount of evidences or arguments for the Bible will make a bit of difference if the person believes that there is no right or wrong when it comes to religion.{14}

It’s easy for apologists to come to rely primarily on their arguments when responding to critics, which is something even Paul wouldn’t do (1 Cor. 2:3-5). What we learn from Scripture is the power of Scripture itself. “For the word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword,” Hebrews says (4:12). Isaiah 55:11 says that God’s word will accomplish his will. In Acts 2:37 we see the results of the proclamation of the word of God in changed people.

So, where am I going with this? I wonder how many people who object to our insistence that our “holy book” is the only true word of God have ever read any of it! Before we launch into a lengthy apologetic for Scripture, it might be good to get them to read it and let the Spirit open their minds to see its truth (1 Cor. 2:6-16).

Am I tossing out the entire apologetics enterprise and saying, “Look, just read the Bible and don’t ask so many questions”? No. I’m simply trying to move the conversation to more fruitful ground. Once the person learns what the Bible says, he can ask specific questions about its content, or we can ask him what about it makes him think it might *not* be God’s word.

The Bible clearly claims to be the authoritative word of God, and as such it makes demands on us. So, at least the *tone* of Scripture is what we might expect of a book with God as its

source. But does it give evidence that it *must* have God as its source? And does its self-witness find confirmation in our experience?

Regarding the necessity of having God as its source, we can consider prophecy. Who else but God could know what would happen hundreds of years in the future? What mere human could get 300 prophecies correct about one person (Jesus)?{15}

The Bible's insight into human nature and the solutions it provides to our fallen condition are also evidence of its divine source. In addition, the Bible's honesty about the weaknesses of even its heroes is evidence that it isn't just a human book. By contrast, we tend to build ourselves up in our own writing.

As further evidence that the Bible is God's word, we can note its survival and influence throughout the last two millennia despite repeated attempts to destroy it.

What Scripture proclaims about itself finds confirmation in our experience. For example, the practical changes it brings in individuals and societies are evidence that it is true.

One more note. We have the testimony of Jesus about Scripture whose resurrection is evidence that He knew what He was talking about!

In sum, the testimony of Scripture to its own nature finds confirmation in many areas.{16} Even with all this evidence, however, we aren't going to be able to prove the inspiration of the Bible to anyone who either isn't interested enough to give it serious thought or to the critic who only wants to argue. But we can share its message, make attempts at gentle persuasion and answer questions as we wait for the Spirit to open the person's mind and heart.

**Notes**

1. Carl F. H. Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority,* vol. 4, *The God Who Speaks and Shows* (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1979), 129.
2. Class notes, *Introduction to Theology*, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, May 4, 1987. See also Warfield cited in Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority,* 4:141.
3. L. Gaussen, *The Inspiration of the Holy Scriptures* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1949), 145. See the entire section, pp. 145-152.
4. Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield, *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1948), 107.
5. Warfield, 108-09.
6. Ibid., 110-11.
7. René Pache, *The Inspiration and Authority of Scripture* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1969), 81.
8.John W. Wenham, *Christ and the Bible* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1972), 24.
9. Wenham, 113.
10. Edward J. Young, *Thy Word is Truth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957), 21.
11.Ibid.
12. Herman Ridderbos, "The Canon of the New Testament," in *Revelation and the Bible*, ed. Carl F. H. Henry ;(Grand Rapids: Baker, 1958), 192, 193.
13.Ibid., 193.
14. For help in dealing with relativism and religious pluralism, see these other Probe articles: Don Closson, How Do You Spell Truth? and Rick Rood, Do All Roads Lead to God? The Christian Attitude Toward Non-Christian Religions.
15. Josh McDowell, *Evidence That Demands a Verdict*, rev. ed. (San Bernardino, Ca.: Here's Life Publishers, ;1979), 144.
16. See Bernard Ramm, *Protestant Christian Evidences* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1953), esp. chaps. 8 and 9.

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# The Time of Our Lives

In his song “Time in a Bottle,” Jim Croce sings about wishing he could capture and contain time so he could spend eternity with the one he loved. But he laments that:

> *There never seems to be enough time*
> *To do the things you want to do*
> *Once you find them*

You know the feeling. Our days get filled up with things that, upon reflection, don’t seem to really matter much, leaving little time for things that are important. Rather than being a friend, time seems more like a foe; “more of a nemesis or taskmaster,” says organizational coach Mark Freier.{1}

In the Middle Ages, time was measured primarily in periods within which people dwelt. Days were divided into rhythmic patterns: sunrise, breakfast time, work hours, evening, sunset. Hours were significant in relation to the daily cycle of prayers prescribed by the Church. But even in that case, there wasn’t a concern with sticking to precise times of the day.

In the Middle Ages people weren’t primarily concerned with time measured by the clock but with the quality of life’s experiences.

As the West moved into modernity, clock time assumed greater importance. Now we worry, not only about hours, but about minutes. As a fund raising specialist told me, if you ask a businessman for ten minutes, take ten minutes and no more. His time is carefully apportioned out, and, as we have heard many times, time is money.

Busyness has become so routine that we easily feel guilty if we don't have anything we have to do. How can we "waste time" like that? But that's usually not a problem! The world outside has a way of filling up our daily planner even if we don't.

There are two ways to think about time I'd like to consider, designated by different words.

One is *chronos.* Chronos was the name given by the Greeks to the god who represented time. Chronos time is clock time. It is marked off by seconds, minutes, hours. Chronos is what I'm thinking about when I'm adding new things to my daily calendar. It's the measure of time I can give to one project or person before I must be moving on to the next item on the agenda.

The other word for time is *kairos.* Kairos was a child of Zeus. He represented opportunity. While chronos time is a quantitative thing, kairos is more qualitative; the concern is with the *what* that is to be done and the importance of doing it. Both are ways of measuring our experience in life, but they do so quite differently. Let's look at them more closely.

Two things help with understanding what kairos is. It speaks of the quality of our actions and of opportunity. Kairos time focuses on what we're doing (or planning to do) rather than the number of minutes or hours it will take. And it connotes the perfect time, the perfect moment, to do what needs to be done. It points to the significance of certain things. Success isn't measured by how many things we get done in a short amount of time, but by how well we've done the important things.

Theologian Daniel Clendenin uses Martin Luther King, Jr., and an example of someone who wanted to grasp the moment. Even though he knew his life had been threatened, he determined to press on with his work for civil rights. It was the time for that, even if King's chronos time might well be cut short very

soon. And indeed it was.{2}

Winston Churchill provides another illustration. When things were going very badly for England in World War II, Churchill rallied the country to fight as hard as they could, because it was a time in which freedom could be lost by many, many people. The Nazis had to be defeated. It was the right time, in the sense of kairos. But even as kairos speaks of the opportunity to do something great, it can also be fraught with danger.

Still one more illustration is the song by the Byrds, *Turn, Turn, Turn,* taken from the Old Testament book of Ecclesiastes:

> *To everything / There is a season / And a time to every purpose, under Heaven*
> *A time to be born, a time to die / A time to plant, a time to reap*

Notice the songwriter didn't say, "There's a time to plant, and that's at 6 a.m. on September 3. And we have eight hours to get it done." Even though farmers might set a day for everyone to gather and begin, that isn't the point of the song (or the Scripture). The time to plant is different from the time to harvest. When it's time to plant, nothing else will do but to plant.

Chronos and kairos are certainly connected, but they are qualitatively different. Kairos intersects chronos. It is within chronos time that we experience kairos. We can't have kairos without chronos, but we can have chronos without kairos.

Chronos time can often be made up, but that isn't so easy with kairos. I can find an open half hour block in my schedule tomorrow for that meeting I couldn't attend today. But can I get back that time I should have given a co-worker who's been going through tough times and really needed a listening ear?

What matters with kairos isn't whether something fits in my schedule. What matters is, what matters! In kairos time, minutes aren't the measure of the value of our acts. The things we do, rather, grant value to the minutes they take. Mark Freier put it very well: ""To miscalculate kronos {3} is inconvenient. To miscalculate kairos is lamentable."{4}

Kairos speaks of a quality of life that sees ourselves, others, the world, as significant and worthy of our time, attention, energy, resources. Its enemies include pragmatism, doubts about our own significance, an absence of a long view of things, and, even more so, no eternal view—no understanding of what gives our lives eternal significance.

The old cry was "Carpe diem!" "Seize the day!" Someone might wonder, seize it for what? If nothing lasts, if nothing has eternal significance, what is the point? It all slips through our fingers and is gone. Seizing the day isn't to be understood as the existentialist's call to experience the moment. The focus on the latter is on fleeting experiences. The hope is that by focusing on those, one can shape one's own life rather than living the life others hand you. But there's nothing eternal about this. I am reminded of Meursault, the protagonist in Albert Camus' *The Stranger,* who believes he lives in an indifferent world, or what *should* be an indifferent world, and wonders why people think anything is really significant. Nothing is of any more value than anything else because it all ends in death. The universe doesn't care.

Which brings me to a specifically Christian view of time as kairos.

My search through the NT showed eighty uses of the word. It's a significant concept in Scripture. The most familiar reference to kairos in the New Testament is probably Eph. 5:15-16: "Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise but as wise, making the best use of the time, because the days are evil." The King James used the more familiar phrase, "redeem

the time." It means literally to buy up, or rescue from loss, the opportunity, the proper season, the right time. The word kairos is also used in the story of Jesus' temptation in the wilderness. After Jesus resisted Satan, Luke writes that "he [Satan] left Him until an opportune time" (Lk. 4:13).

What gives significance to our time (and even to chronos time) is that we live in a world created by God who is working out His plan that will be consummated at His appointed time. Theologian James Emery White wrote this: "Kairos moments are never pragmatic moves to ensure a blessed life during our short tenure on earth. They are moments to be seized for the sake of eternity and the Lord of eternity."{5} Good works have been prepared for us to do (Eph. 2:10), and we should apply ourselves because they matter beyond the grave.

