



**STUDIES IN PRACTICAL THEOLOGY**

**BIBLICAL  
APOLOGETICS**

Brad Anderson

*Biblical Apologetics: Studies in Practical Theology*

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## Recommended Resources

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The author recommends that students read the following book as we progress through the series:

Pratt, Jr., Richard L. *Every Thought Captive: A Study Manual for the Defense of Christian Truth*. Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 1980.

Other resources used for the production of this teaching guide:

Bahnsen, Greg L. *Always Ready: Directions for Defending the Faith*. Nacogdoches, TX: Covenant Media Foundation, 1996.

Frame, John M. *Apologetics to the Glory of God: An Introduction*. Phillipsburg, N.J: P & R Publishing, 1994.

Geisler, Norman L. *Christian Apologetics*. 2nd edition. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013.

McDowell, Josh, and Sean McDowell. *Evidence That Demands a Verdict: Life-Changing Truth for a Skeptical World*. Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2017.

Nash, Ronald H. *Worldviews in Conflict: Choosing Christianity in a World of Ideas*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 1992.

Vos, Howard. *Can I Trust the Bible?* Chicago: Moody Press, 1963.

Other resources are footnoted in the text.



## Lesson 1

# The Meaning and Purpose of Apologetics

We live in an era in which society ridicules both the Bible and those who take its claims seriously. The prominent philosophies of the day have caused most people to view the Bible as a source of myth, fable, and old-wives tales. The Bible is the object of criticism and mockery, especially for those who have been educated in the secular university system. Who today actually believes that Noah built an ark, that Jonah was swallowed by a whale, or that Jesus really walked on the water? Such accounts are for the feeble-minded and weak. Further, everyone knows that the Bible is full of contradictions, false statements and inaccuracies. Science has disproved all the major claims of Scripture. Almost everything we've been taught about the origins of Christianity is false. The manuscripts have been corrupted and corrupt church leaders have imposed their own political agendas.

Christian truth-claims come under attack in many ways today. They are challenged as to their meaningfulness. The possibility of miracles, revelation, and incarnation are questioned. Doubt is cast upon the deity of Christ or the existence of God. The historical or scientific accuracy of the Bible is attacked. Scriptural teaching is rejected for not being logically coherent. Conscious life following physical death, everlasting damnation, and a future resurrection are not readily accepted. The way of salvation is found disgusting or unnecessary. The nature of God and the way of salvation are falsified by heretical schools of thought. Competing religious systems are set over against Christianity—or some try to assimilate it into their own thought forms. The ethics of Scripture is criticized. The psychological or political adequacy of Christianity is looked down upon.<sup>1</sup>

Others suggest that the Bible was never meant to be taken literally. Like most fables and morality tales, the stories of the Bible are rooted in historical reality but point to higher principles that are true. It doesn't matter if Jesus rose from the dead or not. The moral principles Jesus taught are more significant than detailed accuracy of the account. This is the position that most liberal "Christians" take.<sup>2</sup>

Those who do take the Bible seriously are not comfortable letting such criticism pass without comment. Students of the Bible have for many years argued for the truth of Scripture, defending both themselves and the Bible from their critics. If the Bible is what it claims to be, all allegations of error and inaccuracies must prove unfounded. Christianity is not a "blind" faith. It is established upon verifiable historical events. If the record of the Bible is found to be genuinely mistaken,

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<sup>1</sup> Greg L. Bahnsen, "Answering Objections," *The Biblical Worldview* 7, no. 2 (February 1991).

<sup>2</sup> It's important to use the term "liberal" accurately. A theological liberal is one who does not believe the Bible is literally true. He may see the Bible as a valuable record pointing to God, but he does not believe that the Bible is true in all it affirms. One should not use the term "liberal" in a theological context unless this is his meaning.

especially regarding key elements of the faith, Christianity would instantly lose all credibility. If Jesus did not actually rise from the dead, or if a certified error or contradiction could be proved to exist in the Bible, biblically-based faith would also crumble.

Hence, those who have staked their eternal destiny on the truth of the Bible strive to respond to criticisms. If the Bible is verifiably mistaken or corrupt, no one would retain his commitment to it as the Word of God. Also, believers seek to present logical, reasonable responses to critics to show them that their criticism of the Bible is inaccurate or mistaken. Further, students of the Bible want to be able to give an answer to those who have genuine questions about the Bible or about Christianity.

Apologetics has had a long history going all the way back to the New Testament itself. In the Book of Acts the Christians presented reasoned answers to various charges made against Christianity. To the Jews the church pointed out that Christ was the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy. To the Gentiles the church argued that God was calling them to turn from superstitious religions to the true God revealed in Jesus Christ. In all of their apologetics the early Church emphasized the resurrection of Jesus Christ. In fact, they called it the central pillar on which all of Christianity either stood or fell.

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**Key Text:** *1 Peter 3:15 – But in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect.*

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All Christians should be ready to give a *defense* to everyone who asks for the reason for their hope in Jesus Christ. Of course, for some Christians this will be a very special ministry calling, but all Christians should be able to explain what they believe, why they believe it, why others should believe it, and why contradictory systems are inadequate.

Apologetics involves *responding* to any intellectual challenge to the Christian faith. This means that apologetics deals, first and foremost, with answering the outright denials of Christianity which are found in atheism and in other religions. But apologetics also deals with answering the distortions of Christianity, which are found primarily in the cults, as well as in some professing Christian groups within the Christian community itself. Thus, Christian apologetics must answer all challenges to the orthodox, biblical Christian faith — no matter who the challengers are.

## || **Meaning**

|| **The Greek Word *apologia* is used 20 times in the NT.**

Acts 18:4 – *Every Sabbath he **reasoned** in the synagogue, trying to persuade Jews and Greeks.*

Acts 19:8–9 – *Paul entered the synagogue and spoke boldly there for three months, **arguing persuasively** about the kingdom of God... [and later] **reasoning** daily in the school of Tyrannus.*

Acts 22:1 – *Men, brethren, and fathers, hear ye my **defense** which I make now unto you.*

Philippians 1:7 – *It is right for me to feel this way about all of you, since I have you in my heart; for whether I am in chains or **defending** and confirming the gospel, all of you share in God's grace with me.*

Philippians 1:16 – *I am put here for the **defense** of the gospel.*

1 Peter 3:15 – *Always be prepared **to give an answer** to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have.*

## **Activities synonymous with apologetics**

Jude 3 – *You should **earnestly contend** for the faith which was once delivered unto the saints.*

Titus 1:3 – *He brought his Word to light through the **preaching** entrusted to me by the command of God our Savior*

“The preaching” is that set of basic truths that constitute the salvation message. This message should include: 1) God; 2) Sin; 3) Jesus; 4) Faith and repentance.

Titus 1:9, 11 – *[Pastors must] **encourage** others by sound doctrine and **refute** those who oppose it. For there are many rebellious people, mere talkers and deceivers, especially those of the circumcision group. **They must be silenced**, because they are ruining whole households by teaching things they ought not to teach—and that for the sake of dishonest gain.*

## **Definition of Apologetics: “A verbal defense; a reply to a formal charge; an answer.”**

Apologetics is the justification and defense of biblical Christianity. Biblical apologetics focuses on spreading and defending the Christian philosophy of life while challenging non-Christian philosophies.

The apologist responds to the objections of unbelievers in a way which sets forth the objective truth of Christianity and the exclusive character of the Christian system. He or she offers reasons for belief, vindicating the Christian worldview over against competing systems of thought and living. The appropriate response to critics of the faith is that of reasoning with them, refuting objections, proving conclusions, and offering arguments.

Offering arguments in favor of certain conclusions should not be confused with being argumentative or contentious in one's demeanor. Presenting a reason for the hope that is within us does not demand that we do so in an offensive or arrogant way.<sup>3</sup>

By the way, apologetics has nothing to do with apologizing (saying you're sorry) for anything.

## Specific Purposes of Apologetics

1. to defend or demonstrate the truth-claims of Christianity; to prove that Christianity is true
2. to answer particular objections and/or criticisms of the Bible and Christianity
3. to give an account of the foundational concepts of the Christian faith
  - a. the existence of God
  - b. the reality of divine revelation, the Bible
  - c. the ability to know God and truth
4. to reach non-Christian with the gospel (i.e., evangelism)
5. to challenge non-Christian faith systems (e.g., Mormonism, Islam); to attack the foolishness of unbelieving or unorthodox thought

## Summary

Apologetics consists of:

- ✓ Proof: presenting a rational basis for faith
- ✓ Defense: answering objections of unbelief
- ✓ Offense: exposing the foolishness of unbelief and unorthodoxy

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<sup>3</sup> Bahnsen, "Answering Objections."

## Two approaches to Apologetics

### **Rationalist: setting forth rational, logical arguments defending Christianity with the aim of convincing unbelievers.**

This approach focuses on reasons to believe and on defending the faith against criticism. This is often called “traditional” or “classical” apologetics because this seems to be the method used by the most prominent apologists of earlier centuries. Rationalists start from “neutral” ground and work toward proofs that the Bible and Christianity are true. Before one can meaningfully discuss historical evidences, one has to establish God’s existence. Without a theistic context, no historical event could ever be shown to be a divine miracle. Once God is proven to exist, one can show that the Bible is God’s Word, that Jesus is God’s Son, and that Christianity is the only valid faith.

The problem with a rationalistic approach to apologetics is that one must assume a standard of truth that exists apart from the Bible. The Bible, in order to be true, must meet this independent standard. The Bible becomes subject to man’s ability to reason—one must show the unsaved person that the Bible is truly reasonable.<sup>4</sup> Further, rationalists seem to rely on weighty arguments and evidence to bring conversion rather than on a simple declaration of the Gospel message.

### **Presuppositional: starting out with the notion that the Bible is true and that it’s God’s business to convince unbelievers of this fact.**

This approach focuses on presenting the truths of Christianity as fact without regard for how unbelievers respond to it.

Presuppositional writer John Frame states, “[We] should present the biblical God, not merely as the conclusion to an argument, but as the one who makes argument possible.”<sup>5</sup> By demonstrating that unbelievers cannot argue, think, or live without presupposing God, presupposition-alists try to show unbelievers that their own worldview is inadequate to explain their experience of the world and to get unbelievers to see that Christianity alone can make sense of their experience.

The problem with this approach is that it assumes what it’s trying to prove, namely, that the Bible is true. However, this seems to be consistent with Peter’s admonition to recognize the Lordship of Christ in the apologetic task (1 Pet 3:15). There is no true neutrality—everyone accepts the authority of God’s Word or they do not, and not to do so is sin.

Both the testimony of history and the testimony of God’s Word have informed us that the world will not be convinced one whit of the truth of Genesis because of a mountain of creationist evidence or the discovery of Noah’s Ark. The world will not be convinced one whit of the truth of

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<sup>4</sup> Terms such as “likelihood” and “plausibility” frequently crop up in rationalist apologetics. The believer seeks to show the unbeliever that the Bible has good potential for being true.

<sup>5</sup> From Steven B. Cowan, ed., *Five Views on Apologetics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2000).

Exodus and Joshua because of a mountain of archaeological evidence. The “evidence that demands a verdict” will always return from the world a verdict of unbelief. The “search for the historical Jesus” or for the “historical Paul” will never convince men that Christ died and rose for them or that the New Testament is authentic. These might attract the nod of approval from a humanistic world that operates from a foundation of intellectual autonomy, but they will do nothing to change the heart. The Holy Spirit can change the heart of the enemy of the gospel, but he never stoops to engage the enemy *on their terms*. He will only engage the enemy *on God’s terms*: the foolishness of the Word preached. Far be it from us to imagine we can improve on his methods. The world may call us “anti-intellectual,” but God will call us wise.<sup>6</sup>

Why does which apologetic approach you take matter? Imagine this scenario: you are attempting to convince a friend that Jesus really did rise from the dead. You show your friend all the evidence from the Bible that the resurrection is a fact. But your friend does not believe the Bible. He says that you can’t use information from the Bible to defend the Bible. The rational apologist would then step back and show that the Bible is indeed trustworthy. The presuppositionalist, on the other hand, would keep preaching the Bible, knowing that God has promised to use the Word to draw unbelievers to himself in spite of the unbeliever’s unbelief. One should not revert to the unbeliever’s worldview just because the unbeliever doesn’t accept the Christian worldview.<sup>7</sup>

*Note:* A third approach to apologetics, experience, is commonly used to defend the faith in many Christian circles. That is, Christians argue for the existence of God and the validity of Christianity based on their own personal experiences of God. This is the argument “I know God is real because I can feel him in my soul.”<sup>8</sup> Feelings of inner peace, confidence, excitement, security or conviction may seem beyond question to the one feeling them, but have little weight with others. Experiences are by nature subjective and personal. While individuals may find such experiences confirm and deepen their own faith, it is unlikely that others will be persuaded based on such experiences. Hence, it is unwise to use personal religious experiences as a primary apologetic resource. Personal testimonies may aid apologetics, but one’s experiences should not be the focus of an apologetic encounter.

*Another Note:* Apologetics follows and presupposes a correct system of theology. One must determine the content of Christianity before he can defend and propagate it. The better you know the Bible and theology, the better you will be able to explain, promote and defend orthodox Christianity. It’s obviously counter-productive to defend and propagate false doctrine.

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<sup>6</sup> Mark A. Snoberger, “Engaging the Enemy . . . But on Whose Terms? An Assessment of Responses to the Charge of Anti-Intellectualism,” *DBSJ* 8 (Fall 2003): 84.