So, how do we do it? How does one live in kairos time in a world governed by chronos? Others want me to think of time the way they do, as openings in my schedule that can be filled with something else. I have responsibilities in my job and with my family and church that require keeping a calendar.

We aren't going to return to an agrarian society like that of the Middle Ages. And our lives *are* intertwined with others'. We *can,* however, do something about it. For starters, we can be more aware of how we use the time that *is* truly ours. Are we doing useful things? That doesn't mean to fill our time with "meaningful busyness." There's a proper time for rest as well as for work, for creativity as well as for chores. Changing a mindset and habits takes practice. Little by little we can "re-color" our lives.

More significantly, however, is a fundamental change in our thinking about the importance of the things we do. Few of us will become Martin Luther Kings or Winston Churchills. But we—you and I—are important, and we touch the lives of important people. Not all kairos times have to be of society wide significance. The main point is that life and what we do

with it, even in the details, is rich with significance and meaning. We can make a difference in this world, in others' lives, if we'll but seize the opportunities while they are present.

**Notes**

1. Mark Freier, Whatif Enterprises.
2. Daniel Clendenin, "When Chronos Meets Kairos, Martin Luther King, Jr. Day, 2006."
3. Alternate spelling for "chronos"
4. Freier.
5. James Emory White, *Life Defining Moments: Daily Choices with the Power to Transform Your Life* (Waterbrook Press, 2001), 97; quoted by Mark Freier.

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# "How Should I Respond to 'It's All Right to Do Anything as Long as It Doesn't Hurt Anybody'?"

**I have a question about some of the new age mentality that I have encountered in the more recent months. As apologetics is a bit of a hobby for me, I love learning what other people think and believe. It seems that as I ask around more and more, people are always saying the same thing. In more words they always seem to say "I can do whatever I want as long as it doesn't hurt anybody." I know that this is by no means a**

**new or uncommon answer, but it seems to be growing to me. Usually I address this with a series of questions which will cause them to backtrack and correct themselves, something like this: It is not all right to hurt people? Do you count as a person? Are you allowed to hurt yourself? Is emotional harm all right? How did you determine that it was not all right to hurt people? Who enforces this rule? Are you making a connection between church and state? How did the world come into existence? And so on. My philosophy is that sooner or later they will be forced to acknowledge that their view is full of holes, yet it appears to me that this way doesn't work. I actually should have realized this sooner, because I now realize that those people really do not know what they believe, and that their choices are based on emotions. Thus, I am asking you how you would suggest responding to the view that "It is all right to do anything as long as it doesn't hurt anybody"?**

I'm afraid you've hit the wall of the skeptical postmodern mentality. When a person doesn't believe anyone can know what is true about anything, and adopts the "true for me" mentality, the results are an amazing batch of contradictory ideas and no reason to try to make them consistent. People toss together beliefs according to what seems right at the moment, changing beliefs like changing outfits; ideas are subject to fashion just as clothes are. After trying to reason with people who think as you have described, you want to bang someone's head against the wall – theirs or your own (I don't suggest either!).

Because on the level of ideas contradictory beliefs can be held with such amazing ease, one typically cannot convince a person on that level. I say "typically" because some can be convinced at least that their ideas are inconsistent and that that is a problem. You just have to try drawing the person into a conversation and see what happens. For many it takes real life situations to drive home the point.

I recommend you find a copy of Francis Schaeffer's *The God Who Is There* and focus especially on the last section: "Speaking Historic Christianity Into the Twentieth-Century Climate." He deals with this issue there. One of his main points is that any religion or philosophy which isn't Christian must result in some kind of inconsistency in a person's life because we were made by God to live in God's universe. False beliefs put us at odds with the universe and with ourselves. So, for instance, a person who says there is no difference between good and evil will be quite upset if you pour boiling water on him. He might even say you were wrong! Of course, I don't recommend actually pulling off such stunts to prove a point! What one can do, however, is gently (I Pe. 3:15) question a person about an inconsistency between what the person says she believes and how she acts. It's like turning a light on and letting the other person see the problem for herself.

One thing we apologists easily forget is tact. One person defined it as "the ability to make a point without sticking someone with it." Work toward encouragement and very subtle enlightenment rather than conquering in your manner. Be committed to truth, but also be committed to people and to showing the attractiveness of truth to them rather than whipping them with it.

If you have any questions after reading Schaeffer's book (or at least the above-mentioned segment of it) write to me directly.

Rick Wade

**See Also:**

**As Long As It Doesn't Hurt Anyone Else** by Rick Wade

# “Why Is There So Much Acceptance of the Idea That Truth is Relative?”

Thanks for your question about truth. The current pseudo-relativist mindset makes apologetics and evangelism difficult, for the non-Christian is often very happy for us to be Christians . . . as long as we don’t insist or even suggest that what we believe is true for everyone. I call it pseudo-relativism because no one is a thoroughgoing relativist. We ALL have our absolutes. (For more on this you might want to look at William Watkins’ book The New Absolutes. Or for a shorter treatment see my article with the same title on our web site.)

Why is it so widely accepted? There are a few reasons, I think.

> *1. The influx of Eastern religions in the ’60s introduced a “both/and” mindset with respect to truth. In the West we have recognized the reality of the “either/or” nature of the universe: e.g., either the earth revolves around the sun or it doesn’t. It can’t be “both the earth revolves around the sun and it doesn’t.” Which is it? This is simply how the universe is. This reality is represented in logic as the law of non-contradiction. We presuppose it in our speech constantly. When the doctor says, “Take this medicine; it will help you get well,” he doesn’t also mean “Take this medicine; it will not help you get better.” Eastern philosophies and religions often have a pantheistic view of reality which means that everything is of one nature, and everything is divine. If all is one, then those things which*

*appear to be opposites to us really aren't.*

*2. Social realities—Plurality of beliefs: How can all these sincere people be wrong? we ask.*

*3. Democratic ideal—One person, one vote. Knowledge becomes democratic; everyone's opinion is equally valid.*

*4. Science—Quantum theory: Paul Davies said that "Uncertainty is the fundamental ingredient of the quantum theory" (this theory, by the way, is a very significant one in science today). Some people think that if scientists can't even be certain about empirical matters, why do we think we can know about spiritual matters with any certainty?*

*5. Religion—No one knows ultimate reality, people think, so one god is as good as another. Some tell us it's our responsibility to create reality; some say we are gods ourselves.*

*6. Philosophy—Rationalism has faded away; political power is our basic category of understanding rather than truth.*

I think, then, that there are several factors which figure into our postmodern frame of mind. This is the hallmark of postmodernism: a loss of confidence in our ability to know objective truth. Our job is to restore confidence in it, grounded in Jesus, the creator of the universe.

Thanks again for writing.

Rick Wade
Probe Ministries

# “How Do I Witness to People Conditioned for Soundbites?”

**First let me say what an encouragement your site is to me. I truly enjoy engaging my mind about my faith and your site is a wonderful catalyst for this experience, I find too often that the church has a very anti-intellectual attitude, which brings me to my first of two questions:**

**1. For all the talk about using the mind in the Christian faith it at least in my opinion seems to be a hallow protest because our culture is absolutely mindless, both the secular side and the Christian side (generally outside of academia and some exceptions). I suppose what I’m saying is that I have found my desire to be a well thinking Christian a handicap for witnessing and contending for my faith in the normal everyday practical world, where people my age speak in slang, are induced my degenerate immoral images, and have grown up being bombarded with billions of bits of emotional, and psychological information throughout their lives, normal people barely want to hear a well thought out statement anymore about anything because they are conditioned for soundbites and have been culturally reborn impatient, how am I to practically deal with this dilemma when I witness, and still keep my intellectual mind from going insane?? Or how do you deal with people who ask straw man questions?? Questions that are asked and really are framed in such a way that no answer is beneficial to actually knowing the truth but only serves to trap the Christian thinker in such a way that whatever answer he gives will just dig his own hole???**

> *How am I to practically deal with this dilemma when I witness, and still keep my intellectual mind from going insane??*

It can be very frustrating trying to reason with people who

aren’t interested in or haven’t been prepared to think well. But reason is the only tool we have (humanly speaking) to combat this problem. We can’t turn to, say, force to bring people around. That will only enforce the “will to power” mentality of our age—that might makes right. So what we must do is take people to those issues which they do think about to get them into a mental framework suitable for thinking about spiritual matters. Of course, once the topic of religion comes up they might very well shift to a “this works for me” or “whatever you believe” attitude. At that point, however, we can simply ask if they think religion falls into a special category where thinking is prohibited, and if so, why. If they should say that religion deals with abstract ideas, we can point them to the factual aspects of Christianity. People who aren’t interested in thinking or who are convinced that thinking is unnecessary or prohibited in certain areas cannot be intellectually pressed to think. We have to sneak in the back door, as it were. Get them thinking, and then shift to the things we want them to think about.

*Or how do you deal with people who ask straw man questions??*

If they should ask straw man questions, we can ask them (gently) the relevance of the question. If they seem to be simply out to trap us, we can ask how significant the particular issue is. I see no problem with pointing out that it seems they’re trying to trap us! We can ask if they’re serious about discussing the issue.

**2. The second question deals with form critisicm and its related annoyances. If Christianity is actually “true” and not just something that is relatively true as long as people believe in it, during the time when Christ was on earth why did no one actually write immense volumes of material about what He actually did while He was doing it??? He was GOD for goodness sake?!? I mean according to the gospels he healed tons of people and did things people never saw before, but we don’t really have any actual at hand testimony of this**

**stuff??? Yes we have outside historical references, but honestly they are seriously lacking in content, and the gospels conservatively estimated about 50 years after his ascension? I have honestly thought about this, and it just makes me wonder??? Yes I have evaluated the lives of the apostles and alot of the other evidences for Christianity but sometimes it just seems as though God decided to make it either/or. It could be a lie and a bunch of stories formed down through time or it could be true: why didn't God make the evidence clear and bulletproof? I have never understood this. It just seems the whole thing seems dependent on man's thinking and not on God's clear revelation. (Did he make it really clear if no one really wrote about until at least 50 years later?) Like biblical scholars will sugar up the outside historical references and stuff. Perhaps my thinking is flawed here, any answer you have to remove this diffuculty will certainly help??**

A good recent work of apologetics for these questions is Lee Strobel's *The Case for Christ*. I encourage you to get a copy and read the fuller answers to your questions. I'll also refer below to John Bloom's article "Why Isn't the Evidence Clearer?".