<sup>7</sup> For example, one does not help a mentally ill person by adopting his (the sick person’s) skewed ideas.

<sup>8</sup> Another example: “You ask me how I know he lives? He lives within my heart.”

## Conclusion

Apologetics is the study of the best ways to 1) *explain* Christianity to unbelievers; 2) *defend* Christianity against its critics; and 3) *challenge* unbelieving and unorthodox ideas about God. In this series we'll follow this general outline, first looking at the validity of what Christianity teaches, then showing that many criticisms of Christianity don't hold up under scrutiny, and finally exposing the weaknesses of unbelief and unorthodox ideas.

## Discussion

1. What is apologetics? *See conclusion.*
2. Why do we need to bother with defending Christianity? Can't God defend himself? *God obviously doesn't need our help to defend him or his Word. Nevertheless, we should be ready to give an answer because we are commanded to do so (1 Pet 3:15), because of biblical examples of doing so (e.g., Paul), and because apologetics is part of evangelism.*
3. What's the difference between rational/classical apologetics and presuppositional apologetics? *Rational apologetics seeks to defend the Bible using external information. It focuses on logical arguments and evidence external to the Bible. Presuppositional apologetics assumes that everyone has a basic understanding of God and that what they need to hear is what the Bible says even if they reject it.*



## Lesson 2: The Christian View of Knowledge

As we've already learned, the task of biblical apologetics is to spread and defend the Christian message while challenging other non-Christian systems. Before learning how to do so, it's important that we consider some truths about how we know what we know.<sup>1</sup> Understanding how believers and unbelievers think will help us become better apologists.

### A Controlling Text

Paul gives us some important instructions regarding knowledge in 2 Corinthians 10:5:

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*We destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ.*

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Note the following conclusions based on this text:

- Christians must strive to “destroy” those systems of thought that are contrary to Biblical teaching. This seems to apply most specifically to the thought life of individual Christians. That is, they should not allow any anti-Christian ways of thinking within their own minds. But more broadly speaking, part of the apologetic task is challenging those philosophies and religions that contradict the Bible no matter where one finds them. It's biblical to expose and challenge all anti-Christian ideas, whether within one's own mind or in the broader culture.
- In all our thinking, Christ is to be recognized as Lord. That is, the contents of the Bible, and especially the teachings of Christ and the apostles as found in the NT, should inform all our thinking. One does not try to defend or propagate Christianity from a supposedly neutral standpoint. Instead, biblical teaching should influence all thinking. Believers need to develop a Bible-soaked logic, a way of thinking that is saturated with biblical principles.

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<sup>1</sup> The technical word for the study of knowledge is *epistemology*, based on the Greek word *epistamai*, meaning “to know” or “to understand.”

## **The Bible is the Standard**

What is the basis for knowledge? How do we determine that something is true or false? Christians believe that the ultimate standard for determining the truth or falsity of anything is God's Word. Scripture can be judged by no higher authority than Scripture itself. Believers accept a biblical worldview. Unbelievers adopt other grounds for determining truth, like personal or majority opinion, or even whatever works best. But Christians must base their thoughts on the Bible.

We do not judge the Bible on human terms. "It makes sense to me" is *not* the yardstick for judging the truth of biblical claims. Man's intellect is not the highest standard. We submit to the Bible's teaching; we do not stand in judgment of it.

## **Communication with Non-Believers**

There is no such thing as neutrality when it comes to one's views about the Bible, God, or Christianity. Everyone approaches the Bible with a set of ideas that are already set in place. Such views are called presuppositions. Christians believe that the Bible is true, that God is the creator and sustainer of all things, and that the highest duty of man is to honor and obey God. Christians know this because God has convinced them that such is the case. Non-Christians reject the Christian view and replace it with other ideas. Further, non-believers are blind to spiritual truth, spiritually dead, and under the influence of Satan, all of which prevents them from comprehending biblical truth. They think that the "message of the cross is foolishness" (1 Cor 1:18). So neither believers nor unbelievers approach the Bible from a neutral standpoint.

How can Christians and non-Christians communicate if they reject each other's presuppositions? That is, if Christians believe the Bible and non-Christians reject the Bible, how can a Christian convince a non-Christian that he needs to be saved? The Bible teaches that non-Christians *do* have some knowledge of God, and that deep down they agree on some basic things even if they claim not to (cf. Rom 1:18–25). So based on this fact, believers can encourage unbelievers to admit what they know to be true—that God exists and that there's a difference between right and wrong. We simply proclaim the message and trust that God will use it to draw people to himself.

Also, keep in mind that in the evangelism process the believer is not trying to argue a non-believer into submission. He's not trying to win a debate, thereby intellectually convincing the non-believer that the Gospel is true. He's simply announcing the good news, planting the seed. It's God's business to make an unbeliever responsive to the message. In fact, without God's work in the unbelieving heart, no one would respond positively to the Gospel. We can plant and water the seed, but God is the one who brings about a harvest (1 Cor 3:6).

## The Danger of “Neutrality”

Some suggest that in defending and propagating the Gospel, believers should take more of a neutral attitude. That is, Christians should encourage unbelievers to take an honest, impartial look at the Bible and Christianity and judge it for themselves. People should not assume anything; they should simply look at the Bible like any other book—honestly and impartially. If the Bible seems to make reasonable sense, if it holds up to critical investigation, then it is acceptable. If not, then disregard it.

The problem with such an approach, as noted above, is that everyone starts with some presuppositions. Those who desire an impartial investigation of the Bible assume that they are qualified to engage in such an investigation. They presuppose that their own intellect is sufficient to judge whether the content of the Bible is reasonable. In fact, the Bible itself claims that the principles contained in it will not make sense to non-believers. The wisdom of God is foolishness to men (1 Cor 1:18f). Hence, from a non-believing, “neutral” point of view, the Bible will never be acceptable. It makes no sense, therefore, to encourage unbelievers to “impartially” judge the Bible. Rather, we must encourage and even demand that unbelievers submit to and obey the Bible whether they recognize its authority or not. We do not hold the Bible up for critical scrutiny. We simply proclaim its truths and let the chips fall where they may.

“You shall not tempt [make trial] of Jehovah your God” (Deut. 6:16). When Satan tempted Jesus to do so—to push God into offering proof of the veracity of his Word (as quoted by Satan)—Jesus rebuked Satan, “the accuser,” with these very words from the Old Testament. It is not God whose integrity and veracity and knowledge is somehow suspect. It is that of those who would accuse him and demand proof to satisfy their own way of thinking or living.

In every area of life, the Bible demands submission to its principles. Christians must be committed to biblical thinking in every area. Paul asserts that all wisdom and knowledge are deposited in the person of Christ (Col 2:3–8). Every thought is in some way related to Jesus Christ. Christians must refuse to think like unbelievers. To attempt a supposed neutrality or independence in our thinking would be an act of disloyalty. We are dependent upon God and the Bible and have no right or ability to assert our intellects apart from God. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge (Prov 1:7). Rational thought is based on a correct understanding of God and his Word.

UNBELIEVING THOUGHT	CHRISTIAN THOUGHT
Vain in their imaginations	Every thought captive to the obedience of Christ
Their foolish heart was darkened	The light of the knowledge of the glory of God
Enemies of God in their minds	Love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind.
“What is truth?” (Pilate)	“Thy Word is truth” (Jesus)

We are not implying in any of this that the Bible is essentially unreasonable, mistaken, full of genuine contradictions and absurdities, or unable to withstand investigation. Christianity is not blind faith that simply believes irrespective of the evidence. Reason is not the enemy of Christian faith. Perhaps no other worldview has as high a regard for logic as Christianity does.<sup>2</sup> Critics have been examining the Bible for centuries in their quest to find fatal flaws or any proof that the Bible is not trustworthy.<sup>3</sup> While one must admit that the Bible does contain many things difficult to understand and that there are some problems not easily resolved, there are no obstacles so serious that they destroy or even reduce the Bible's credibility, as we shall see.

## **Circular Arguments**

Those who take a presuppositional approach to apologetics are often charged with circular reasoning. We say the Bible is true because we believe the Bible. We assume what we are trying to prove. But all reasoning starts either with God or with man. Christians are persuaded that the correct starting point is not man's intellect but God's Word. Unbelievers also engage in circular reasoning, assuming what they are trying to prove—that they have the intellectual capacity to sit in judgement of the Bible. They think they are rational because they are rational. So there's no avoiding circularity in reasoning. The question is which circle you want to be in, God's or man's.

## **The Purpose and Place of Evidence**

There is much evidence that supports biblical claims. Christianity is not a house of cards that will come crashing down due to a lack of supporting evidence. Our faith is built on a solid foundation of historical accuracy and verifiable events. Some scholars believe that the resurrection of Jesus Christ is the single most well-attested event in all of ancient history. So there is no lack of evidence to back up the claims of the Bible and of Christianity.

People often say they reject Christianity because it fails to offer enough evidence to support its claims. In response, Christian scholars have accumulated a great many reasons to believe. However, we are on shaky ground when we base our faith solely on historical evidences. Historical studies can suggest that events actually happened, but they cannot prove it. They can persuade and remove doubt, but ultimately people do not convert to Christianity because they are intellectually moved by the proofs. God may use such studies to convince people of the truth of his Word, but conversion is not simply intellectual agreement to a series of statements. Faith comes by hearing the Word of God (Rom 10:17). The Holy Spirit uses the Word to convince people of their need for salvation. A study of the evidences of Christianity may remove some of

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<sup>2</sup> Ronald H. Nash, *Worldviews in Conflict: Choosing Christianity in a World of Ideas* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 1992), 74.. Many religions include irrationality as a primary aspect of their faith. Christianity does not.

<sup>3</sup> Skeptics assert that they have found fatal flaws, but Christian scholars and apologists have discredited such assertions.

the obstacles that hinder belief, but evidences alone will never bring about conversion. After all, the devil believes what the Bible says (James 2:19).

Unbelievers often claim that one should not believe anything that doesn't have good evidence. The problem is that we believe countless things without good evidence or proof. If we eliminated all belief in things for which we don't have good evidence, we would get rid of a good many things indeed. It's clear that we do have the right to believe things even without solid proofs in many cases. Even the statement "You must have proof before you believe" is unprovable. Those who make such statements should be shown how absurd such a claim is. A person's beliefs may be perfectly rational even if he cannot prove them to others. This of course does not suggest that Christianity lacks good proofs, only that evidence or lack thereof neither establishes nor destroys Christianity.<sup>4</sup>

## Conclusion

The Christian view of knowledge seeks to take every thought captive to the obedience of Christ. There is no such thing as independent, impartial, or neutral thinking. Christians seek to think God's thought after him; unbelievers rebel against God by asserting their own intellectual independence. All reasoning starts either with God or with man. Christians assert that God and his Word is the correct starting place.

## Discussion

1. Why is it so important to consider presuppositions before launching into a study of apologetics? *Because Christians need to understand their own viewpoint as well as the unbelieving viewpoint. They further need to know that everyone, even the skeptic, bases his thinking on his own set of presuppositions.*
2. Explain the idea of circular reasoning and why all systems of thought are to some degree circular. *Circular reasoning is assuming what you are trying to prove. All systems of thought are somewhat circular. Even science and math start with axioms that are presupposed and upon which the whole endeavor is based.*
3. When the unbeliever dismisses the Bible, what is he presupposing? *That he has the capacity to sit in judgment of the Bible.*
4. How important are Christian evidences in one's conversion to Christ? *Such may remove obstacles and influence one to study the Bible, but ultimately one is not converted simply because he believed the evidence.*

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<sup>4</sup> Nash, *Worldviews in Conflict*, 88ff.

5. What do we mean by a Bible-soaked logic? *Thinking biblically, letting the Bible influence all your thoughts and decisions.*



## Lesson 3: An Accurate Gospel Presentation

A significant aspect of the apologetic task is presenting the Gospel message to unsaved people with the goal that they would convert to Christ. We commonly call this evangelism. It is critical that we are able to make an accurate presentation of the Gospel. Today the Gospel message is often watered down, misunderstood and misspoken. In our evangelistic efforts we must make sure that we are communicating the true Gospel in an appropriate way. We must strive to present the message of the Gospel clearly and accurately. This lesson will examine what information you must include as you tell others of their need for salvation through Christ.

When you present the gospel, there are certain topics that your audience must understand. You should thoroughly understand each topic yourself and you should be able to discuss the content of each topic with any age group.

*Note the progression that follows: God, man, Christ, response (repentance and faith)*

### **Who is God? The Creator and sovereign Lord**

It's important that you start here because much error and confusion regarding the person of God abounds in our culture and around the world. People need to know who God is and where they stand in relation to him.

Texts	Ideas
Gen 1:1	God exists. He is the Creator. Because he made us, we are totally dependent upon him. He can do as he pleases. He is in charge of the universe.
1 Pet 1:15–16	God is holy. He never sins. He always does what's right.
John 3:16; Rom 5:8; 2 Pet 3:9	God loves us. He wants to have a friendly relationship with us. He wants us to be saved and has provided a means of salvation.
Eph 1:11	God is absolutely sovereign. He's the King of kings.
Rev 4:11	As Creator, God is worthy of man's worship.

## What is man? Utterly sinful and unable to save himself.

Texts	Ideas
Jer 17:9; Rom 5:12, 3:10–23	People are basically sinful. People do bad things because they are sinful. Each person has sinned against a holy God.
Eph 2:1, 4:17–19	Man is dead in trespasses and sin. He has no fellowship with God.
John 3:18, 36	Sinners are separated from and under the wrath of God. This is man's primary problem, and he cannot solve it by himself.
Rom 6:23a; Isa 59:1–2, 64:6	Sin deserves to be punished. That punishment is eternal separation from God and from everything good.
Rev 20:14–15	Those who remain in their sin will spend eternity in hell.

It's critical that your audience understands the nature and severity of their sin and alienation from God. Francis Schaeffer said that, given one hour, he would take 45–50 minutes to show how one has sinned against and offended a holy God, and then 10–15 minutes to preach the gospel. A person must acknowledge his disease before he's ready to take the cure. So make sure your student understands the full meaning and ramifications of his or her sin.

## Who is Christ? The sacrifice, Savior and Lord

Again, it's critical to take the time to explain exactly what the Bible says about the person and work of Christ. There's much false information floating around about Jesus—don't assume that the student knows who he is and what he did.

Texts	Ideas
Matt 1:21; Luke 19:10; John 1:1; 1 Pet 2:22	He is the Son of God, God in the flesh, and lived a perfect, sinless life. Jesus is the Savior. He came to save us from our sin.
1 Cor 15:3–5	Christ died for our sins, was buried, and arose the third day.
2 Cor 5:21; Isa 53:4–7	Christ took the punishment for our sins. He suffered instead of us. He was our substitute.
John 14:6; Acts 4:12	He is the only way of salvation. There is no other means.
Mt 7:21–23; Luke 6:46; Rom 10:9	Jesus is both Lord and Savior. We must recognize his Lordship.

## How should I respond to the Gospel? Repent of my sins and trust in Christ.

The gospel message demands a response. Just knowing the facts of the gospel does not mean that one is saved. One must make a personal decision regarding the facts.

Texts	Ideas
John 3:16; Acts 20:21	Salvation occurs when one repents of his sin and believes in the person and work of Christ.
1 Thes 1:9; Acts 20:21, 26:20	Repentance is turning away from and rejecting sin and turning to God. It is being sorry for sin and wanting to be forgiven.
John 3:16, 36, 5:24; Eph 2:8–9	Faith is trusting in Christ to forgive you. It is a trust in and commitment to him. It is trusting Christ alone to be saved. Belief consists of knowledge, assent, and whole-hearted trust.
Luke 14:33	Discipleship is costly. Following Christ may require a major change in your lifestyle.

Two frequently neglected but essential aspects of salvation are repentance and commitment. Clearly define and emphasize the need for repentance. Simply acknowledging one's sin is not enough (e.g., Judas was sorry that he sinned). We must urge people to turn from their sin and seek forgiveness. And when one trusts Christ as Savior, he is also recognizing him as Lord. We must present Christ as the NT presents him—both Lord and Savior. Make this clear to the student. Unfortunately, much of the material written for evangelism either leaves out or downplays both repentance and commitment. This fact results in many false professions of faith.

Note: People sometimes attempt to make the salvation decision as easy as possible by stripping down the gospel to its bare minimum, and in so doing they leave out important information. Being saved is more than just believing in Jesus. Millions of people who claim to believe in Jesus are not genuinely saved (cf. Mt 7:21–23). So we have to carefully define our terms and express precisely what we mean when we present the gospel to an unbeliever.

## Conclusion

An accurate, clear presentation of the Gospel message is an important aspect of the apologetic task. Make sure you can tell others why they need to be saved and what they must do to be saved.

## Discussion

1. Shouldn't we first convince people that God exists before launching into a Gospel presentation? *No, the Bible teaches that everyone knows that God exists. They need to hear of their alienation from God, of God's wrath against them, and of the means of salvation thru faith in Christ.*
2. Shouldn't we first convince our audience that the Bible is trustworthy before telling them what the Bible says? *No, we believe the Word of God does the work of God, whether your audience believes it or not. It's God's job to convince unbelievers that the Bible is true. We simply proclaim its message.*
3. What if the person you are talking to tells you that he doesn't believe in God or the Bible? *Still present the same message as long as he is willing to listen. Remember that faith comes by hearing the Word, not by being convinced intellectually.*
4. Why do we need to stress the importance of accuracy and clarity in a Gospel presentation? *Because it's so common for people to leave out or add to the message of the Gospel. It's very common today for people to make it as easy and painless as possible for people to accept Christ. Evangelists often say little or nothing about repentance, the Lordship of Christ or the costs of discipleship.*



## Lesson 4: **The Reliability of the Bible**

One of the purposes of apologetics is to present a rational basis for Christian faith. We want to demonstrate that Christianity is reasonable, logical and sensible. Although we've already shown that Christianity does not rest on man's intellectual ability to prove the claims of the Bible, it is beneficial to examine some of the evidence that supports Christianity. In this lesson we'll endeavor to show the legitimacy of Christianity's foundational documents and basic claims.

Christianity stands or falls with the Bible. Like the old song says, "Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so." If the Bible is not trustworthy, then faith based upon the Bible is empty and absurd. If one could find genuine, unquestionable errors and/or contradictions in the Bible, Christianity would come crumbling down. Hence, Christian apologists have for centuries been defending the Bible against the attacks of critics and skeptics. In today's lesson we'll discuss why faith in the record of Scripture is not misplaced.

### **Scripture's Doctrine of Scripture**

What does the Bible say about itself? It claims to be God's book, originating from the very breath of God (2 Tim 3:16). The Bible is God's self-witness; it is God speaking to us. The words "Thus saith the LORD" occur 279 times in the OT. There is no higher authority, no greater ground of certainty than that established as the Holy Spirit enables Christians to believe, understand and use the Scriptures rightly.

### **Difficulties of the Apologetic Task**

The primary source of our knowledge of the events we are concerned about are the Scriptures themselves. While there is some extra-biblical information available, it does not add much to our knowledge of the events we are interested in. Thus we must ask the question, "Are the accounts recorded in the Bible worthy of belief?"

From the outset we should admit that proving that something actually occurred in history is not as easy as one might think. If there's doubt as to what occurred a few years or a few centuries ago, imagine trying to prove that something happened 2,000 or even 3,000 years ago! Today we can go back to newspaper or TV reports to research an event, but in biblical times such technologies did not exist. The events of the Bible occurred before the invention of the printing press, so the texts we have are copies of hand-written documents. Small errors can creep into such texts over time as one copy is made from another. Some copyists and translators were more careful than others, so there are some texts that are admittedly less reliable than others. These are just a few

of the challenges facing those who seek to defend the reliability of the Bible. However, none of these difficulties make our task impossible.

Some people argue that the details of the biblical stories are not very important as long as the general teaching comes through. Errors of historical or geographical nature are not all that important, they suggest. However, if the Bible is in error on areas that we can check (like dates and locations), then how do we know that it's not wrong concerning doctrine? The Bible claims to be God's Word, not just a newspaper account or a historical record. If it's truly inspired, we should expect it to be perfect in all that it affirms. And that's exactly what we find—it's perfectly reliable.

## **The Reliability of Old Testament History**

The Old Testament does not read like a standard history book—it's full of miraculous stories. God walks on earth and interacts with man, angels appear, children are born to old people, fire falls from the sky, prophets foretell events, a cloud leads a nation through the wilderness, iron floats, and a host of other fascinating events are recorded in the pages of the OT. There are those who dismiss such accounts immediately simply because they don't believe such miraculous events could have happened. Thus, even if archaeology and related sciences could vouch for all the ordinary data contained in the OT (e.g., dates, places, reigns of kings, etc.), it could say nothing about such miraculous events. They are unverifiable. The only reason we know they happened is that those who saw them happen recorded them.

Before tackling the issue of the historical accuracy of the OT accounts, one must first decide upon the issues of the existence of God, revelation and the possibility of miracles. If one admits that God could exist and that he could intervene in the normal flow of events with a miracle, then the contents of the OT are not so ridiculous after all. On the other hand, if one is dead-set against the possibility of miracles, then he'll find much to ridicule in the OT.<sup>1</sup>

With this backdrop, we can still make a good case for the accuracy of the OT account. Here are some factors that argue for the historical accuracy of the OT:<sup>2</sup>

1. The text of the Hebrew OT has been preserved with an accuracy unparalleled in any other Near-East literature. The Jews have always held Scripture in very high regard and were exceedingly careful to preserve their texts.

A group of scribes known as the Massorettes (500–900 AD) carefully copied and cared for the Hebrew Bible. They were so meticulous in their work that they successfully transmitted the text with marvelous accuracy.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> In a future lesson we'll discuss the possibility of miracles.

<sup>2</sup> From Howard Vos, ed., *Can I Trust the Bible?* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1963), 135ff.

<sup>3</sup> Josh McDowell and Sean McDowell, *Evidence That Demands a Verdict: Life-Changing Truth for a Skeptical World* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2017), 56.

An example of how well the OT text was preserved over the years is found among the texts of the Dead Sea Scrolls (DSS). Prior to the finding of the DSS, the oldest copy of Isaiah available dated back to about 900 AD. In the DSS was a copy of Isaiah from about 150 BC. Looking at the two copies, scholars found only minor differences, mostly matters of spelling, word order, and word use. The text had been preserved very faithfully during that entire time period (about 1,000 years). This strongly suggests a very careful and faithful preservation work over the years that separate the two copies. And if this is true of Isaiah, it's likely true of the rest of the OT books.

2. Archaeology largely supports biblical dates. Evidence supports the age and origin of Abraham, Moses and many of the other figures in the OT. One scholar asserts that "no archaeological discovery has ever [contradicted] a biblical reference."<sup>4</sup>
3. There are significant similarities between the biblical accounts and the findings of archaeology regarding the social and political patterns of the times. For example, Babylonian legal documents found in 1925 near the Tigris River reflect and confirm the practices mentioned in the Bible.
4. Various people groups mentioned in the OT, once regarded by skeptics as legendary, have been discovered. A good example of this is the Hittite nation. Other than in the Bible, no evidence was found for them until scholars found a huge library full of Hittite cultural items.
5. The Assyrian and Hittite law codes prove that OT laws are had counterparts in other Near Eastern cultures.
6. Excavations of ancient sites have proven that the other religions mentioned in the OT did exist and that some of their rituals and practices were similar to those the Israelites practiced.
7. The story of the Israelite conquest of Canaan and settlement there is confirmed by archaeology. Evidence of the violent destruction of Canaanite cities squares with the OT record of the times.
8. Close parallels exist between the covenants (agreements or treaties) God made with Abraham and those secular kings made with their subjects.

While skeptics and critics would likely take issue with some of the above points, the more scholars dig around and explore in the Middle East, the more evidence comes to light supporting the OT record of events. Archaeology disproves many alleged biblical errors and inaccuracies.

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<sup>4</sup> McDowell and McDowell, *Evidence That Demands a Verdict*, 65, quoting archaeologist Nelson Glueck. Biblical scholars recognize that there are still problems harmonizing archaeology with the Biblical account, but none so serious as to bring into question the accuracy of the Bible.

# New Testament Accuracy

Perhaps more important to Christians is the issue of how accurate and reliable the text of the NT is. The following facts strongly suggest that the text of the NT is very reliable and accurate.

1. A large amount of manuscript evidence exists supporting the NT.
  - There are about 5,800 Greek manuscripts of the NT in existence today. In contrast to this, other books from biblical times may be recorded in only a few manuscripts (MSS) or even a few scraps of MSS. Further, the oldest of these MSS may come from a time many hundreds of years after the book was originally written.<sup>5</sup> The oldest NT documents come from a time only 50 years or so after the autographs. So there are no other books like the NT. No other ancient books have so much high quality MSS evidence to back up their claims.
  - There are many versions of the NT in other languages. The NT was translated into many languages, such as Latin, Syriac and Egyptian (a.k.a. Coptic). These are important because they were translated from the Greek very early on and likely reflect an early (and thus more likely accurate) reading of the Greek.
  - The NT has also been preserved in the form of quotations in other works. Some of these writings contain lengthy quotations from the Bible. These are important because they go back to an early form of the Greek NT.
2. Because of the hand-copying process, slight errors were inserted into the text. However, such errors are generally small and insignificant, and can be identified by comparing several texts to each other. And even though there are differences between the various families of Greek MSS, these differences (called variants) are generally minor and do not demand any changes in doctrine or practice. No essential teaching of the NT is greatly affected by any copying errors or variations from one text to another.
3. This historical accuracy of the NT is verifiable. One does not find historical errors in the text of the Bible.
  - Luke, the author of Luke and Acts, was a very careful and accurate historian. He includes a great deal of secular history in his accounts—rulers, dates, places, customs and the like (e.g., Luke 3:1–2). Luke even is able to accurately record the correct titles of the many Roman government officials mentioned in his books, no small feat in itself.

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<sup>5</sup> For example, Caesar's famous book *Gallic War*, written about 50 years before Christ, is found in only 9 or 10 MSS, none of which is older than the ninth century AD. So nearly a thousand years separate the original writing and the oldest copies now available.

Archaeology has repeatedly vindicated Luke's historical accounts, so that Luke is now considered among the best ancient historians ever.

- Archaeology has confirmed many details from the pages of the NT. Entire books have been written on how archaeology supports NT claims.
  - Archaeologists found an inscription warning Gentiles not to enter certain sections of the Temple area. This temple barrier was undoubtedly the source of Paul's statement about the "middle wall of partition" which separated Jews and Gentiles at the Temple (Eph 2:14).
  - An inscription by Erastus, the city treasurer in Corinth who Paul mentioned (Rom 16:23) was uncovered in 1929.
  - Scholars found the amphitheater where the riot caused by Demetrius took place (Acts 19:23–41).
  - Even ancient coins confirm the details related in the NT.
  - The Pavement, which the Jews called Gabbatha, was buried for centuries and discovered only recently.
  - The Pool of Bethesda, which had no record except in the NT, has been positively identified.
  - The ossuary (burial box) of the high priest Caiaphas has been found.