You said there is no "at hand testimony." What about that of Matthew, John, James and Peter? Surely these apostles and New Testament writers had direct experience with Christ. Paul was taught by the risen Lord. Luke did his research carefully, talking to those who walked with Christ.

Regarding the dates of the New Testament writings: The book of Acts must have been written before A.D. 62, since it contains no mention of Paul's death. Thus, Luke must have been written before that, and Mark before Luke (since Luke drew from Mark). This puts two of the Gospels within 30 years of Jesus.

Why weren't there mountains of writings about Jesus from his time? Perhaps because journalism as we know it wasn't

practiced then. It seems apparent that people did write down things Jesus said and did. But we wouldn't expect the kind of written coverage historical events get today.

Why didn't God make it all clearer? John Bloom has a few suggestions. He notes first:

> There are two reasonable demands for any set of evidence. First, the evidence should be clear enough to be intellectually sound at the same level of certainty one uses in making other important decisions. Second, the evidence must be clear enough to select one set of claims over another (that is, clear enough to select Christianity over other religions).

For a point of comparison Bloom considers the knowledge gained from science. He says:

> *Often the data are inconclusive or ambiguous preventing a rigorous conclusion. However, abandoning the research and pronouncing that no one can ever discover the answer is poor methodology. The fact is that the natural order rarely produces ideal data, and nature appears to be more far more complex the more we know about it.*

Do we give up on learning about nature because the facts aren't always so clear? Likewise, we wouldn't expect to find the rich truths of our faith to be so easily searched out and set forth.

Bloom also considers the possibility that God might have good reasons for not making it all clearer.

> But even if He reveals evidence of Himself only to benefit us, why isn't He more forthright about it? This much seems clear: If He made His presence or the evidence too obvious, it would interfere with His demonstration, which is intended to draw out or reveal the true inner character of mankind.

> We know from several passages of Scripture that this is part of God's purpose for maintaining a relative silence. For example, in Psalm 50:21-22 we read, "These things you have done, and I kept silence; you thought that I was just like you; I will reprove you, and state the case in order before your eyes." From these statements we come to see that God is not struggling desperately to gain man's attention. Actually He is restraining Himself in order to demonstrate to human beings something about our inner character, or tendency to evil.

Finally, Bloom notes that we often don't believe evidence which is perfectly clear. In Romans 1 we read that God has made Himself known to everyone, yet many refuse to believe. Says Bloom:

> Given this tendency on the part of man, how clear does the evidence have to be before people would universally recognize the existence of the God of the Bible? Would a cross in the sky actually be sufficient to convert Carl Sagan? Would the performance of an undeniable miracle in a scoffer's presence be enough? However impressive such feats would be, the records of history show that most people choose to ignore whatever evidence they have, no matter how clear it may be.

Some, for example, will insist upon starting with naturalistic presuppositions and conclude that Christianity can't be true! Atheists are adept at using this kind of reasoning. They will say, like Bertrand Russell, "Not enough evidence!" What they want is evidence which fits within the narrow confines of their naturalism. Such reductionism doesn't provide for good reasoning.

God has given plenty of evidence for His existence and for the truth of the faith. It is up to the individual to consider the evidence and respond to it.

Rick Wade
Probe Ministries

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# “Why I Don’t Believe in God”

**Dear Christian Philosopher,**

**One day I was asked why I believed in God. I had a very hard time coming up with one reason. However, since my faith has disappeared, I have had a relatively easy time coming up with reasons that I do not believe in Him. Here are five:**

- **I have not perceived God. Everything that I believe exists, I have perceived. As a result, I do not believe in God (since I don’t believe that He exists).**

- **I have not received reliable testimony that anyone that has perceived God. However, I have received reliable testimony that others have not perceived God. Therefore, since I must perceive something (or at least hear reliable testimony from a perceiver) before I say it exists, I do not believe in God.**

- **I do not believe in God because he does not exist. God does not exist because everything that exists must take up space and God does not take up space. Therefore, God does not exist.**

- **It is impossible for spiritual substance to interact with physical substance. The Christian God is composed of spiritual substance and the world is material substance. The Christian God created the world. Since creating the world entails spiritual substance interacting with and manipulating physical substance, the Christian God cannot exist. (If spiritual substance can interact with physical**

**substance, then how?)**

**• There is no such thing as spiritual substance (Descartes mind or the other realm); i.e., the soul, the devil, angels, hell etc. (If there is spiritual substance, then I would like to hear some reasons why I should believe that there is such a substance.). My reason for saying that there is no such thing as spiritual substance is due to spiritual substance being unperceivable and non-existent (assuming that to exist is to take up space). In fact, spiritual substance cannot be perceived because human-kinds faculties for perception only gather information from material substance. Since all human faculties are material, they cannot gather information from spiritual substance because the spiritual substance would have to interact with the material faculties; and it is impossible for spiritual substance to interact with physical substance.**

**Like I said, my faith disappeared. I believe that if someone shows me how I have made a mistake, then my faith will come back. I know that these reasons are probably not great in the eyes of a seasoned philosopher (I am just doing my undergraduate work right now), but in my stage of development as a thinker, these are huge roadblocks. Thank you.**

Dear _____,

Thanks for your letter. I will respond to each of your five points individually.

> *1. I have not perceived God. Everything that I believe exists, I have perceived. As a result, I do not believe in God (since I don't believe that He exists).*

By perceive, do you mean through the senses? If so, for this reason to be valid you must present a case for a strong empiricism such as that of the logical positivists of the early 20th century. They believed that only that can be held as true knowledge which is empirically verifiable. This has

been shown to be self-referentially incoherent, since the theory itself can't be so verified. Consider, too, the things I'm sure you believe exist even though you haven't perceived them by your senses, things such as electricity or love. You can see the effects of these things, but not the things themselves (if love can be called a "thing"). Similarly, we can see the effects or the works of God without seeing Him. If you mean you haven't perceived God in any way, there is nothing I can say to that, except that this is no proof that God doesn't exist. It could be that you have closed off any avenues by which you might perceive Him.

> *2. I have not received reliable testimony that anyone that has perceived God. However, I have received reliable testimony that others have not perceived God. Therefore, since I must perceive something (or at least hear reliable testimony from a perceiver) before I say it exists, I do not believe in God.*

Again, by perceive do you mean by the senses? If so, my first response still stands. If you mean any kind of perception, then millions of people can offer positive testimony. Of course, if you have decided already that God doesn't exist, then you will write such testimonies off to something else. But that would be no argument against God's existence, but rather a testimony of your own philosophical/religious biases.

> *3. I do not believe in God because he does not exist. God does not exist because everything that exists must take up space and God does not take up space. Therefore, God does not exist.*

Here you first need to present an argument to prove that anything which exists must take up space. Materialists have the same obligation as theists to prove their world view.

Here are some reasons I find naturalism untenable. Consider first that if matter is all that exists (since all existing

things must take up space), then the universe must be explainable purely in terms of natural laws, including the law of cause and effect. If there is a purely materialistic cause/effect explanation for everything, then even our mental processes are nothing more than the motion of atoms in our brains (whether chemical or electrical) acting in a strict cause/effect sequence. But if this is the case, how can we know whether what we think is true, or whether it is just the result of determined natural processes? How do you know that what you think about the world outside yourself actually obtains? It could all be simply mental images your brain has produced. There must be something in our reasoning abilities which isn't reducible to natural processes.

In addition, such determinism strikes at the heart of free will, which means that you didn't make a free choice to write your letter: it simply happened as a result of the natural, non-mental, processes of your brain and body.

One more note: Those working in artificial intelligence still haven't been able to produce a computer which thinks like a human. If reason were a strictly causal process surely they would have been able to do so already.

> *4. It is impossible for spiritual substance to interact with physical substance. The Christian God is composed of spiritual substance and the world is material substance. The Christian God created the world. Since creating the world entails spiritual substance interacting with and manipulating physical substance, the Christian God cannot exist. (If spiritual substance can interact with physical substance, then how?)*

Why do you believe it is impossible for spiritual substance to interact with physical substance? Some say that such interaction would negate natural laws. But I see no reason to accept this. We can't deny the interaction of the supernatural with the natural just because it complicates matters.

Just how this happens I cannot say. But my limited understanding shouldn't be an impediment to belief. If we have good reasons to believe God exists and created the universe, and there are no objections significant enough to overcome those reasons, then one is justified in believing in God. Because there are other reasons to believe in God, the burden is on you to prove the spiritual cannot interact with the physical.

> *5. There is no such thing as spiritual substance (Descartes' mind or 'the other realm'); i.e., the soul, the devil, angels, hell etc. (If there is spiritual substance, then I would like to hear some reasons why I should believe that there is such a substance.). My reason for saying that there is no such thing as spiritual substance is due to spiritual substance being unperceivable and non-existent (assuming that to exist is to take up space). In fact, spiritual substance cannot be perceived because human-kind's faculties for perception only gather information from material substance. Since all human faculties are material, they cannot gather information from spiritual substance because the spiritual substance would have to interact with the material faculties; and it is impossible for spiritual substance to interact with physical substance.*

You (again) make your presuppositions very clear: 1) all existing things take up space, and 2) the spiritual cannot interact with the material. Again, I ask that you present a case for your materialism and for your assumption about the impossibility of spiritual/natural interaction.