*[Teacher: For more info on the reliability of the OT and NT texts, see the two articles in the Additional Material at the end of this curriculum.]*

## **Conclusion**

We don't ultimately believe the Bible because of the many proofs and evidences that it is an accurate, reliable book. We believe because God gives us the gift of faith. Nevertheless, the Bible is historically verifiable, accurate and trustworthy. Whether one examines the Bible's historical, archaeological or manuscript evidences, he will find nothing to discredit the Bible's claims. Such an examination in fact lends great credibility to the Bible.

## **Discussion**

1. What does the Bible claim about itself? *That it is the Word of God, inspired by God.*

2. Does archaeology generally support or disprove the Bible? *By far it supports the Bible. Some secular scholars certainly allege that history contradicts some of the biblical account. But no one has ever come up with a certifiable, genuine contradiction between history/archaeology and the Bible.*
3. How is the manuscript evidence of the NT different from other books from the same period? *There's much more and much earlier support for the NT than any other book of like age.*
4. What are the main lines of evidence supporting the validity of the NT? *Historical accuracy, archaeological accuracy and manuscript evidence.*



## Lesson 5: The Resurrection of Christ

Christianity rises or falls on one historical event: the resurrection of Jesus Christ. If Jesus rose from the dead, then everything he claimed is true—he is the Son of God, the Savior, the Messiah. If he did not rise from the dead, then all the things he said and taught are worthless. Paul says that if Jesus is not risen from the dead, the Christian faith is empty and meaningless (1 Cor 15:17–19). Christians believe that Jesus did indeed rise from the dead. One cannot claim to be a Christian unless he believes this central doctrine (cf. 1 Cor 15:1–4).

Remember the central aim of the apologetic task: to defend or make highly probable the truth-claims of Christianity. The central truth-claim of Christianity is the resurrection of Christ. Our desire is to show non-believers that it's reasonable to believe that Jesus did rise from the dead. So how do we go about our task?

We must first admit that almost everything we know about this event is based on what the Bible says about it. There is very little extra-biblical information about Jesus's death and resurrection. So what we know is based on the accounts from the Bible. If one does not accept what the Bible says about Jesus's resurrection, then there is no hope of making any headway.

### **Support for Jesus's Resurrection**

We've already seen (in Lesson 4) that there is good reason to believe that the NT documents are trustworthy. History, archaeology, and manuscript evidence support the authenticity of the NT accounts. So, given that what we find in the NT is true, we can suggest the following in support of Jesus's resurrection.<sup>1</sup>

### **The death of Jesus was actual, literal and genuine**

Jesus did not just pass out, faint or temporarily lose consciousness. The crucifixion extinguished Jesus's physical life.

Roman soldiers crucified Jesus and finished the execution. To quicken death, they broke the legs of the two criminals crucified on each side of Jesus. But when they came to Jesus they did not break his legs, because from experience they knew he was already dead. As a final precaution,

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<sup>1</sup> Some of this material inspired by "10 Reasons to Believe in the Existence of God" (RBC Ministries, 2009).

however, they thrust a spear into his side, thus insuring his death. Further, those who handled Jesus's body after removing it from the cross were convinced that he was really dead.

### **The gravesite was secure.**

The Jewish leaders met with Pilate to urge him to secure the gravesite. They said Jesus had predicted he would rise in 3 days. To assure that the disciples could not conspire in a resurrection hoax, Pilate ordered the official seal of Rome to be attached to the tomb to prevent any grave robbers from tampering with the tomb. To enforce the order, soldiers stood guard. A huge stone was rolled in front of the tomb as added security.

### **The tomb was found empty.**

On the morning after the Sabbath, some of Jesus's followers went to the grave to anoint his body. But when they arrived, they were surprised at what they found: the huge stone had been moved and Jesus's body was gone. As word got out, two disciples rushed to the burial site. The tomb was empty except for Jesus's burial wrappings, which were lying neatly in place. In the meantime, some of the guards had gone into Jerusalem to tell the Jewish officials that they had fainted in the presence of a supernatural being that rolled the stone away. And when they woke up, the tomb was empty. The officials paid the guards a large sum of money to lie and say that the disciples stole the body while the soldiers slept.

### **Many people claimed to have seen the resurrected Christ.**

Paul wrote that himself, Peter and the other apostles, James, and more than 500 people at one time had seen the resurrected Christ (1 Cor 15:5–8). By making such a public statement, he gave critics a chance to check out his claims for themselves. In addition, Luke begins his second book (Acts) by saying that Jesus "presented himself alive after his suffering by many infallible proofs, being seen by [the apostles] during forty days and speaking of the things pertaining to the kingdom of God" (Acts 1:3). Eyewitness testimony is very strong.

### **The apostles changed dramatically after the resurrection.**

Jesus's disciples were in a state of panic and utter depression after the crucifixion. Even Peter, who earlier had insisted that he was ready to die for his teacher, lost heart and denied that he even knew Jesus. But the apostles went through a dramatic change after the resurrection. Soon they were courageously standing face to face with the ones who had crucified their leader. Their spirit was like iron. They became unstoppable in their determination to obey the risen Christ. Even threats of imprisonment, torture and death did not stop them (Acts 5:42).

## **The apostles were willing to die for their claims.**

While it's not uncommon for people to be willing to die for what they believe to be the truth, few if any will die for what they know to be a lie. That fact is important because the disciples of Christ did not die for deeply held beliefs about which they could have been honestly mistaken. They died for their claims to have seen Jesus alive and well after his resurrection. They never would have willingly gone to their deaths for what they knew to be a lie.

## **Jewish Christians changed their day of worship.**

The Sabbath day of rest and worship was basic to the Jewish way of life. Any Jew who did not honor the Sabbath was guilty of breaking the Law of Moses. Yet Jewish followers of Christ began worshipping with Gentile believers on a new day. The first day of the week, the day on which they believed Christ had risen from the dead, replaced the Sabbath. For a Jew, it reflected a major change of life. The new day, along with the Christian conversion rite of baptism, declared that those who believed Christ had risen from the dead were ready for more than a renewal of Judaism. They believed that the death and resurrection of Christ had cleared the way for a new relationship with God.

## **Jesus and the prophets predicted the resurrection.**

Jesus repeatedly claimed that it was necessary for him to go to Jerusalem to die and be resurrected from the dead. Isaiah also predicted a suffering servant who would bear the sins of Israel, being led like a lamb to the slaughter (Isaiah 53). David said that God would not allow "thine Holy One to see corruption" (Ps 16:10). Peter, in his famous sermon in Acts 2 referred to this Messianic Psalm and concluded, "This Jesus hath God raised up, whereof we all are witnesses" (Ac 2:32).

## **The resurrection is central in the preaching of the gospel.**

The message that the apostles took to the "ends of the earth" was a message of the resurrection of Christ. As one reads through the book of Acts, he finds that the good news always included the fact that Jesus rose from the dead. The resurrection was not added to the message years later. The Gospel without a resurrection is no Gospel at all. Faith in the resurrection is not a side issue; it is the essence of Christianity.

## **The very existence of the church argues for the reality of the resurrection.**

If the resurrection never happened, what explains the transformation of that small band of terrified disciples into men and women who were willing to suffer and die because of their refusal to

renounce Jesus's resurrection? What changed them into bold, confident, courageous witnesses, willing to carry the gospel to every corner of the world? Only the resurrection explains it.

## **False Theories of The Resurrection**

The conclusion to all this evidence strongly suggests that Jesus did indeed rise from the dead. Good, honest, trustworthy people who had nothing to gain and everything to lose believed that Jesus rose from the dead. However, skeptics and critics of the Bible suggest the following false theories as to what “really” happened after the crucifixion:<sup>2</sup>

### **The Swoon Theory**

Jesus did not really die, he only fainted; therefore the disciples saw only a revived or resuscitated Christ. When he was placed in the tomb, he was still alive and the disciples, mistaking him for dead, buried him alive. After several hours, he revived in the coolness of the tomb, arose, and departed.

The absurdity of this theory is apparent. First, the Roman soldiers were convinced that he was dead even before they speared him. Second, the idea that Jesus could revive in the tomb, push away the stone, overcome the soldiers and convince his disciples that he had miraculously risen from the dead is simply beyond belief. Third, the linen wrappings that clothed Jesus's dead body were undisturbed in the tomb.

### **The Hallucination Theory**

Those who claimed to see Jesus after the crucifixion were hallucinating. The apostles so desired and expected to see Jesus that they experienced mass hallucinations.

Again, the impossibility of this is apparent. How could so many people have hallucinations—especially 500 at one time? Hallucinations are not contagious. Furthermore, the appearances happened under different conditions and at different times. And, don't forget, the disciples were reluctant to believe in the resurrection in the first place! Plus, they didn't simply see Jesus; they touched him and spoke to him. This false theory simply is irrational.

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<sup>2</sup> From J. Hampton Keathley III, “False Theories Against the Resurrection of Christ” (Biblical Studies Press, 1996).

## **The Impersonation Theory**

This is the view that the appearances were not really Christ at all, but someone impersonating him. This, the opponents say, is evident because in some cases they did not recognize him at first (or at all). However, several facts show this theory to be implausible.

1. The disciples were reluctant to believe in the resurrection, were doubtful and would have been hard to convince unless it was really him, as was the case with Thomas.
2. It would have been impossible to impersonate Christ's wounds. This was Christ's proof to Thomas that it was really he (cf. John 20:24f).
3. At times their inability to recognize him was a phenomenon of his glorified body brought about by his own purposes as in Luke 24:16, "But their eyes were restricted that they should not recognize him."
4. These men had close personal interaction with the Lord for three years. It is highly improbable that an impersonator could have deceived them.
5. They were meeting in locked chambers in some instances, and he suddenly appeared and then vanished. No one could fake such miraculous acts.

## **The Spiritual Resurrection Theory**

This is the view that Christ's resurrection was not a real physical resurrection. Proponents of this theory assert that Christ's body remained in the grave and his real resurrection was spiritual in nature. The story was told as it was to illustrate the truth of spiritual resurrection. This is what many liberals believe. However, this theory lacks credibility for several reasons.

1. A physical body did disappear from the tomb. If it was only a spiritual resurrection, then what happened to the body? History shows there was a body there and it disappeared.
2. The resurrection accounts are not presented in parabolic or symbolic language, but as hard fact. John 20 is full of what Greek grammarians call vivid historical present tenses to stress the historical reality of the Gospel message.
3. The record states he was touched and handled, that he had a body, and that he even ate with the disciples (Luke 24:30, 41f; John 21:12f).
4. First Corinthians 15 teaches us that Christ not only arose, but that he arose bodily. He possessed a glorified body which had unique capacities. First Corinthians 15:44 calls it a spiritual body, but it was nevertheless a physical body as well. Note the following facts about the body of Christ:

- He could appear in different forms (Mark16:12).
- He could eat, though it was not needed for sustenance (Luke 24:30).
- He could appear and disappear and could pass through solid objects (John 20:19, 26).
- He could pass in a moment from one place to another (Luke 24:31).

Philippians 3:21 shows that his body was glorious and unique, but nevertheless, still a body according to which our bodies will one day be fashioned. So, it was spiritual, glorified, and yet a physical body of flesh and bone.

## The Theft Theory

The disciples or someone else stole the body. Matthew 28:11–15 indicates that the Jewish leaders paid off the soldiers who guarded the tomb, encouraging them to tell the authorities that the disciples stole the body.

Who *could* and *would* steal the body under the circumstances?

1. The Romans *could* have but *would not* have. Pilate had agreed to have guards watch and seal the tomb in order to prevent such a theft.<sup>3</sup>
2. The Jewish leaders *could not* and *would not*. They were the ones who had requested a guard to protect the tomb against theft (Mt 27:63–66). The presence of the soldiers and the seal over the door made it virtually impossible for anyone to steal the body.

If any of the enemies of Jesus had taken the body, they would have brought it forward as soon as any claims of resurrection were made. The easiest way to end the whole affair would have been to parade the corpse of Jesus through the streets of Jerusalem, proving to everyone that he was still dead. The fact that they didn't do that suggests that they didn't have the body.

3. The women *could not* and *would not*, for they were wondering who would remove the stone for them when they went early Sunday morning to finish burial preparations (cf. Mark16:3–4).
4. The disciples *could not* and *would not* because they were perplexed and scattered, huddled together in locked rooms. Some had even left town. The likelihood of these timid, anxious, disorganized men stealing the body of Jesus out from under the noses of a guard

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<sup>3</sup> There is some doubt as to whether the guards were Roman or Jewish Temple guards. The guards may have been the same (Roman) ones who were in charge of the crucifixion. It seems more likely that they were Jewish because they reported to the High Priest rather than to the Roman authorities. In either case they never would have fallen asleep on the job.

of highly disciplined and skilled soldiers while they all slept (an offense punishable by death) is ridiculous.

## **The Mistaken (or Unknown) Tomb Theory**

One of the earliest false theories suggests that the disciples did not know where the tomb was located and probably went to the wrong empty tomb. This theory depends on the belief that those who were crucified were tossed into a common pit and that no one was sure where the authorities put the corpse.

This theory also disregards the straightforward historical narrative about the events surrounding Christ's burial and the post-resurrection scene. The Gospel record indicates that Joseph of Arimathea received permission from Pilate to take the body to his own private tomb, not to a public mass burial ground. According to Scripture, the body of Christ was prepared for burial according to the burial customs of the Jews. Everyone involved knew where the tomb was. It's simply irrational to think that the disciples would all go to the wrong tomb.

None of these theories adequately deals with the evidence of the known facts that surrounded the resurrection of our Lord. In order to believe such theories, one must totally reject the NT record, which there is no good reason to do. The evidence clearly asserts that he arose, and the resurrection marks him out as the Son of God (Rom 1:4), the Savior of the world.

If one comes to the conclusion that the NT records are basically reliable, he would also have to grant that Jesus must have risen from the dead. If so, he is exactly who he claimed to be.

## **Conclusion**

We've seen that there is adequate evidence to believe that the resurrection actually did occur. It's an historical event beyond doubt. All the theories that attempt to explain away the resurrection have proven to be absurd and/or unreasonable.

## **Discussion**

1. What is the primary source of information about the resurrection? *The NT.*
2. What makes the resurrection such an important event? *Because Christianity is based on it. It's the central doctrine of the faith.*
3. What do you think are the strongest lines of evidence that Jesus rose from the dead? *The empty tomb, eyewitness testimony, accurate reporting of events.*

4. What must skeptics assume in order to discount the resurrection? *They have to assume that the NT records are wrong.*
5. How can you convince someone that the resurrection is true if he or she does not believe the NT records? *You can't. One must trust that the Bible is true because it's the only source of information on the topic. But there's good reason to believe that the NT records are true.*



## Lesson 6: The Deity of Christ

Orthodox Christianity claims that Jesus of Nazareth was God in human flesh. This doctrine is absolutely essential to true Christianity. If it is true, then Christianity is unique and authoritative. If not, then Christianity does not differ in kind from other religions. Thus, this is a vital topic.

The teaching of the Bible and the historic confession<sup>1</sup> of the Church is:

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*We believe and confess that our Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is God and Man. He is God of the substance of the Father begotten before the worlds, and he is man of the substance of his mother born in the world; perfect God, perfect man subsisting of a reasoning soul and human flesh; equal to the Father as touching his Godhead, inferior to the Father as touching his Manhood. Who although he be God and Man yet he is not two but one Christ; one however not by conversion of the Godhead in the flesh, but by taking of the Manhood in God; one altogether not by confusion of substance but by unity of Person. For as the reasoning soul and flesh is one man, so God and Man is one Christ.*

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The Westminster Confession (8:2) puts it a little more simply:

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*The Son of God, the second person in the Trinity, being very and eternal God, of one substance and equal with the Father, did, when the fullness of time was come, take upon him man's nature, with all the essential properties, and common infirmities thereof, yet without sin; being conceived by the power of the Holy Ghost, in the womb of the virgin Mary, of her substance. So that two whole, perfect, and distinct natures, the Godhead and the manhood, were inseparably joined together in one person, without conversion, composition, or confusion. Which person is very God, and very man, yet one Christ, the only Mediator between God and man.*

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Christ is, and always has been, 100% God, to which was added a human nature at the incarnation, making him 100% man *and* 100% God, without any confusion, intermingling, or overcoming of either the divine or the human natures. While each member of the Godhead is equal in glory,

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<sup>1</sup> From *The Athanasian Creed*. Athanasius (269–373 AD), the “Father of Orthodoxy,” was the bishop of Alexandria, Egypt and a great champion of orthodox belief.

Christ voluntarily took on a subordinate role in order to accomplish the plan of redemption. Each member of the Godhead works in perfect harmony to mercifully bring about the redemption of believers.

Cultists and skeptics commonly misunderstand this vital doctrine. They may believe that Christ is either entirely divine (not really human) and only appears to be human, or that the divine and human natures are somehow combined or mixed. Some cultists assert that Jesus was the first and greatest of God's creation. But any teaching that comes short of acknowledging Christ's full deity is simply incorrect and unbiblical.

## **How do we know that Jesus is equal with God the Father?**

Several reasons:

### **Christ existed before the birth of Jesus.**

Many mistakenly believe that Christ came into existence at the birth of Jesus. However, the Bible teaches that Christ is eternal. As God, there was never a time when he was not.

1. Christ existed prior to Creation.

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*John 1:1 – In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.*

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The context of this verse clearly indicates that “the Word” here is Jesus.

2. Christ was active in Creation.

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*John 1:3 – All things were made through him, and without him nothing was made that was made. (See also Colossians 1:16.)*

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Note: Since Christ was the Creator, he could not have been part of the creation.

3. Christ appeared in temporary human form in the Old Testament.

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*Genesis 16:7 – Now the Angel of the Lord found [Hagar] by a spring of water in the wilderness, by the spring on the way to Shur.*

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#### **Who Was the Angel of the Lord?**

Several facts have led many scholars to identify “the angel of the Lord” with Christ:

- The use of the definite article (“the” angel): appearances of other divine messengers normally do not include the article (Luke 2:9 and Acts 12:7).
- The angel of the Lord is equated with God and worshiped as God (Exodus 3:1–5).
- The angel of the Lord never appears after Jesus is born.

This should not lead us to conclude that Jesus is an angel or any other kind of created being. The word “angel” is simply “messenger.” These were pre-incarnate appearances of God the Son.

4. Christ claimed to have existed prior to Abraham.

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*John 8:58 – Jesus said to them, “Most assuredly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I AM.”*

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Jesus here clearly claims to be the “I AM” of Exodus 3:14, i.e., Yahweh, the God of the Israelites. Look at the next few verses to see how the Jews responded to this — they understood that he was equating himself with God, and they wanted to stone him for it.

### **Clear statements in Scripture equate Christ with God.**

- John 1:1 clearly states “the Word was God.” It’s unreasonable to deny that this verse is teaching the deity of Christ. Cultists do deny it but Christians have upheld this obvious interpretation for two thousand years.

- In John 10:30–33, Jesus states “I and my Father are one.” The Jews understood this assertion and accused Jesus of claiming to be equal with God. They were going to stone him for such a claim. The word that Jesus used suggests oneness in nature or essence.
- In John 20:28, Thomas calls Jesus “My Lord and my God.” Jesus accepts such worship.
- In Philippians 2:6, Paul asserts that Jesus was “in very nature God” who “did not consider equality with God something to be grasped.”
- Hebrews 1:8–10 clearly equates the Son with God.

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*But to the Son he says: “Your throne, O God, is forever and ever; A scepter of righteousness is the scepter of Your kingdom. You have loved righteousness and hated lawlessness; Therefore God, Your God, has anointed You With the oil of gladness more than Your companions.” And: “You, Lord, in the beginning laid the foundation of the earth, And the heavens are the work of Your hands.”*

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## **Christ is called the “Son of God.”**

In Scripture, “son of” often means “to possess the character qualities of” a person or object. For example, in Genesis 5:32 the original Hebrew literally says that Noah was the “son of 500 years.” Acts 4:36 says that the name “Barnabas” means “Son of Encouragement.” The title “Son of God” indicates that Christ possesses the attributes of God, a fact which even Christ’s enemies acknowledged:

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*John 10:33–36 – The Jews answered him, saying, “For a good work we do not stone You, but for blasphemy, and because You, being a Man, make Yourself God.” Jesus answered them, “... do you say of him whom the Father sanctified and sent into the world, ‘You are blaspheming,’ because I said, ‘I am the Son of God’?”*

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## **Christ is fully God.**

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*Col 2:9 – For in him dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily;*

*Heb 1:3 – who being the brightness of his glory and the express image of his person, and upholding all things by the word of his power, when he had by himself purged our sins, sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high.*

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Some cults and/or false religions teach that Christ is “a god” or somehow less than fully equal with God the Father. The Bible teaches that he is fully and equally God.

## **Christ demonstrated that he was God.**

- Christ demonstrated that he was omnipotent.

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*Mark – 4:39 Then he arose and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, “Peace, be still!” And the wind ceased and there was a great calm.*

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- Christ demonstrated that he was omniscient.

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*Matthew 12:25 – But Jesus knew their thoughts, ...*

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- Christ demonstrated that he was sovereign.

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*Matthew 28:18 – And Jesus came and spoke to them, saying, “All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth.”*

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- Christ demonstrated that he was holy.

Christ did not yield to Satan’s temptations (Matthew 4:1–11 and Luke 4:1–13). Many other texts assert Christ’s sinlessness.

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*John 8:46 – Which of you convicts Me of sin? And if I tell the truth, why do you not believe Me?*

*2 Corinthians 5:21 – For he made him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in him.*

## Arguments often used against the deity of Christ

1. Jesus denied equality with God the Father when he said, “My Father is greater than I” (John 14:28). Paul also denies such equality when he asserts that “the Son also himself be subject unto [God]” (1 Cor 15:28).

*Answer:* The Father and the Son occupy different offices or function in different roles, but that does not imply a difference in essence or nature. Jesus submits to the Father as part of his role as Son. This is a functional relationship that does not imply a inferior nature.

2. Jesus must have been inferior to God because he was limited. He claimed to be ignorant of some things, which cannot be said of God. So he must be less than God.

*Answer:* Jesus possessed two natures: God and man. As a man, Jesus was limited in some respects—he got hungry, thirsty, tired, etc. His divine nature was unlimited, but his human nature was limited. Any limitations that he experienced were part of his human nature.

3. Jesus claimed not to be good (Mark 10:18), so he must not be equal with God.

*Answer:* A careful look at Mark 10:18 shows that Jesus is not saying that he is not good. The man was unwilling to recognize Christ as his master, so Jesus is challenging the man’s use of the title “good master.” Jesus is saying, “Don’t call me ‘good master’ if you don’t really recognize my authority.” Jesus refuses to accept the flattery of the man and soon points out that this fellow is not as good as he thought he was.

4. On the cross Jesus claimed that God had forsaken him (Mark 15:34). God could never forsake himself.

*Answer:* Jesus took the sin of the world upon himself on the cross (2 Cor 5:21), which caused God the Father to turn his back temporarily upon the Son.

Many of those who deny the deity of Christ do so because they can’t understand the nature of the Trinity. While the three-in-one-ness of God is indeed difficult to comprehend, it is clearly taught in the Bible and Christians have believed it throughout history.

## Conclusion

How do we know that Jesus is equal with God the Father? All the biblical evidence points to that conclusion. The Scripture explicitly states that he is divine. Divine names and attributes are ascribed to Christ. He does those things that only God can do. People worship him as God. And he claimed to be God. As all genuine Christians have always believed, Jesus is the Son of God, the second Person of the Trinity, equal in essence and nature to God the Father.

Almost all cults and other false religions deny the deity of Christ. If you want to know where a person stands, just ask, "What do you think about the deity of Christ?"

## Discussion

1. Can you reject the deity of Christ and still be a Christian? *No. This is an essential aspect of Jesus's nature that one cannot deny and still claim to be a Christian.*
2. With all the Scriptural evidence, why do you think cultists deny the deity of Christ? *1. They are unsaved and cannot comprehend spiritual truth; 2. The Trinity doesn't make sense to them so they want to get around it.*
3. How important is it that Christians have historically accepted and taught the deity of Christ? *I'd say it's very important. This has been a central doctrinal teaching in all branches of Christianity (RCC, EO, Protestant, independents, etc.) for 2k years.*



## Lesson 7: The Trinity

The doctrine of the Trinity is one of the great fundamental doctrines of Christianity. Belief or disbelief in the Trinity marks orthodoxy from unorthodoxy. Human reason alone cannot fathom the Trinity, nor can logic explain it fully.<sup>1</sup> Probably a more descriptive term would be Tri-unity, which suggests the three-in-oneness of God better than the word Trinity. God is trinal, not triple; three in one, not three-parted. [There is no good natural analogy to God's nature—not eggs, 3 states of matter, etc.]

A definition of the Trinity must include the distinctness and equality of the three Persons within the Trinity as well as the unity within the Trinity. The doctrine of the Trinity asserts that one God exists indivisibly and eternally as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. God is three persons in one essence. The divine nature subsists in three distinctions—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. All three Persons possess the divine attributes, yet the essence of God is undivided. The Persons do not exist or act independently of one another.

One of the great criticisms of the doctrine of the Trinity is that the word is not found in the Bible. Further, there is no uncontested, clear statement of the Trinity in one particular passage in the Bible. Nevertheless, the biblical evidence strongly supports the doctrine.

### **Hints of the Trinity in the Old Testament.**

While there is no clear statement of the Trinity in the OT, there is some evidence of it. The OT allows for and implies the existence of the Trinity.

### **Suggestions of plurality in the Godhead**

1. Genesis 1:1 – God (*Elohim*) is a plural noun.
2. Genesis 1:26 – “Let us make man in our image.” C.f. also Gen 3:22.
3. Psalm 110:1 – God's name is applied to more than one person in the same text.

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<sup>1</sup> Paul P. Enns, *The Moody Handbook of Theology* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1989), 198.

## **Suggestions of three persons**

4. Isaiah 48:16 – “The Lord God, and his Spirit hath sent me”
5. Isaiah 61:1 – “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me.”

## **The Angel of the Lord**

In Exodus 3:1–5, the Angel of the Lord is equated with God and worshipped as God. Most likely, this was a pre-incarnate appearance of Christ.