Here I have simply tried to respond to your ideas and show where I see weaknesses. For positive arguments to believe, there are numerous resources available. I suggest that you look for copies of C.S Lewis' books *Mere Christianity* and *Miracles*. For a study on mind/body dualism from a Christian perspective, see J.P. Moreland, *Scaling the Secular City: A Defense of Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1987),

chapter 3. Also look through the list of articles on our web site (www.probe.org) under the categories Theology/Apologetics and World View/Philosophy. My articles on atheism and miracles address the issue of naturalism.

Rick Wade

Probe Ministries

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# Looking for God

## Looking for God

> *If God had a name, what would it be?*
> *And would you call it to His face?*
> *If you were faced with Him in all His glory,*
> *What would you ask if you had just one question?*
> *Yeah, yeah, God is great.*
> *Yeah, yeah, God is good.*

God has made a comeback in pop music in recent years. In her song "One of Us," Joan Osborne wonders what we might ask God if we stood face-to-face with Him.{1} Writer Tom Beaudoin sees a spilled pitcher of milk in the music video for R.E.M.'s "Losing My Religion" as a symbol of the loss of religious authority in the lives of Gen-Xers.{2} Madonna's video for the song "Like a Prayer" is full of religious symbolism: an altar, a crucifix, candles, and other icons.{3}

Tom Beaudoin, a member of Generation X himself, says his generation is "strikingly religious." They express their spirituality through pop culture rather than through institutional religion.{4}The shift from the word *religion* to

*spirituality* is significant here. Having lost confidence in institutional religion to provide satisfactory answers to important issues, Xers look elsewhere; often mixing ideas and religious expressions from a variety of sources as each person chooses for him or herself what to believe.

Beaudoin says Xers are on an "irreverent spiritual quest." Feeling abandoned by parents, churches, politicians, and even technology, they seek their own path in finding meaning for their lives. Campus minister Jimmy Long writes, "Xers are twice as likely as people in [the Boomer] generation to be children of divorce. Between 1960 and 1979 the American divorce rate tripled." He continues, "Fifty percent of today's teenagers are not living with both birth parents."{5}

Looking outside the home, Xers feel let down as they look at what the Boomer generation left them.{6} They were alarmed by the TV movie *The Day After* that was about the results of nuclear war. The spaceship Challenger blew up shortly after takeoff; Watergate was fresh in our cultural memory; environmentalists were pointing to the severe damage to nature caused by technology. Xers thus see themselves as fixers, as those who have to clean up the mess preceding generations made. But since their own backgrounds were often so difficult, many simply hope to take charge of their own lives.

Finding little stability around them to give them any confidence that there is such a thing a objective truth which remains the same, and thus no ultimate truth which makes sense of everything, they feel the burden of providing their own meaning of life and establishing their own moral standards. Jimmy Long quotes Eric, a Gen-Xer who speaks of the stress this puts on him. "There's too much pressure from outside," he says.

> *"Life gets pretty complicated when you have to think carefully about everything you do, deciding for yourself whether it's right or wrong. In the end there can be so many*

> *conflicts going on inside of you that you can't do anything, it becomes impossible to be happy with what you think at any point."*{7}

As a result of all this, when they want to find their place in this world, Xers turn to friends. Their small communities of friends provide a structure for truth and meaning. Consensus means more with respect to "truth" than logic and facts.{8} "Busters process truth relationally rather than propositionally," say Celek and Zander.{9} The emphasis on community in Xer culture reveals their desire to get along, not get ahead; to connect, not conquer.{10}

The modernistic search for utopia without invoking God has been turned on its head with the Buster generation. Their horizons and ambitions might be smaller than those of their parents, but they have an openness to the transcendent that their parents didn't have. Spirituality is now an accepted aspect of life; Xers are open to a sense of fellowship with something bigger than themselves.

In his collection of short stories, *Life After God*, Doug Coupland allows a man he calls Scout to tell about himself and his small group of friends. Scout tells about the early, carefree days of fun and camaraderie, a time of living in paradise in which "any discussion of transcendental ideas [was] pointless."{11} As time went by, however, they all saw their dreams fade in the realities of everyday life. Scout had this to say about his life:

> *Sometimes I want to go to sleep and merge with the foggy world of dreams and not return to this, our real world. Sometimes I look back on my life and am surprised at the lack of kind things I have done. Sometimes I just feel that there must be another road that can be walked—away from this person I became—either against my will or by default. . . .*

He continues:

> *Now—here is my secret: I tell it to you with the openness of heart that I doubt I shall ever achieve again, so I pray that you are in a quiet room as you hear these words. My secret is that I need God—that I am sick and can no longer make it alone. I need God to help me give, because I no longer seem to be capable of giving; to help me be kind, as I no longer seem capable of kindness; to help me love, as I seem beyond being able to love.{12}*

This first fully postmodern generation needs to understand that they aren't alone: we *all* need God.The good news is that God has not left us wandering in a dark place but has come looking for us. He is not aloof, off making other worlds, or too busy gussying up heaven to notice us down here. He has taken on our flesh and become one of us. What if God *was* one of us, Joan Osborne? He was! He looked like us, hurt like us, laughed like us. In this article I'm going to look at some of the characteristics of this God who became like us, to show how He has the answers Xers need.

## God: A Person Who Sees and Feels

> *If God had a face, what would it look like?*
> *And would you want to see,*
> *If seeing meant that you would have to believe,*
> *In things like Heaven and in Jesus and the Saints,*
> *And all the Prophets and . . .*
> *Yeah, yeah, God is great.*
> *Yeah, yeah, God is good.*
> *Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah" {13}*

What *does* God look like? He doesn't have a physical body. But what does He "look" like character-wise? Those of us born before Gen-X have a hard time understanding that many in this generation have no real understanding of the God of the Bible,

the one in whom we ask them to commit their very souls. Who *is* this God, anyway? Let's consider some of His characteristics.

*A Person, Not a Force*

First of all God is a *Person*, not some Star Wars "force." Because we're created in His image we can learn some things about Him from looking at ourselves. As we are persons, He is a Person. "He possesses life, self-consciousness, freedom, purpose, intelligence, and emotion,"{14} just like us. Thus it could rightly be said that the Old Testament patriarch Abraham could be called "the friend of God" (James 2:23). One cannot be a friend with a "force." Because God is a Person He can be involved in our lives, unlike a force, which cannot relate to us on a personal level.

*One Who Sees . . .*

Furthermore, this is a God who *sees*. The Bible teaches, "The eyes of the Lord are in every place, watching the evil and the good." (Prov. 15:3) We're told that He knows completely. God knows when the sparrow falls from the sky; He even knows the number of hairs on our heads! (Matt. 10:29-31)

More importantly, God knows our hearts (Acts 1:24). Those who recognize their need see this as great news. If, on the other hand, this makes us fearful because we know the badness in our hearts, we're also told that "He knows how we are formed; he remembers that we are dust" (Psa. 103:14). God doesn't look for those who meet His standard, for none of us can. He looks for the one who will believe and then obey. In fact, it's at the place of our greatest need that He meets us.

*. . . With a Father's Eyes*

Beyond that, God presents Himself to us as a father, as *the* Father. Unlike many fathers today, God takes His fatherhood seriously. He provides for our needs (Matt. 7:11). Like a shepherd looking for a lost sheep, God looks for the one who strayed away; not wishing that any should remain lost. There's a story in the New Testament about a father whose younger son asks for his inheritance only to squander it on wild living. He winds up feeding pigs to earn his food. Finally, he comes to his senses and returns home, prepared to be as one of the hired men, to give up his rights as a son. As he is approaching his home, his father sees him coming down the road. In his joy, the father gathers up his robe and runs down the road to embrace the son (and in those days men didn't typically act in such an undignified way), and he welcomes his son home. The father in the story represents God the Father.

*One Who Feels*

Even more than seeing, God *feels.* He truly "knows our pain." In Jesus, we see a God who weeps over the hardness of His people, who has compassion on those who are sick and on those caught in sin. He knows the feeling of rejection, having been rejected even by those who were close to him. When he was put to death by crucifixion he felt the weight of sin even though he had never sinned. And while bearing our sin, he felt forsaken by God, alienated, as it were, from his own Father.

In short, God is a Person who reveals Himself as the Father who knows all about us, as one who understands our hurts and who cares. This is a God who is in touch. This is a God to believe in.

## The God Who Reaches Out

*Loves and Cares*

The character Scout in Doug Coupland's book, *Life Without God,* says he needs God. One reason, he says, is "to help me love, as I seem beyond being able to love."{15} The implication, of course, is that God has the capacity to help people love. To do this He must be a God of love Himself.

The Bible says that God *is* love (I John 4:8,16). It is a part of His very *nature* to love. This love is shown throughout Scripture in God's dealings with His people. Some critics see God in the Old Testament as angry and vengeful. But they are selectively focusing on the actions of a just and holy God in responding to wrongdoing. They overlook the love of God poured out on His people as He cared for them, protected them, and provided for their needs. *Lovingkindness* is a word used many times in descriptions of God. "But You, O Lord, are a compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness," (Ps. 86:15).

This love isn't just for the elite, for "super people." God cares for the "regular people." "For there is no partiality with God," the Bible says (Rom. 2:11; Acts 10:34). In fact, He chastises His people for treating the influential differently than others (James 2:1-7), and for attending to all their religious duties, but not demonstrating true love to those in need. "Learn to do right!" He says. "Seek justice, encourage the oppressed. Defend the cause of the fatherless, plead the case of the widow" (Isa. 1:17). The second greatest commandment, in fact, is to love our neighbor as ourselves (Luke 10:27-37), and our neighbor is anyone who is in need. Jesus reached out to the outsiders: the prostitutes, the lepers, and the poor. Those who knew their problems were the one's most drawn to him.