While the OT by itself does not furnish a sufficient basis for the doctrine of the Trinity, it does contain certain suggestions that are consistent with it. It is highly doubtful that OT saints held any true Trinitarian ideas. The OT stressed the unity of God (Deut 6:4–5), and OT saints were strict monotheists. The revelation concerning God the Son and God the Holy Spirit had to await the historical appearance of Christ and the works of the Holy Spirit.

# **New Testament proof of the Tri-Unity of God**

## **Texts mentioning the three Persons**

1. Matthew 3:16–17 – At the baptism of Christ, the Son was in the water, the Father’s voice was heard from heaven, and the Spirit appeared in the form of a dove.
2. Luke 1:32–35 – Persons named: the Lord God, Son of the Most High, the Holy Spirit
3. Matthew 28:19 – Baptism formula: “In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit”
4. 2 Corinthians 13:14 – Apostolic benediction: “The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit.”
5. Jude 20–21 – “But you, beloved, building yourselves up in your most holy faith and praying in the Holy Spirit, keep yourselves in the love of God, waiting for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ that leads to eternal life.”

Texts that draw a distinction between the three Persons of the Godhead teach that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are individual, distinct persons. The Father is not the same individual as is the Son, nor is he the same individual as the Spirit.

## **Texts asserting the equality of the three persons**

1. John 6:27, 20:17 – The Father is God.

2. John 1:1, 5:23; Titus 2:13; Hebrews 1:8 – The Son is God.
3. Acts 5:3–4 – The Holy Spirit is God.
4. Matthew 28:19; 2 Corinthians 13:14 – The Persons are associated together in ways denoting equality.

Note: There is no fixed order in the naming of the Godhead. That is, the names Father, Spirit, and Son are given in different orders.

## **Other issues regarding the Trinity**

### **The name “Son of God”**

Some suggest the term “son of God” implies a lower stature than God himself. However, as we saw in Lesson 6, the term “son” as used in the Bible is a Hebraic expression suggesting that one partakes of the qualities of whatever one is said to be a son of. Jesus also called himself the “son of man,” that is, he was a man. Thus the phrase “son of God” implies that Jesus partakes of the qualities of God. The Jews understood this—they were ready to stone him for making himself equal with God (John 5:18).

### **The economic Trinity**

Occasionally it appears as if one member of the Trinity is submissive or subservient to another member. For example, Paul states that “the head of every man is Christ; and the head of the woman is the man; and the head of Christ is God” (1 Cor 11:3). Jesus repeatedly said that he came to do the Father’s will, not his own (Mark 14:36; John 5:19). And since the Holy Spirit is sent by God, he must be of lesser stature than God or Jesus.

An understanding of the functional nature of the Trinity dismisses the idea of essential difference within the Trinity. While the Persons of the Godhead are essentially equal, there is a functional or administrative chain of command. This concerns what they do, not who they are. God the Son and God the Holy Spirit do the will of God the Father. The Father is the source, the Son is the means, and the Spirit is the active agent (Eph 2:18).

This does not imply that the Father is better or superior to the Son or the Spirit, but simply that there is functional differences based on differing roles. Inferiority or superiority is not the idea here. Just as a father is to be head of the household, yet is not essentially different or better than any other persons in it, so God the Father is head of the Trinity without any essential difference between any member of the Trinity.

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*1 John 5:7 – “For there are three that bear record in heaven, the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost: and these three are one.”*

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This verse directly supports the doctrine of the Trinity and is included in most versions of the Bible until the nineteenth century. But it appears in only three Greek manuscripts, all of which are late and of suspect nature. No church father quotes the verse, which is a significant fact, because had they known the text, they certainly would have used it in the Trinitarian controversies they were engaged in. It's not found in the Latin until the fourth century. Erasmus did not include it in his first two versions of his Greek NT because he couldn't find it in any existing Greek text. He included it reluctantly in his third and following editions, with a lengthy footnote asserting his disbelief in its authenticity. It was included in the KJV because the translators followed Greek manuscripts based on Erasmus's third edition. Thus this text is of limited value in proving the Trinity. Fortunately, the existence of the Trinity can be easily proven from many other texts.

## **Misinterpretations of the Trinity**

1. Tri-theism: three separate gods rather than one God in three persons.
2. Modalism: three roles or modes of existence. The one God manifests himself as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.
3. Arianism: the Son is a created being, “a god,” and thus inferior to the Father in nature or essence. Jehovah's Witnesses are Arians.

## **The use of “only begotten” and “first born”**

Critics of the doctrine of the Trinity often assert that Christ cannot be equal with the Father because he was begotten and is called the first born. However, the term “only begotten” does not necessarily suggest a beginning point in time, but rather the unique, one-of-a-kind quality of Jesus. The term “only begotten” could be translated “one-and-only.”

The term “first born” is based on the OT idea that the first born son inherits a double portion of the father's estate and other privileges unique to the first born son. Figuratively, the word denotes special privilege, priority and supremacy (c.f., Ex 4:22; Col 1:18; Heb 1:6). Christ is the head of the church and supreme over all, and is thus the first born. The word emphasizes Christ's position, not his birth or origin. Read Psalm 89:27.

## Conclusion

Bible clearly teaches the doctrine of the Trinity and Christians have believed it for nearly 2000 years. We may not fully grasp its meaning or understand how three can be one, but we must believe that one God exists eternally and indivisibly as Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

## Discussion

1. Must we thoroughly understand a doctrine in order to believe it? *No.*
2. Why is denial of the Trinity such a serious error? *Because it denigrates the nature of God. It says that Jesus and the Holy Spirit are not fully and equally God.*
3. What's wrong with this statement?

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*The Bible calls God by the names Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. That does not mean that he is three persons. Actually, these are the titles of three roles that he has filled. This can be understood in the same way that a man can say, "I am a father, son, and husband." A man can truly be all three, but he is still a single person. So it is with God.*

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*The Bible teaches 3 persons, not 3 modes of operation. The above idea is called modalism—one God functions in different modes at different times. Refutation: All three members of the Godhead show up simultaneously (e.g., Matthew 3:16–17), which would be impossible if modalism was true.*



## Lesson 8: Common Criticisms of the Bible

We've already examined the evidence supporting the trustworthiness of the biblical text (Lesson 4). We found that Bible is historically verifiable, accurate and trustworthy. Whether one examines the Bible's historical, archaeological or manuscript evidences, he will find little to discredit the Bible's claims. Such an examination in fact lends great credibility to the Bible.

However, there are still many critics of the Bible. In today's lesson, we'll be examining some typical criticisms of the Bible, and we'll find that most criticisms lack substance.

### **The Bible is full of myths, legends and old-wives' tales.**

This criticism is brought up because of the Bible's many miracle stories. Such accounts, to the modern mind, are surely mythical and not factual. Miracles like those described in the Bible just don't happen. We see no evidence of them happening today. Further, some Bible stories, like Noah's ark and the flood, are very similar to the fables from other cultures. The stories in the Bible are of the same mythical quality.

Liberals and others who deny the Bible would agree with the above criticism, but suggest that it's not important whether the stories are actually true. The point or moral of the story is what's important. But those who uphold the validity of Scripture deny such a suggestion. There are several reasons to believe that the miraculous stories of the Bible are true, not mere mythical fiction:

- If God exists, it is not irrational to reason that he might occasionally intervene in various ways and upset the normal flow of events. Those who deny the existence of God obviously would also deny miracles. But if God exists, miracles are not out of the question.
- Biblical accounts are usually sober and restrained rather than frivolous and bizarre. If one compares the fables and myths from other sources with biblical stories, he will notice a marked contrast. Biblical stories don't sound like typical myths and legends. We see no half-man, half-beast creatures, no worlds supported on tortoise's backs, or individuals springing from the head of Zeus or the like in the biblical record.
- The biblical writers come from a tradition with a solid commitment to truth. The authors of the Bible are men of profound ethical integrity who were willing to die for the truth of their

claims. One would expect the truth from them. It makes no sense to suggest that accurate historians would include myths and legends in their otherwise factual accounts.

- The fact that certain biblical stories share similar themes with mythical stories should not surprise us. For example, if the flood really happened, it's not irrational to suppose that we would find evidence of it in the stories of pagan cultures.
- Christianity is not irrational or absurd. Christians do not believe in things that are patently untrue, mythical or legendary.

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*Christian faith does not aim to affirm what is absurd, reveling in irrationality. Such a thought misconstrues the nature of faith as it is presented by the Bible. The Christian notion of faith—unlike most other religions—is not an arbitrary leap of emotion, a blind stab of commitment, a placing of the intellect on hold. For the Christian, faith (or belief) is well-grounded.<sup>1</sup>*

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## **Science has proven the Bible to be untrue.**

Two hundred years ago, most people in western cultures believed the Bible to be an accurate record of actual events. Today, however, after the Enlightenment and the rise of rationalism and naturalism as the predominant ways of thinking, most westerners have rejected the Bible. Science and technology have been able to explain most phenomena that used to be thought of as the mysterious ways of God. We no longer need God to explain why things happen. The Bible teaches a view of reality that is out of sync with the assured results of modern science.

- Science depends upon the ability to verify a hypothesis by repetition and testing. The events described in the Bible are non-repeatable and untestable. They are the subject of history, not science. A biologist or paleontologist may give you his ideas about how things came about, but it's impossible for him to say how things did indeed happen. He wasn't around to observe them, so he really doesn't know.
- The Scripture describes things as they appear to the naked eye, how they appear on the surface to the casual observer. The Bible is not a science textbook. This is not to suggest that the Bible is inaccurate, but simply that one should not impose modern scientific standards upon the Bible. For example, we know that the sun does not really rise or set. The use of such language does not invalidate the Bible's claims.

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<sup>1</sup> Greg L. Bahnsen, *Always Reading: Directions for Defending the Faith* (Nacogdoches, TX: Covenant Media Foundation, 1996), 196.

- The “assured results of modern science” are not so assured as we are led to believe. Every so often, science experiences a major upheaval which throws out the old ideas and replaces them with new ones. Today there are many scientists who disavow traditional scientific naturalism. Even the venerable theory of Darwinian evolution is not without a significant number of critics within the scientific community.
- Science tells us that miracles simply don’t happen. One cannot break the laws of nature. However, such an argument assumes that God does not exist, or that if he does exist, he is unable or unwilling to intervene in nature and suspend the natural order of things. But if God exists, it is not unreasonable to suppose that he could occasionally interrupt natural laws.
- Science may claim to have the answer for everything, but it clearly does not. One of science’s major problems is explaining how mindless forces give rise to minds, knowledge, sound reasoning, and moral principles. Further, science cannot tell us how matter arose from nothing, why the big bang (supposedly) happened, or why life is meaningful if random forces are really in control. Science also can say nothing in regard to morality, decency and virtue. A world governed by pure naturalism would be a savage, inhuman place indeed.

## **The Bible is full of contradictions.**

Skeptics and critics commonly assert that the Bible is full of contradictions. Not just a few, but hundreds, even thousands. Lengthy books have been written detailing the supposed contradictions in the Bible. In a normal storybook, contradictions wouldn’t make much difference. But when a book claims to be inspired and inerrant, the very words of God, contradictions, if genuine, would present a major problem. We would expect there to be no contradictions and no mistakes in God’s Word.

How should we respond to this accusation?

- We must from the outset admit that there are a few apparent contradictions and problems that have not yet been satisfactorily resolved. But such are few and far between. To say that the Bible is “full” of contradictions is a serious overstatement.
- Most critics use the word “contradiction” very loosely. Two accounts that seem not to correspond are not necessarily contradictory. A genuine contradiction must assert that something is true and false at the same time and in the same respect.<sup>2</sup> For example, the Bible commands, “Thou shalt not kill.” Yet God tells the Israelites to kill the Canaanites

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<sup>2</sup> The Law of Non-Contradiction states “not both A and – A at the same time and in the same sense.” In other words, a statement and its opposite cannot both be true at the same time and in the same respect. A genuine contradiction exists only when two statements are both alleged to be true when they cannot both be true at the same time and in the same sense.

and others. The Bible even supports capital punishment, the killing of a guilty criminal. Is this a contradiction? *No, because the Fifth Commandment deals with murder, not the killing associated with warfare or capital punishment. The word “kill” is used in a different sense. No genuine contradiction exists here.*

- Some supposed contradictions result from two or more different perspectives on events, such as the varying accounts in the Gospels. For example, one writer mentions only one angel at Jesus’s tomb while another writer says there were two. There is no contradiction here. Had the first writer said that there was *only* one, then a genuine contradiction would exist. But he doesn’t say that.
- Some supposed contradictions arise from a copyist’s error. Because the Bible was copied by hand for many years before the printing press, it was inevitable that small typographic errors crept into the text. By comparing texts, scholars are able to weed out these mistakes most of the time. Some of the apparent contradictions are likely due to an error of this sort. Such errors are not true contradictions.
- The problem of outstanding discrepancies in the Bible becomes smaller as time goes by. As scholars study the manuscripts and dig around in the Middle East, these problems yield to close examination and solutions arise. Such has happened many times in the past and continues to happen today. There is less reason today to believe that the Bible is full of contradictions that at any time in the history of the church.<sup>3</sup>

## **The manuscripts (MSS) of the Bible have been corrupted and changed over the years so that we cannot be sure what was originally written.**

The OT was written primarily in Hebrew and the NT in Greek. We have no original MSS, only copies of copies. Sometimes these copies are quite far removed from the time of original writing. Thus, critics assert that many scribal errors and mistaken readings have made the text of the Bible unreliable.

The critics are simply wrong in their contention that scribal errors and multiple copies over many centuries render the text unreliable. Scribes were fully capable of making very accurate copies of manuscripts, and the copying process has not degraded the text to the point that it is no longer trustworthy.

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<sup>3</sup> R. C. Sproul, *Reason to Believe: A Response to Common Objections to Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 1982), 26.

See the two articles on the subject in the Additional Material.

## **The Bible is full of historical errors.**

As we saw in Lesson 4, there is good reason to believe that history as presented in the Bible is accurate and trustworthy. Archaeological discoveries have supported the sequence of events as reported in the Bible. Many of the supposed errors reported in the Bible have proven to be accurate historical accounts. The Christian has nothing to fear from rigorous historical research.

## **Some parts of the Bible are offensive to modern, secular “values.”**

There are many statements in the Bible that people find offensive. A God who pours out his wrath upon sinners is simply unacceptable to the modern mind. God should be loving and forgiving, not strict and “terrible” as the Bible makes him out to be, especially in the OT. Further, it would be narrow-minded and downright mean if God allowed only one way of salvation. For God to prohibit the majority of the people in the world from being saved is reprehensible to our pluralistic culture. God ought to at least give them a chance to be saved. Also, God surely could not have meant for the Israelites to kill all those innocent people when they conquered the Promised Land. And the whole idea of eternal punishment in hell is certainly not acceptable.

All such sentiments are the result of both misunderstanding God and substituting worldly, human “wisdom” for biblical thinking.

- God is the creator; Man is the creature. The ways of God are not subject to the uninformed judgements of sinful man. God is under no obligation to explain his reasoning to man. Man is in no position to judge God.
- God’s ways are often unsearchable and beyond man’s intellectual grasp (Rom 11:33f). The fact that man cannot understand God’s ways should not surprise anyone.
- God and his Word give us the standard by which we judge the morality of any act. There is no higher standard independent of God. God doesn’t have to measure up to what unsaved people think is right.
- All sinners rightfully deserve God’s wrath and judgement. It is purely an act of mercy and grace that God chooses to spare believers. The fact that God presents people with a means of salvation is a clear display of his lovingkindness.

- The people the Israelites killed when they conquered the Promised Land were by no means innocent. Their cultures were exceedingly inhumane. The Israelites spared many of the Canaanites, who in turn became a major stumbling block for them.
- Eternal punishment is the reasonable and just reward for those who have offended a holy God. If there's a heaven, there must surely be a hell.

## **Christianity, like all religion, is man-made.**

Karl Marx, one of the founders of communism, is famous for his statement alleging that “religion is the opiate [i.e., drug] of the masses.” He asserted that the rich use religion to exploit the poor and keep them from rebellion. Because it emphasizes virtues such as industry, service, humility and obedience, religion keeps workers in line, thus protecting the interests of the rich minority. Religion promises the oppressed “pie in the sky bye and bye,” milk and honey and streets of gold for those who behave themselves in this life. Sigmund Freud, the father of psychoanalysis, suggested that man created religion to help him deal with the problems of life. Uncontrollable forces surround man, and religion helps people deal with things they can't understand. According to the Freud, religion owes its origin to psychological needs rather than the actual existence of God. People want gods to exist, so they invented them.

Scholars teach us that monotheism evolved from animism (the belief that spirits inhabit all things) and pantheism (the belief in many gods). Ancient people attributed human characteristics to the forces of nature, which led to the belief that spirits inhabited physical things. This led to the belief that many gods existed. Eventually, someone suggested that his god was better than all the rest, and this led to monotheism. Religion evolved just like many other aspects of life.

How should Christians respond to such criticism?

- Christianity does not somehow drug believers into a mindless stupor. As we've already seen, Christianity emphasizes logical, reasonable thought. It's not a blind faith or a leap into the dark.
- The fact that religion meets a psychological need in people does not imply that religion is the result of such a need. While faith does help people psychologically, that is not its primary goal.
- Although Christianity teaches a blessed future existence, it also teaches the necessity of justice and fairness in this life. Jesus, the prophets, and the apostles were very critical of powerful, rich people who were oppressing the poor.
- If man had invented God, he certainly would not have invented the One whom the Scriptures reveal. A man-made god would be much more human-like, less wrathful, less judgmental, and far easier to please than the biblical God. Attributes such as holiness,

omniscience, sovereignty, omnipotence, and immutability actually make God more of a threat to man than a “crutch.”

- There is no archaeological or historical evidence suggesting that monotheism evolved from any other religious practice. A fully-formed monotheism is evident from the very beginnings of Judaism.

## **The church is full of hypocrites.**

A hypocrite is a play-actor, one who lives a lie. Our culture has had its fill of liars and frauds in positions of authority. The government, education, the military and even organized religion have provided us with many examples of people who say one thing but do another. Critics loudly declare that the church is filled with such people.

We must admit that the church is full of sinners. In fact, the church is one organization that requires its members to admit that they are sinners. But “sin” is not necessarily synonymous with “hypocrisy.” In one sense, the church has fewer hypocrites than other organizations because church members admit their sinfulness. They don’t claim to be perfect. Even pastors and other leaders, those who should be the least guilty of hypocrisy, are not perfect. Everyone falls short of the glory of God, including mature believers. One should not expect perfection from anyone. For a pastor to preach a higher level of holiness than he himself has achieved is not hypocrisy. In order to proclaim the whole counsel of God, preachers must exhort people to do what they may fail to do. But such is not hypocrisy.

There is a sense in which all people are somewhat hypocritical. They present an image to the public that is not a true reflection of themselves. However, the assertion that the church is “full” of hypocrites is an inaccurate exaggeration. Every church has a few in it, but there are many good churches “full” of sincere believers who are actively seeking to live holy lives as well. The fact that church members have not achieved perfection does not imply that they are hypocrites. Further, even if it is true that churches are full of hypocrites, that fact should not prevent a sincere seeker of God from participation at church. One should not allow the shortcomings of others to hinder his own spiritual development.

Christians are fortunate in that their Lord was no hypocrite. Jesus is the perfect example for believers to follow. Rather than looking at the failures of believers, critics ought to examine the life of Christ. Christianity must be judged, not on the basis of the lives of Christians, but on the life of Christ. He was no hypocrite.

## **Christianity is a crutch for weak people.**

People often state that they feel no need for religion. Everything is running smoothly in their lives without it. Perhaps those who are psychologically weak find it helps them feel better, but well-

balanced, educated people don't need it. Such people are indifferent to Christianity—they never think about it and never sense a need for it. Further, some suggest that the virtues that Christianity produces, such as integrity, industry, and kindness, need not be rooted in faith at all. People are basically good, and one need not be religious to be virtuous. Given the right set of circumstances, people are fully capable of virtuous living without the threats and rewards of religion.

However, one's sense of need for a certain thing, or a lack of need for it, does not validate or invalidate that thing. Christianity is not based on how people feel about it. God's existence is not determined by whether or not anyone believes in him. For someone to allege that Christianity is invalid simply because he does not find it personally necessary is the height of arrogance.

Man is not basically good; he is basically evil. The unsaved person is dead in trespasses and sin, unable and unwilling to please God. Man may reform himself by "turning over a new leaf," but he cannot redeem himself or restore his relationship to God by self-effort. Man is a fallen creature in need of grace.

Man *does* need to be religious in a sense. He needs that genuine religion which fully depends upon God's grace. Repentance from sin and faith in Christ are not unnecessary options with God. Christianity is not a crutch; it's the solution to man's primary problem, a problem he cannot solve by himself.

## **Christianity is just one of many legitimate religions.**

Our pluralistic society tells us that Christianity is just one option among many. If it "works" for you, then fine. People have the right to believe whatever they want. All religions are equally valid. In fact, all religions are simply different ways of accomplishing the same thing. All religions are basically true even if they differ on the details. One should focus on the similarities instead of the differences. Each religion is like a separate road up a mountain—they all lead to the same place even if they seem to be going in different directions at times. No single religion has all truth locked up within itself. One should not make narrow, exclusive claims for his own faith or criticize the faith of others. God is not so narrow-minded that he provides only one way of salvation.

The problem with such a view is that Christianity is in clear contradiction with other faiths. If what Christianity alleges to be true is indeed true, then all other faiths that contradict it are false. Christ makes many exclusive claims for himself and his way of salvation (e.g., John 14:6; Acts 4:12). If he's right, then all contradictory faiths are invalid.

We've already learned that two contradictory statements cannot both be true at the same time and in the same respect. So it is with Christianity and other faiths—they cannot all be true. They could all be false, or one true and the others false, but they can't all be true because they contradict each other on many points. One could simply ignore these contradictions, suggesting

that they are mere nonessential, minor details, stripping Christianity of its distinctives and watering down its doctrines, but it could no more be called Christianity. To contend that Christianity does not really contradict other religions is to descend into irrationalism. While irrationality is not a problem for some faiths, it definitely is for Christianity. Thus, it's impossible to hold that Christianity and other faiths are equally valid. Such cannot be the case.

If God does not exist, and if all religions are simply man-made traditions, then all religions would indeed be equal—equally empty and futile. But if God exists and if man is able to enter into a positive relationship with him, there must be appropriate and inappropriate ways to approach him. Christianity asserts that it is the one and only way to God. Thus, all other ways are invalid.

## Conclusion

Christianity has plenty of critics. But many of the criticisms leveled against our faith are quite weak, unreasonable, and empty. Believers must be ready to give an answer to criticisms whenever they have the opportunity.

## Discussion

1. Why is it reasonable that we find similar themes in the Bible and in mythology? *1. In some cases, the Bible and mythology are treating the same event, e.g., the flood; 2. Both the Bible and mythology deal with similar issues, e.g., life, death, families, tragedy, etc.*
2. Why can't science prove that a historical event happened? *Science cannot prove history. Science proves things thru observation and replication. History is not the object of science. Historians can gather evidence that a certain thing happened, and they can do so in a scientific way. But the best they can do is to give an educated guess as to what happened.*
3. Define a genuine contradiction. *You must have two statements that cannot both be true at the same time and in the same sense. Both a and –a must be alleged to be true.*
4. Why is it impossible for both Christianity and Islam or Buddhism to be equally valid? *Because of the law of non-contradiction. Contradictory statements cannot both be true at the same time and in the same sense. These religions contradict each other at many points.*



## Lesson 9: The Problem of Evil—Weak Answers

We've already seen that many of the most common criticisms of the Bible and Christianity don't stand up under close examination. However, there are a few criticisms that are a bit more substantial and thorny. We'll look at one today—the problem of evil and suffering in the world. One scholar calls this issue “the most serious and cogent [of] objections that unbelievers have brought against Christianity.”<sup>1</sup> R.C. Sproul agrees, stating, “the problem [of evil] is a severe one and one for which I have no adequate solution. I do not know how evil could originate with a good God. I am baffled by it, and it remains a troublesome mystery to me.”<sup>2</sup> Atheistic scholars assert that the presence of evil is the strongest argument against the belief in God, offering a complete refutation of theism. Hence the problem of evil must be a troublesome one indeed.

This issue can be stated in various ways: If God were all-powerful, he could prevent evil. If he were good, he would prevent evil. But there is evil. So God is not powerful or not good, or perhaps neither good nor powerful. Or perhaps there is no God.

Most people have experienced great suffering, loss and pain, and even believers cry out to God at such times, hoping to understand why such evil has entered their lives. “Why, Lord?” is an almost universal response to suffering. Seemingly undeserved suffering and pain is not easily reconciled with the idea of a good, all-powerful God. The word that theologians use when discussing this issue is theodicy, which comes from the Greek words for “God” and “just.” How can God allow or even cause evil and yet be righteous? How can the existence of God be harmonized with the existence of evil? That's the problem.

How should believers approach this issue? Is there a reasonable, biblical defense? Defenders of Christianity have constructed several responses. However, those we'll examine today are all weak and unsatisfactory. We'll look at these because they are common in Christianity. We should avoid these approaches in our dealings with critics and skeptics.

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<sup>1</sup> John M. Frame, *Apologetics to the Glory of God: An Introduction* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P & R Publishing, 1994), 149. Most of this lesson follows Frame.

<sup>2</sup> Sproul, *Reason to Believe*, 126.

## **God allows evil so that, in triumphing over it, God displays his power and name throughout the earth.**

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*Romans 9:17 – For the Scripture says to Pharaoh, “For this very purpose I have raised you up, that I might show my power in you, and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth.”*

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This verse implies that God raised up an evil ruler so that he might display his power in defeating him. This is not a bad answer altogether, but it does not really answer the objections posed above. It side-steps the issue. The question still remains: Why is evil required to display God’s power and glory? Much evil goes unpunished, unlike the case of Pharaoh. How does evil, especially when that evil seems to go unpunished, display God’s power? God’s power was evident in Pharaoh’s case, but not seemingly in every case.

## **Evil is just an illusion. If you have the right attitude, it can’t harm you.**

Followers of certain Eastern religions (e.g., Buddhism) and cults (e.g., Christian Science) profess to believe this doctrine. If you don’t believe in evil, nothing evil can happen. Some Christians have also suggested that evil is more of a lack of good than anything that exists independently.

But evil does truly exist. Only blind fools believe that pain and suffering are not real. If evil is just an illusion, it’s a very strong one. Someone could easily say, “How could God allow such a terrible illusion of pain and suffering?” It is true that evil cannot exist by itself—it depends upon the corruption of that which is good. Nevertheless, evil is real and powerful. It’s irrational to deny it.