*Reaches Out by Identifying and Drawing Near*

What this reveals is a God that doesn't stand aloof, but who

draws near. From the beginning of the human race, He has been reaching out to us. When the first people sinned, God took the initiative to repair the breach. He established the people of Israel, and constantly sought after them, even when they were in open rebellion. This was all a precursor to God's most astonishing move. His love for us was so great that He chose to become one of us; He didn't stay apart from us, but rather He identified with us in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. Although he was God, He emptied Himself, and was "made in human likeness," and became a servant (Phil. 2:7).

As the shepherd searches for his sheep, God came looking for us. "Being in very nature God," the Bible says, Jesus "did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made Himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross!" (Phil. 2:6-8). Jesus became a man so he could bring mankind to Himself. And He did it by becoming one of us. This is a God to believe in.

## The God Who Receives, Redeems, Reconciles, and Restores

*Receives*

One of the problems many Gen-Xers have is the feeling that they aren't acceptable. The child saw the departure of a parent through divorce as a personal rejection. Such familial rejection, whether real or just perceived, colors a child's attitude about himself and his acceptability. Sadly enough, many Gen-Xers deal with feelings of shame, thinking they aren't good enough. "If Dad or Mom left, I must not be worth much," they think.

Even in cases where both parents were present, children were

often left to raise themselves because of their parents' jobs. "They were the first full-blown 'latchkey children,'" say Celek and Zander, "coming home to a house where nobody was home."{16} What might at first seem like wonderful freedom often resulted in fear and a sense of aloneness. Even day care wasn't always enough to relieve the sense of being alone. Again, this felt like abandonment to many kids.

God isn't like fallen people, however. He receives anyone who will come to Him. He never turns anyone away, and He never leaves. We need not fear enemies from without, difficult tasks ahead, or the lack of provision for our needs (Deut. 31:6; Josh. 1:5; Heb. 13:5). "I will never fail you or forsake you," is His promise, a promise that has been affirmed by His people for centuries.

*Redeems*

The value God places on us is revealed by the fact of Jesus' death by crucifixion. By His death He *redeemed* us; He bought us out of slavery only to make us children of God. We are no longer "owned" by our old way of life. The slave standing on the block has been bought and paid for—not to remain as a slave but to become a child! The price we couldn't pay, Jesus did.

*Reconciles*

Gen Xers can have problems getting close to people because of the rejection they have felt. After all, for many, even parents were aloof from them; why should they get close to others? They may not feel like they *can* get close to others.

We're told in the book of Romans that God has taken the initiative to bring us close to Him, to reconcile us to Himself. Whereas formerly we were alienated from Him, now we can come near to Him in open communication. "We have peace with God through our Lord, Jesus Christ," the apostle Paul wrote (Rom. 5:1). God breaks down the walls for us.

*Restores*

Once our sin is taken care of through faith in Christ and we are reconciled with God we begin the process of being restored in the image of Christ. There is a fundamental change in us when our spirits are made alive through Christ. Building upon that, the Spirit of God begins slowly changing us from the inside out, conforming us to the image of Jesus, and making us like Him. This restoration will be complete when we are with Him.

*Summed Up in the Cross and Resurrection*

All this is summed up in the work of Jesus on the cross. He paid the ultimate price for us, and enabled us to be reconciled to the Father. And we're told that in His death He called all people to Himself (John 12:32). Furthermore, when He rose from the grave, coming to life never to die again, He showed us what our hope is: our own resurrection, revealing our full restoration in His image. This restoration begins here on earth through the work of God's Spirit in us. It will be made complete when we are raised up, never to die again.

In the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, we see God receiving, redeeming, reconciling, and restoring. God has done the work. This is a God to believe in.

## The God Who Can be Trusted

When those who are the most important to them have lied to people, they become distrustful. David Hocking tells of a woman who, after her parents had divorced, had been put in a special institution. Her parents rarely visited. When she was old enough to be on her own she began wandering from town to town, experiencing abuse and broken promises. As a result she didn't trust anyone. Rev. Hocking says, "As I began telling her of God's love for her, she asked, 'Can He be trusted?' I answered, 'Of course. He's God!' She countered, 'Why should I

trust Him? Everyone else has let me down!’{17}

What does it take to build trust in a person? Hocking gives three factors: telling the truth, doing what is right and fair, and being reliable. Do these characteristics describe God?

*Tells the Truth*

Because God is holy or separate from all that is sinful, He is morally pure. As such He cannot lie. “It is *impossible* for God to lie,” says the New Testament (Heb. 6:18). If He says He will do something, He will do it (Num. 23:19). The people of Israel discovered that God was true to His word in fulfilling His promises. He gave them the land He had promised them, and over and over He spared them when they turned away from Him because of the covenant He had made with their forefathers. And because He cannot lie, those who believe can rest in the promises of His constant presence and of eternity with Him (Titus 1:2; Matt. 28:20).

*Does What is Right and Fair*

We also can count on God to do what is fair or just. If He couldn’t be depended on to do that, we would have no reason to trust Him. What if He arbitrarily changed the rules on us and judged us by a different standard? A student complains that his teacher grades inconsistently. She seems to be arbitrary in assigning values to projects, and often gives no clear word on what she expects. He says she isn’t being fair. A boss shows favoritism among his employers, advancing those who are his friends, while leaving the truly worthy behind. Not fair, we say.

God is not like this. He plays straight. He tells us what He expects, and He shows no partiality in His judgments. “Righteous are You, O Lord,” says the Psalmist, “and Your laws are right,” (Ps. 119:137). Likewise, He demands justice of us: “How blessed are those who maintain justice, who constantly do

what is right," (Ps. 106:3).

*Can Be Depended Upon*

Finally, God can be counted on. He is faithful to His word and His character. Knowing what He is like teaches us what He does. And one of His characteristics is being always the same: "For I, the Lord, do not change," He says (Mal. 3:6). He is the one "who does not change like shifting shadows" (James. 1:17). God is faithful forever to his own nature.

He is also faithful to his decrees and his promises. "I foretold the former things long ago, my mouth announced them and I made them known;" He said. "[T]hen suddenly I acted, and they came to pass," (Isa. 48:3). He promised Sarah a child in her old age, and He gave her one (Gen. 21:1). King Solomon said, "not one word has failed of all the good promises he gave through His servant Moses," (1 Kings 8:56).

God can be trusted. He tells the truth, He does what is fair, and He can be counted on. This is a God you can believe in.

**Notes**

1. Joan Osborne, "One of Us," on the album *Relish*, Uni/Mercury, 1995. Downloaded from http://lyrics.astraweb.com:2000/display.cgi?joan_osborne%2E%2Erelish%2E%2Eone_of_us, Feb. 17, 2001.

2. Tom Beaudoin, *Virtual Faith: The Irreverent Spiritual Question of Generation X* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998), 53.

3. Cf. Beaudoin, 74-75.

4. Beaudoin, xiii-xiv.

5. Jimmy Long, *Generating Hope: A Strategy for Reaching The Postmodern Generation* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press,

1997), 43.

6. See Jerry Solomon, "Generation X", an overview of this generation.

7. Long, 48, quoting Andrew Smith, "Talking About My Generation," *The Face*, July 1994, p. 82.

8. Tim Celek and Dieter Zander, *Inside the Soul of a New Generation: Insights and Strategies for Reaching Busters* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 46.

9. Celek and Zander, 51.

10. Celek and Zander, 31-32.

11. Douglas Coupland, *Life After God* (New York: Pocket Books, 1994), 273.

12. Coupland, 310, 313, 359.

13. Osborne, *One of Us*.

14. David Hocking, *The Nature of God in Plain Language* (Waco, Texas: Word Books, 1984), 65.

15. Coupland, 359.

16. Celek and Zander, 55.

17. Hocking, 145. I am indebted to the author for the outline of this section.

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# God and the Future: Examining The Open View of God

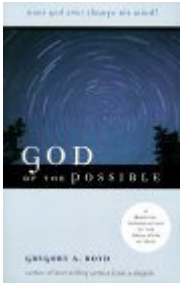
## Introducing Open Theism

What does it mean to be free? It at least means that one is able to make significant decisions. What if you discovered that all the choices you thought you made freely were mapped out in advance?

Here's another question. Does God know everything that is going to happen in the future? This has been the teaching of orthodox Christianity from early on.

But let's put these two together. If God knows everything that is going to happen, is there real freedom? Or, if we are truly free, can God really know the future entirely?

In recent years some evangelical scholars have rejected the view that God knows everything about the future. They say this idea is based more on Greek philosophy than Scripture. What they see in Scripture, especially in the Old Testament, is a God who "flexes" with the actions and decisions of people, who even expresses surprise at what people do.




The view is called *open theism*. A number of articles and a few books have been written on the subject. For our discussion in this article I'll focus on a book by Dr. Greg Boyd, a pastor and professor of theology in the Baptist General Conference. The title is *God of the Possible: A Biblical Introduction to the Open View of God*.{1}

Boyd asks the question: “Does God ever change His mind?” He believes God does, not only because of a change of heart and behavior on the part of people, but because God doesn’t know everything that is going to happen in the future. As a result He modifies His plans in keeping with our decisions and actions. Open theists thus go further than Arminians who affirm that God didn’t foreordain everything; they say He doesn’t even *know* everything that will happen in the future. Boyd has two basic reasons for believing this. First, he believes this is the testimony of Scripture. Second, Boyd believes that complete foreknowledge is incompatible with free will. If the future is settled in God’s mind, then it is fixed, and our freedom is only apparent.

But this doesn’t mean God doesn’t know *anything* about the future. He knows for certain those things which He plans to accomplish. “The future is settled to whatever extent the sovereign Creator decides to settle it,” says Boyd.{2}

What is at stake in this debate? For Boyd it fosters a renewed understanding of the importance and significance of prayer, it helps resolve the problem of evil, and it keeps us from feeling resigned to difficult circumstances. For traditionalists, it means a diminished view of God, a loss of confidence in the future, and a general loss of security.

In this article, then, we’ll consider Boyd’s ideas. In doing so, even if we disagree with him in the end, at least we’ll have had the opportunity to think once again about the nature of our God.

## The Classical View of God’s Foreknowledge

Christian doctrine was developed in a culture imbued with Greek thought. It was thus a product of revealed truths shaped by Greek forms of thought.

What did the Greeks believe about God? A fundamental belief

was that God was perfect and unchanging, that change of any kind was a weakness. Proponents of open theism say that this idea was taken into Christian theology, so that God came to be seen as being distant from and unaffected by His creation. It meant, for example, that He could not experience passions or deep emotional desires as we do, for that indicates a deficiency and the possibility of being controlled by outside forces. Likewise, God's knowledge was fixed; any change such as obtaining new knowledge or changing His mind would indicate an imperfection. This, open theists say, is a quite different picture than what we get of God in the Old Testament, a God who was seen as closely involved with His people, who was genuinely responsive to the circumstances of their lives.

The view of God as unchanging has remained the orthodox view since the early church.{3} However, it is overstating the case to suggest that Christian theology has been simply "Christianizing" Greek philosophy. There are numerous biblical passages which lend support to this idea as well.

In Exodus we read that God presented Himself to Moses as "I am who I am" (3:14). Although open theists say this refers to God's consistent faithfulness to His people, traditionally it has been held to refer to God's nature as well. He has His being in Himself; He is *independent* of His creation (see also John 5:26). Furthermore, there are verses which are understood to refer to God's *unchangeableness*. Malachi 3:6 says "For I, the Lord, do not change; therefore you, O sons of Jacob, are not consumed." He is the one "with whom there is no variation or shifting shadow" (Jas. 1:17). He is also said to *know* the end from the beginning (Is. 46:10). 1 John 3:20 says God "knows all things." Psalm 139 has several verses referring to God's knowledge of the writer's life from birth to death (vv. 2,4,16). Finally, Scripture presents a God who is *sovereign* over the course of history. Isaiah 48 speaks of the things God had "declared long ago," and which He now was bringing about (vv. 3-5).

These Scriptures and others have been held to support the traditional view of God's foreknowledge.

## Open Theism's Response to the Classical View

How does Boyd interpret passages that are held to support the traditional or classical view?

We should first note that Boyd believes God *does* know a lot about the future, specifically what He has planned to happen. What God does *not* know is the future free decisions of individuals. "The future is *partly* open and *partly* settled," he says.{4}

Boyd says some passages which are taken to teach that God knows everything about the future really only tell us God's *intentions* for the future. One passage is Isaiah 46:9-10 in which God says "I am God, and there is no one like Me, Declaring the end from the beginning, And from ancient times things which have not been done, Saying, 'My purpose will be established, And I will accomplish all My good pleasure.'" Classical theists say this passage not only declares God's knowledge of the future, but that He knows the future because He planned it.{5} Boyd says, however, that God is only speaking of those things *He* intends to do. It doesn't say God knows *everything* about the future, but only those things which He has ordained will take place.

Other prophecies can be explained by the fact that God can perfectly predict our behavior in certain circumstances. God knows us perfectly, and He knows all the possibilities which lie ahead.{6} Boyd says God can predict a person's behavior because of His knowledge of the person's character combined with all future possibilities.{7} So regarding Jesus' foreknowledge that Peter would deny him, Boyd says that God "knew the effect Jesus' arrest would have on him." He used the circumstances to let Peter see how weak he really was.{8}

The interpretations Boyd gives to these passages raise questions, however. While the Isaiah passage doesn't say God knows everything about everything, it's hard to see how God could know for certain that His plans would work out if free individuals making free decisions along the way were involved, which surely they would be. The prophecy about Peter's denial seems strained. Jesus could certainly make predictions based upon Peter's character. But how could He know there would be three denials before the rooster crowed twice simply on the basis of Peter's character and the circumstances?

In his book Boyd gives an open interpretation of a number of other Scriptures typically taken to support the classical view. I'd invite you to buy the book and read his arguments first hand.

## The Open View of God

It's time now to take a brief look at Boyd's defense for the open view of God.

First, Boyd points to times that it appears that God *regrets* something He has done. Could God really regret having made man in the first place, as Gen. 6:6 says, if He knew all along what would happen? Similarly, how could God truly regret having made Saul king (1 Sam. 15:35) if He knew all along the direction Saul's life would take?

Second, we see God *confronting the unexpected*, Boyd says. In Isaiah 5 we read where God expected Israel, His vineyard, "to yield grapes, but it yielded wild grapes" (vv. 2,4). Boyd wonders how God could "expect" something that He knew eternally wouldn't happen.

Similarly, in Jeremiah we read where God "thought" Israel would return to Him, when in fact she didn't (3:6-7, 19-20). If He knew all along that Israel wouldn't return, isn't this a lie?

Boyd gives several other examples from Scripture in his book. He then concludes that the biblical witness is that God knows all of reality, but doesn't know the future free decisions of individuals. This means that "Future free decisions do not exist (except as possibilities) for God to know until free agents make them."{9} Thus, he says, "Scripture teaches us that God literally finds out *how* people will choose *when* they choose."{10} If God *did* know everything in advance, then our decisions wouldn't truly be free. "The notion of a 'pre-settled' free action is . . . a logical contradiction," Boyd says.{11}

Does this mean God isn't omniscient? No, says Boyd. We aren't limiting omniscience just because we differ on *what* can be known. If something is unknowable in principle, God isn't limited if He doesn't know it. "The issue is not about God's knowledge at all," he says. "Everyone agrees he knows reality perfectly. The issue is the *content* of the reality God perfectly knows."{12}

Boyd explains further. A statement is true if it corresponds with something real. "But unless you *assume* that the future already exists, there is nothing for definitive statements about future free acts to correspond to."{13} Thus, there is nothing for God to know. To say that this means God is limited would be like saying God is limited because He can't make a square circle. It's an impossibility.

One response to this is that God knows all the possibilities available to us in any given situation, and He knows how particular individuals will respond to certain influences. Another is that the events of time exist in their totality in the mind of God, who has foreordained everything.

## A Brief Critique

A basic complaint open theists have against the classical view of God is that it makes God very remote; He is the cold,

unfeeling God of the Greeks who is unaffected by our decisions and actions. The open view sees God as truly interacting with His creation, as engaging in give-and-take with us. This closer, person-to-person relating is an important aspect of God's character, and we should take it seriously.

On the negative side, however, there are aspects of Boyd's open view which make it difficult to accept.

First, Boyd never explains how the future events which God *has* foreordained can be certain since the free decisions of individuals are always a factor (unless we're talking about events in nature or in the animal kingdom). He speaks of "predestined events with non-predestined players."{14} If God doesn't know the future free acts of individuals, how does He know that what He has predicted will happen?

Second, and perhaps most importantly, open theism has a serious problem with prophecy. Did Jesus really only make a prediction about Peter denying him based upon Peter's character? But the prophecy was so specific: three denials before the rooster crowed twice (Mark 14:30-72). When Ezekiel prophesied about the destruction of the city of Tyre, was that just a really good guess? It was too accurate a prophecy for that.{15}

Third, we need to question whether free will requires the open view of God. Can God know in advance the free decisions of individuals?

Open theists hold to what is called an *incompatibilist* position. That is, truly free choice is *incompatible* with God's foreknowledge. Many classical theologians, however, have held to a *compatibilist* position: free will and foreknowledge *can* go together. Those of a Reformed persuasion believe that "freedom" doesn't mean pure arbitrariness or spontaneity. There are a number of influences on our behavior about which we are rarely conscious, and God can use such influences

Himself.{16} Others might hold to what's called "middle knowledge": God knows all the possibilities the future holds and how we'll freely respond in each possible circumstance.{17}

While the open view of God is helpful in reminding us of God's nearness and responsiveness to us, the nature of prophecy, if nothing else, seems sufficient to render open theism implausible. While there clearly is interaction between persons when God meets man, this cannot take away from God's sure knowledge of future events. There must be some way that we can be free in a real sense while God knows what we will do. And because He does know the future, we can have confidence that what He has promised will come about.

**Notes**

1. Gregory A. Boyd, *God of the Possible: A Biblical Introduction to the Open View of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2000).

2. Ibid., 31.

3. Pelikan provides a brief sketch of the ideas of church fathers on this matter to show how thoroughly infused with Greek thought they were. Emergence, 52-55.

4. Boyd, 32.

5. Millard Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1985), 348,353. See also Augustus H. Strong, Systematic Theology: A Compendium (Valley Forge, PA: The Judson Press, 1907), 282, 355.

6. Boyd, 127.

7. Ibid., 35.

8. Ibid., 36.

9. Ibid., 120.

10. Ibid., 65.

11. Ibid., 126.

12. Ibid., 125.

13. Ibid., 124.

14. Ibid., 44.

15. Geisler, *Creating God in the Image of Man?* (Minneapolis, MN : Bethany House, 1997), 150-51. See Appendix One for several prophecies like this one which were too precise to be just good guesses.

16. Erickson, 206-209.

17. For a brief study of a Reformed compatibilist position see Millard Erickson, *God the Father Almighty: A Contemporary Exploration of the Divine Attributes* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 203-09. For a middle-knowledge view, see William Lane Craig, "Divine Foreknowledge and Future Contingency," in Ronald H. Nash, *Process Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987), 95-115.

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# Blaise Pascal: An Apologist for Our Times – A Defense of

# Christianity Ringing True Today

*Rick Wade examines the contemporary relevance of the apologetics of Blaise Pascal, a 17th century mathematician, scientist, inventor, and Christian apologist.*

 *This article is also available in Spanish.*

One of the tasks of Christian apologetics is to serve as a tool for evangelism. It is very easy, however, to stay in the realm of ideas and never confront unbelievers with the necessity of putting their faith in Christ.

One apologist who was not guilty of this was Blaise Pascal, a seventeenth-century mathematician, scientist, inventor and Christian apologist. Christ and the need for redemption through Him were central to Pascal's apologetics.

There was another feature of Pascal's thought that was, and remains, rare in apologetics: his understanding of the human condition as both created and fallen, and his use of that understanding as a point of contact with unbelievers.

Peter Kreeft, a modern day Christian philosopher and apologist, says that Pascal is a man for *our* day. "Pascal," he says, "is three centuries ahead of his time. He addresses his apologetic to modern pagans, sophisticated skeptics, comfortable members of the new secular intelligentsia. He is the first to realize the new dechristianized, desacramentalized world and to address it. He belongs to us. . . . Pascal is our prophet. No one after this seventeenth-century man has so accurately described our twentieth-century mind."{1}

Pascal was born June 19, 1623 in Clermont, France, and moved to Paris in 1631. His mother died when he was three, and he

was raised by his father, a respected mathematician, who personally directed his education.

Young Blaise took after his father in mathematics. In 1640, at age 16, he published an essay on the sections of a cone which was much praised.{2} Between 1642 and 1644 Pascal developed a calculating machine for his father to use in his tax computations. Later, he "invented the syringe, refined Torricelli's barometer, and created the hydraulic press, an instrument based upon the principles which came to be known as Pascal's law" of pressure.{3} He did important work on the problem of the vacuum, and he is also known for his work on the calculus of probabilities.

Although a Catholic in belief and practice, after the death of his father and the entrance of his younger sister into a convent, Pascal entered a very worldly phase of his life. Things changed, however, on the night of November 23, 1654, when he underwent a remarkable conversion experience which changed the course of his life. He joined a community of scholars in Port-Royal, France, who were known as Jansenists. Although he participated in the prayers and work of the group, he didn't become a full- fledged member himself. However, he assisted them in a serious controversy with the Jesuits, and some of his writings on their behalf are considered "a monument in the evolution of French prose" by historians of the language.{4}

In 1657 and 1658 Pascal wrote notes on apologetics which he intended to organize into a book. These notes were published after his death as the *Pensees*, which means "thoughts" in French. It is this collection of writings which has established Pascal in Christian apologetics. This book is still available today in several different versions.{5}

Pascal was a rather sickly young man, and in the latter part of his short life he suffered from severe pain. On August 19, 1662, at the age of 39, Pascal died. His last words were "May

God never abandon me!”{6}

## The Human Condition

To properly understand Pascal’s apologetics, it’s important to recognize his motive. Pascal wasn’t interested in defending Christianity as a system of belief; his interest was evangelistic. He wanted to persuade people to believe in Jesus. When apologetics has evangelism as its primary goal, it has to take into account the condition of the people being addressed. For Pascal the human condition was the starting point and point of contact for apologetics.

In his analysis of man, Pascal focuses on two very contradictory sides of fallen human nature. Man is both noble and wretched. Noble, because he is created in God’s image; wretched, because he is fallen and alienated from God. In one of his more passionate notes, Pascal says this:

> What kind of freak is man! What a novelty he is, how absurd he is, how chaotic and what a mass of contradictions, and yet what a prodigy! He is judge of all things, yet a feeble worm. He is repository of truth, and yet sinks into such doubt and error. He is the glory and the scum of the universe!{7}

Furthermore, Pascal says, we know that we are wretched. But it is this very knowledge that shows our greatness.

Pascal says it’s important to have a right understanding of ourselves. He says “it is equally dangerous for man to know God without knowing his own wretchedness, and to know his own wretchedness without knowing the Redeemer who can free him from it.” Thus, our message must be that “there is a God whom men can know, and that there is a corruption in their nature which renders them unworthy of Him.”{8} This prepares the unbeliever to hear about the Redeemer who reconciles the sinner with the Creator.

Pascal says that people know deep down that there is a problem, but we resist slowing down long enough to think about it. He says:

Rick Wade examines the contemporary relevance of the apologetics of Blaise Pascal, a 17th century mathematician, scientist, inventor, and Christian apologist.Man finds nothing so intolerable as to be in a state of complete rest, without passions, without occupation, without diversion, without effort. Then he faces his nullity, loneliness, inadequacy, dependence, helplessness, emptiness. And at once there wells up from the depths of his soul boredom, gloom, depression, chagrin, resentment, despair.{9}

Pascal says there are two ways people avoid thinking about such matters: diversion and indifference. Regarding diversion, he says we fill up our time with relatively useless activities simply to avoid facing the truth of our wretchedness. “The natural misfortune of our mortality and weakness is so miserable,” he says, “that nothing can console us when we really think about it. . . . The only good thing for man, therefore, is to be diverted so that he will stop thinking about his circumstances.” Business, gambling, and entertainment are examples of things which keep us busy in this way.{10}

The other response to our condition is indifference. The most important question we can ask is What happens after death? Life is but a few short years, and death is forever. Our state after death should be of paramount importance, shouldn’t it? But the attitude people take is this:

Just as I doRick Wade examines the contemporary relevance of the apologetics of Blaise Pascal, a 17th century mathematician, scientist, inventor, and Christian apologist. not know where I came from, so I do not know where I am going. All I know is that when I leave this world I shall fall forever into oblivion, or into the hands of an angry God, without knowing which of the two will be my lot for eternity.

Such is my state of mind, full of weakness and uncertainty. The only conclusion I can draw from all this is that I must pass my days without a thought of trying to find out what is going to happen to me.{11}

Pascal is appalled that people think this way, and he wants to shake people out of their stupor and make them think about eternity. Thus, the condition of man is his starting point for moving people toward a genuine knowledge of God.

## Knowledge of the Heart

Pascal lived in the age of the rise of rationalism. Revelation had fallen on hard times; man's reason was now the final source for truth. In the realm of religious belief many people exalted reason and adopted a deistic view of God. Some, however, became skeptics. They doubted the competence of both revelation and reason.

Although Pascal couldn't side with the skeptics, neither would he go the way of the rationalists. Instead of arguing that revelation was a better source of truth than reason, he focused on the limitations of reason itself. (I should stop here to note that by *reason* Pascal meant the reasoning process. He did not deny the true powers of reason; he was, after all, a scientist and mathematician.) Although the advances in science increased man's knowledge, it also made people aware of how little they knew. Thus, through our reason we realize that reason itself has limits. "Reason's last step," Pascal said, "is the recognition that there are an infinite number of things which are beyond it."{12} Our knowledge is somewhere between certainty and complete ignorance, Pascal believed.{13} The bottom line is that we need to know when to affirm something as true, when to doubt, and when to submit to authority.{14}

Besides the problem of our limited knowledge, Pascal also noted how our reason is easily distracted by our senses and

hindered by our passions.{15} “The two so-called principles of truth*reason and the senses*are not only not genuine but are engaged in mutual deception. Through false appearances the senses deceive reason. And just as they trick the soul, they are in turn tricked by it. It takes its revenge. The senses are influenced by the passions which produce false impressions.”{16} Things sometimes appear to our senses other than they really are, such as the way a stick appears bent when put in water. Our emotions or passions also influence how we think about things. And our imagination, which Pascal says is our dominant faculty{17}, often has precedence over our reason. A bridge suspended high over a ravine might be wide enough and sturdy enough, but our imagination sees us surely falling off.

So, our finiteness, our senses, our passions, and our imagination can adversely influence our powers of reason. But Pascal believed that people really *do* know some things to be true even if they cannot account for it rationally. Such knowledge comes through another channel, namely, the heart.

This brings us to what is perhaps the best known quotation of Pascal: “The heart has its reasons which reason does not know.”{18} In other words, there are times that we know something is true but we did not come to that knowledge through logical reasoning, neither can we give a logical argument to support that belief.

For Pascal, the heart is “the `intuitive’ mind” rather than “the `geometrical’ (calculating, reasoning) mind.”{19} For example, we know when we aren’t dreaming. But we can’t prove it rationally. However, this only proves that our reason has weaknesses; it does not prove that our knowledge is completely uncertain. Furthermore, our knowledge of such first principles as space, time, motion, and number is certain even though known by the heart and not arrived at by reason. In fact, reason bases its arguments on such knowledge.{20} Knowledge of the heart and knowledge of reason might be arrived at in

different ways, but they are both valid. And neither can demand that knowledge coming through the other should submit to its own dictates.

## The Knowledge of God

If reason is limited in its understanding of the natural order, knowledge of God can be especially troublesome. “If natural things are beyond [reason],” Pascal said, “what are we to say about supernatural things?”{21}

There are several factors which hinder our knowledge of God. As noted before, we are limited by our finitude. How can the finite understand the infinite?{22} Another problem is that we cannot see clearly because we are in the darkness of sin. Our will is turned away from God, and our reasoning abilities are also adversely affected.

There is another significant limitation on our knowledge of God. Referring to Isaiah 8:17 and 45:15{23}, Pascal says that as a result of our sin God deliberately hides Himself (“hides” in the sense that He doesn’t speak}. One reason He does this is to test our will. Pascal says, “God wishes to move the will rather than the mind. Perfect clarity would help the mind and harm the will.” God wants to “humble [our] pride.”{24}

But God doesn’t remain completely hidden; He is both hidden and revealed. “If there were no obscurity,” Pascal says, “man would not feel his corruption: if there were no light man could not hope for a cure.”{25}

God not only hides Himself to test our will; He also does it so that we can only come to Him through Christ, not by working through some logical proofs. “God is a hidden God,” says Pascal, ” and . . . since nature was corrupted [God] has left men to their blindness, from which they can escape only through Jesus Christ, without whom all communication with God is broken off. *Neither knoweth any man the Father save the*

*Son, and he to whosoever the Son will reveal him*."{26} Pascal's apologetic is decidedly Christocentric. True knowledge of God isn't mere intellectual assent to the reality of a divine being. It *must* include a knowledge of Christ through whom God revealed Himself. He says:

> All who have claimed to know God and to prove his existence without Jesus Christ have done so ineffectively. . . . Apart from him, and without Scripture, without original sin, without the necessary Mediator who was promised and who came, it is impossible to prove absolutely that God exists, or to teach sound doctrine and sound morality. But through and in Jesus Christ we can prove God's existence, and teach both doctrine and morality.{27}

If we do not know Christ, we cannot understand God as the judge and the redeemer of sinners. It is a limited knowledge that doesn't do any good. As Pascal says, "That is why I am not trying to prove naturally the existence of God, or indeed the Trinity, or the immortality of the soul or anything of that kind. This is not just because I do not feel competent to find natural arguments that will convince obdurate atheists, but because such knowledge, without Christ, is useless and empty." A person with this knowledge has not "made much progress toward his salvation."{28} What Pascal wants to avoid is proclaiming a deistic God who stands remote and expects from us only that we live good, moral lives. Deism needs no redeemer.

But even in Christ, God has not revealed Himself so overwhelmingly that people cannot refuse to believe. In the last days God will be revealed in a way that everyone will have to acknowledge Him. In Christ, however, God was still hidden enough that people who didn't want what was good would not have it forced upon them. Thus, "there is enough light for those who desire only to see, and enough darkness for those of a contrary disposition."{29}

There is still one more issue which is central to Pascal's thinking about the knowledge of God. He says that no one can come to know God apart from faith. This is a theme of central importance for Pascal; it clearly sets him apart from other apologists of his day. Faith is the knowledge of the heart that only God gives. "It is the heart which perceives God and not the reason," says Pascal. "That is what faith is: God perceived by the heart, not by the reason."{30} "By faith we know he exists," he says.{31} "Faith is different from proof. One is human and the other a gift of God. . . . This is the faith that God himself puts into our hearts. . . ."{32} Pascal continues, "We shall never believe with an effective belief and faith unless God inclines our hearts. Then we shall believe as soon as he inclines them."{33}

To emphasize the centrality of heart knowledge in Pascal's thinking, I deliberately left off the end of one of the sentences above. Describing the faith God gives, Pascal said, "This is the faith that God himself puts into our hearts, often using proof as the instrument."{34}

This is rather confusing. Pascal says non-believers are in darkness, so proofs will only find obscurity.{35} He notes that "no writer within the canon [of Scripture] has ever used nature to prove the existence of God. They all try to help people believe in him."{36} He also expresses astonishment at Christians who begin their defense by making a case for the existence of God.

> Their enterprise would cause me no surprise if they were addressing the arguments to the faithful, for those with living faith in their hearts can certainly see at once that everything which exists is entirely the work of the God they worship. But for those in whom this light has gone out and in who we are trying to rekindle it, people deprived of faith and grace, . . . to tell them, I say, that they have only to look at the least thing around them and they will see in it God plainly revealed; to give them no other proof

> of this great and weighty matter than the course of the moon and the planets; to claim to have completed the proof with such an argument; this is giving them cause to think that the proofs of our religion are indeed feeble. . . . This is not how Scripture speaks, with its better knowledge of the things of God.{37}

But now Pascal says that God often uses proofs as the instrument of faith. He also says in one place, "The way of God, who disposes all things with gentleness, is to instil [*sic*] religion into our minds with reasoned arguments and into our hearts with grace. . . ."{38}

The explanation for this tension can perhaps be seen in the *types* of proofs Pascal uses. Pascal won't argue from nature. Rather he'll point to evidences such as the marks of divinity within man, and those which affirm Christ's claims, such as prophecies and miracles, the most important being prophecies.{39} He also speaks of Christian doctrine "which gives a reason for everything," the establishment of Christianity despite its being so contrary to nature, and the testimony of the apostles who could have been neither deceivers nor deceived.{40} So Pascal *does* believe there are positive evidences for belief. Although he does not intend to give reasons for everything, neither does he expect people to agree without having a reason.{41}

Nonetheless, even evidences such as these do not produce saving faith. He says, "The prophecies of Scripture, even the miracles and proofs of our faith, are not the kind of evidence that are absolutely convincing. . . . There is . . . enough evidence to condemn and yet not enough to convince. . . ." People who believe do so by grace; those who reject the faith do so because of their lusts. Reason isn't the key.{42}

Pascal says that, while our faith has the strongest of evidences in favor of it, "it is not for these reasons that people adhere to it. . . . What makes them believe," he says,

” is the cross.” At which point he quotes 1 Corinthians 1:17: “Lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power.”{43}

## The Wager

The question that demands to be answered, of course, is this: If our reason is inadequate to find God, even through valid evidences, how *does* one find God? Says Pascal:

> Let us then examine the point and say: “Either God exists, or he does not.” But which of the alternatives shall we choose? Reason cannot decide anything. Infinite chaos separates us. At the far end of this infinite distance a coin is being spun which will come down heads or tails. How will you bet? Reason cannot determine how you will choose, nor can reason defend your position of choice.{44}

At this point Pascal challenges us to accept his wager. Simply put, the wager says we should bet on Christianity because the rewards are infinite if it’s true, while the losses will be insignificant if it’s false.{45} If it’s true and you have rejected it, you’ve lost everything. However, if it’s false but you have believed it, at least you’ve led a good life and you haven’t lost anything. Of course, the best outcome is if one believes Christianity to be true and it turns out that it is!

But the unbeliever might say it’s better not to choose at all. Not so, says Pascal. You’re going to live one way or the other, believing in God or not believing in God; you can’t remain in suspended animation. You must choose.

In response the unbeliever might say that everything in him works against belief. “I am being forced to gamble and I am not free,” he says, “for they will not let me go. I have been made in such a way that I cannot help disbelieving. So what do you expect me to do?”{46} After all, Pascal has said that faith comes from God, not from us.

Pascal says our inability to believe is a problem of the emotions or passions. Don't try to convince yourself by examining more proofs and evidences, he says, "but by controlling your emotions." You want to believe but don't know how. So follow the examples of those who "were once in bondage but who now are prepared to risk their whole life. . . . Follow the way by which they began. They simply behaved as though they believed" by participating in various Christian rituals. And what can be the harm? "You will be faithful, honest, humble, grateful, full of good works, a true and genuine friend. . . . I assure you that you will gain in this life, and that with every step you take along this way, you will realize you have bet on something sure and infinite which has cost you nothing."{47}

Remember that Pascal sees faith as a gift from God, and he believes that God will show Himself to whomever sincerely seeks Him.{48} By taking him up on the wager and putting yourself in a place where you are open to God, God will give you faith. He will give you sufficient light to know what is really true.

Scholars have argued over the validity of Pascal's wager for centuries. In this writer's opinion, it has significant weaknesses. What about all the other religions, one of which could (in the opinion of the unbeliever) be true?

However, the idea is an intriguing one. Pascal's assertion that one must choose seems reasonable. Even if such a wager cannot have the kind of mathematical force Pascal seemed to think, it could work to startle the unbeliever into thinking more seriously about the issue. The important thing here is to challenge people to choose, and to choose the right course.

## Summary

Pascal began his apologetics with an analysis of the human condition drawn from the experience of the new, modern man. He

showed what a terrible position man is in, and he argued that man is not capable of finding all the answers through reason. He insisted that the deistic approach to God was inadequate, and proclaimed Christ whose claims found support in valid evidences such as prophecies and miracles. He then called people to press through the emotional bonds which kept them separate from God and put themselves in a place where they could find God, or rather be found by Him.

Is Blaise Pascal a man for our times? Whether or not you agree with the validity of Pascal's wager or some other aspect of his apologetics, I think we can gain some valuable insights from his ideas. His description of man as caught between his own nobility and baseness while trying to avoid looking closely at his condition certainly rings true of twentieth-century man. His insistence on keeping the concrete truth of Christ at the center keeps his apologetics tied to the central theme of Christianity, namely, that our identity is found in Jesus, where there is room for neither pride nor despair, and that in Jesus we can come to a true knowledge of God. For apart from the knowledge of Christ, all the speculation in the world about God will do little good.

**Notes**

1. Peter Kreeft, *Christianity for Modern Pagans: Pascal's Pensees Edited, Outlined and Explained* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1993), 13, 189.
2. Hugh M. Davidson, Blaise Pascal (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1983), 4.
3. The New Encyclopedia Britannica Macropedia, 15th ed., s.v. "Pascal, Blaise."
4. Davidson, 18.
5. James Houston's translation, Mind On First: A Faith for the Skeptical and Indifferent (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1997), will be quoted extensively in these notes. This version was edited to retain only the individual pensees which are pertinent for apologetics. Mind

On Fire also includes edited versions of some of Pascal's Provincial Letters, the ones he wrote against the Jesuits. The reader might also want to refer to Peter Kreeft's version (cf. note 1 above) which includes Kreeft's comments on individual pensees.

6. Davidson, 22.
7. Houston, 91.
8. Blaise Pascal, Pensees, trans. W.F. Trotter, 97.
9. Kreeft, 187.
10. Houston, 96.
11. Ibid., 122.
12. Kreeft, 238.
13. Ibid., 124.
14. Ibid., 236.
15. Houston, 58.
16. Ibid., 58.
17. Ibid., 53.
18. Trotter, 50.
19. Kreeft, 228.
20. Ibid., 229.
21. Ibid., 238.
22. Ibid., 120-26, 293.
23. Trotter, 178; see also 130.
24. Kreeft, 247.
25. Ibid., 249.
26. Ibid., 251.
27. Houston, 147.
28. Ibid., 149.
29. Kreeft, 69.
30. Ibid., 232.
31. Houston, 130.
32. Kreeft, 240.
33. Houston, 223.
34. Kreeft, 240.
35. Houston, 151.
36. Ibid., 152.
37. Kreeft, 250-51.

38. Ibid., 240.
39. Houston, 205; Trotter, 52.
40. Trotter, 52; Kreeft, 266.
41. Houston, 116-17.
42. Ibid., 221-22.
43. Ibid., 223.
44. Ibid., 130-31.
45. Kreeft, 292.
46. Houston, 133.
47. Ibid., 133.
48. Kreeft, 251, 255.

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