## **God cannot overcome all evil.**

In 1981, Rabbi Harold Kushner wrote a popular book entitled *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*. His explanation of evil was that although God does the best he can, he is unable to prevent evil in some cases. God is good and is doing all he can, but sometimes his hands are tied, especially when it comes to people suffering the consequences of their own free choices.

Kushner wants to retain God’s goodness, but he does it at the expense of God’s omnipotence, omniscience, and sovereignty. The Scripture repeatedly teaches that God is both good and all-powerful. One cannot deny any of God’s attributes without denying God himself. A weak God is no solution to this problem. Kushner presents a wimpy “god” who is in subjection to his own

creation, which is absurd. With such a weak “god,” there’s no certainty that evil ever will be overcome. Perhaps there will be no eternal triumph of good over evil in that case.

## **God has created the best possible world.**

Some philosophers have argued that since God is good, and that he created the world the way it is, it must be the best possible world. If it could have been better, God would have made it better. The fact that it is not better must mean that it’s as good as it could be. Certain evils are necessary to achieve certain good ends. For example, it’s good to show compassion for those who suffer, so evil is necessary to allow for the good of compassion. It’s logically necessary for some evil to exist in the world.

The world was created good (Gen 1:31), but not perhaps as good as it could have been. Nothing in creation rises to the level of God himself, the ultimate standard of good. Creation cannot be as “good” as God. Although God is perfect, he is capable of creating imperfection. Adam was imperfect—he was alone and found no mate among all the animals God had made. Both Adam and Satan were created good, but with the capacity for sin. God *can* use evil for good ends, but it seems reasonable that evil is not really necessary to achieve good ends. Much more good would exist if evil did not exist.<sup>3</sup>

## **God allows men to make their own free choices.**

This is one of the most common defenses today. Evil came about by the free choice of a man, Adam. That choice was in no way foreordained or controlled by God. God is good and wants people to do good, but does not exercise any influence over the choices people make. Once a choice is made, people must live with any consequences that occur from that decision. These consequences may be evil. God lets us do what we want, even if it’s evil or creates suffering. He does not suspend the laws of gravity to prevent us from falling down the stairs. He does not miraculously redirect the hammer when it’s about to hit our thumb. If our choices extend suffering and pain to others, that’s just too bad.

The Bible teaches that man does possess a degree of freedom. He acts in accordance with his inner desires, whether they are holy or wicked. Man is not the helpless victim of circumstances. Genetics and background do not determine the outcome of one’s life. So man is indeed free to certain extent.

However, the Bible also teaches that God alone is truly free. God is free; man is limited in his freedom. Further, God is fully capable of influencing or foreordaining the “free” choices of man.

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<sup>3</sup> The famous skeptic Voltaire wrote the novel *Candide* showing the folly of the perfect world approach.

Scripture frequently speaks of God determining man's choices (cf. Gen 50:20; 2 Sam 24:1; Prov 16:9; Luke 24:45; Acts 2:23, 4:27–28). Even in the matter of salvation, Paul claims that God is sovereignly controlling man's choices (Rom 9:11–15). The wicked choices of evil men do not obstruct God's plan. Sometimes, in fact, God uses such men and their choices to further his plan. A perfect example of this is the crucifixion of Jesus.

## **God builds our character through suffering.**

This argument suggests that God uses evil and suffering to bring man to a state of spiritual maturity. The expression “no pain—no gain” is true in a spiritual sense. Suffering teaches us important lessons that we would not learn otherwise.

We commonly hear this explanation when loved ones are suffering, and it is comforting to know that pain may be of some meaningful use. The Bible does teach that pain can build character (e.g., Rom 5:3–5; James 1:2–4). Even the discipline of a father is helpful in the maturing process.

Perhaps if all cases of evil brought about the growth of a believer, this defense would be more acceptable. But in most cases, evil does not help anyone. People the world over, Christians and pagans alike, suffer and learn nothing from it. Evil often seems to be meaningless, random, and irrational. Also, maturity for believers can develop through other means than suffering. Suffering is not absolutely required for growth to take place. Further, the ultimate cause for Christian maturity is God's grace, not the presence of evil.

## **God is not directly responsible for sin.**

Because God is sovereign, one could argue that all sin and evil is really God's fault. That's the defense Adam and Eve tried with God. But the Bible teaches that God tempts no one to sin. The serpent, not God, tempted Eve. God is the ultimate cause of all things, but only indirectly so. Secondary causes are really to blame for evil.

This “divine permission” scheme suggests that God somehow controls evil apart from controlling the one who is doing the evil. God orders circumstances and leaves the creature to the power of his own choice, unaffected by God.

This defense merely shifts the blame one step away from God. It makes God into a Mafia boss who breaks no laws himself but commands his henchmen to do so. Scripture warns us that enticing someone else to sin is still sin (Deut 13:6f; Prov 1:10). A person who hires a hit man to murder someone else is equally responsible for the murder. So to blame secondary causes rather than the ultimate cause does not really prevent the blame from falling on God.

## **God is outside the law (*ex Lex*)**

God need not follow the Laws he prescribed for men. Human morality does not apply to God. For example, he can take life without being guilty of murder. He can do anything that suits his own purposes, even if it contradicts Scripture.

There is some truth in this approach, because some of the Laws of Scripture and morality do not apply to God. For example, God can and does take life, yet is not guilty of murder. He is the creator and has the right to do whatever he wants with creation.

However, the Law of God reflects the character of God. The holiness, justice and goodness of God are part of his character, and God is thus incapable of violating such attributes. God does, for the most part, honor the Laws that he gave for men. God behaves according to biblical standards. Hence, God cannot unjustly torment men and still not be guilty of sin. Unrighteousness is sin no matter who is guilty of it.

## **We'll appreciate heaven more because of our temporary earthly experience with evil.**

Without enduring the results of evil, believers would not know how wonderful it is to live without them. The enjoyment of heaven will be heightened because believers will be able to look back on their earthly lives of suffering and pain and realize how much better heavenly life is without the presence of evil. In order to really enjoy the bliss of heaven, believers had to suffer under evil.

Again, there is some truth to this idea, but it does not explain why evil is necessary to experience the bliss of heaven. Were Adam and Eve less than perfectly happy in the Garden before the fall? Did they really need to experience sin and its consequences to appreciate what they had before evil was introduced? Likewise, one's experience of heavenly bliss does not seem to *require* that he also experience the pains of evil. Could God not make the joys of heaven complete without the previous experience of evil? No doubt believers will appreciate heaven because evil will be eradicated, but the idea that evil is necessary in order to appreciate heaven does not satisfy.

## **The presence of evil has no meaning for an unbeliever.<sup>4</sup>**

Even if believers explained what Scripture says about evil, the unsaved won't understand it because they cannot grasp spiritual truth. Those who deny that God exists have no basis for

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<sup>4</sup> For a very good examination of this idea, see Bahnsen, *Always Ready*, 169–70.

complaining about the presence of evil because without an absolute standard of good, there can be no evil. If there is no God, then morality is impossible.

It is useful to bring this to the unbeliever's attention. The believer can point out that without God, suffering has no meaning or purpose. It's just bad luck. Further, the atheist has the added problems of explaining both good and evil, and how life can be meaningful at all without God. He's in a far worse conundrum than the believer is.

While this response has some merit, it doesn't directly address the issue. It simply tells the unbeliever that he has a bigger problem than figuring out where evil comes from. This is simply a refusal to discuss the issue. It just shifts the argument away from the problem.

## Conclusion

Some of these responses maybe valuable, but none of them explain away the problem of evil. Ultimately, they all prove unsatisfactory in one way or another. Most of them attempt to solve the problem at the expense of God's attributes. We should be very cautious when using these approaches in our dealings with critics and skeptics.

As you can see, the problem of evil is a great one indeed. However, it is not insurmountable. The key to an appropriate response is a commitment to biblical revelation. The Bible has the answer to the problem, as we will see in the next lesson.

## Discussion

1. What's the theological word used to describe the problem of evil? *Theodicy*
2. Why is this such a serious issue? *1) Because most people experience evil and many wonder where God is at such times; 2) Because it's not easily explained away.*
3. How could you prove to someone that evil is not just an illusion? *Punch him in the nose; take him to a hospital or graveyard.*
4. Why is Rabbi Kushner's explanation so unsatisfactory? *Because it robs God of his power. It rejects the biblical view of God.*
5. Why does the atheist have a bigger problem explaining evil than the Christian? *Because he has no way to define evil. Good and evil are meaningless unless God exists.*



## Lesson 10: **Biblical Solutions to the Problem of Evil**

The presence of evil is a problem for Christianity because it would seem that a good God could and would prevent evil in a universe under his control. But we find evil everywhere. So how can we harmonize the existence of evil and the existence of God? If God could prevent evil, why doesn't he? Last time we examined several proposed solutions to the problem and found them all to be less than satisfactory. Today our goal is to answer the problem biblically.

From the outset we should admit that we do not have a completely satisfactory answer to the problem of evil. Evil at times simply does not seem to make sense to us. And it is difficult indeed to explain why God allows and uses evil, yet is not touched by evil himself. This is why some scholars call the problem of evil “the most intense, pained and persistent challenge” to the Christian message.<sup>1</sup> It's a troublesome mystery that defies simple solutions. All we can do is see what the Bible says about it and accept what we find there.

### **God is under no obligation to explain his ways to man.**

In many biblical passages, the problem of evil arises, but the text never explains it. For example, in the creation narrative, God does not reveal where Satan came from, how he became evil, why he was allowed in the garden or why God didn't prevent the whole scenario. In Job's case, rather than explaining his actions to Job, God shows him that he has no right to question the Creator. Job never learned why he suffered, except that God had his own reasons. By not defending or explaining himself, God is silently challenging people to believe and trust him even when they don't understand or appreciate their circumstances.

God is sovereign in granting or withholding mercy. Exodus 33:19 says, “I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion.” God chooses according to his own will. He does not submit himself to the judgments of fallible men. Sometimes God explains his actions, and sometimes he doesn't. Modern believers must avoid the sin of Job—thinking they have the right or the capacity to understand God's ways.

In the parable of the workers in the vineyard (Matt 20:1–16), some seem to receive more than their fair share, while others think it's unfair that they receive only what they are paid. But the master claims the right to do whatever he wants with his own possessions. He admits that the

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<sup>1</sup> Bahnsen, *Always Ready*, 163.

payments were unequal, but he refuses to make things “fair.” His only explanation is that he has the right to handle his affairs as he sees fit.

Paul, the NT author who at times goes into great detail in his explanations of theology, does not explain the problem of evil. In Romans, Paul simply rebukes those who would charge God with unrighteousness (Rom 3:3–8, 9:18–24), concluding that those who bring such charges against God are justly condemned. God has the sovereign right to do as he wishes, and no further explanation is necessary. Thus, the fact that we may not understand why evil exists should not surprise us.

## **Wondering why evil takes place is not sinful.**

But when doubt turns to accusation, then questions become sinful. When we express doubt regarding God’s goodness or when we demand that God explain himself to us, then we are exalting ourselves over our Creator. We have no right to demand that God satisfy our desire to know why certain things happen. Doing so is like a clay pot demanding an explanation from the potter (cf. Rom 9:20–21). The potter has total power over the clay in both control and authority, and is under no obligation to explain his choices to the clay.

God, as sovereign Lord, is the standard of his own actions. He is not subject to human judgment; on the contrary, our judgment is subject to his Word. We can be assured, despite our circumstances, of God’s good character—God is holy, just and good. On that matter God’s Word is clear. God expects us to trust him, not doubt his good intentions. The very nature of faith is to persevere despite unanswered questions. God’s Word encourages us to hold on tightly to God’s promises and not to be overcome with doubt.<sup>2</sup>

## **God’s work in the past encourages us to wait patiently for a solution.**

Scripture tells us and gives us examples of how God’s people have to wait, often for long periods of time, for the fulfillment of God’s promises. God eventually brings such waiting periods to an end, vindicating himself and ending the sufferings of his people. For example, Israel had to wait in Egypt for over 400 years, until Moses was ready to lead the people out. Moses was eighty years old before God called him to this task. The people had to wait about forty more years before arriving in the Promised Land. The whole OT period may be described as a time of waiting and expectation. The promises given to Abraham are ultimately fulfilled in Christ, and we are still awaiting his return and the final fulfillment of God’s promises.

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<sup>2</sup> Frame, *Apologetics to the Glory of God*, 178–79.

If we look back on God's activities in the past, we can see that God always fulfills his promises and works things out according to his plan. God often solves problems in ways that are surprising and unexpected (e.g., Joseph, Ruth, Esther). God eventually shows us how the presence of evil is somehow part of his program. The lesson for us is that if God could do such things in the past, we can trust him to do so again. Even in the midst of suffering, it makes sense to trust and obey God. Suffering is temporary; the glories of heaven are eternal.

## **God may use evil to produce a greater good.**

God is currently using evil for his own good purposes. This is sometimes called the greater good defense. We must reject the idea that God's first priority is to make man more comfortable and happy. God's ultimate aim is to glorify himself. If something serves to advance God's glory, it may be thought of as good, even if it seems to be evil or associated with evil. The greater good is from God's perspective, not man's. For example, the death of Christ was both good and evil—good in that it brought about the redemption of man, evil in that it required the death of God's Son. Hence, something obviously evil (murder) may still bring about a greater good (salvation). The same is true today. Many individuals can testify to the fact that it was only through terrible circumstances that they repented and trusted Christ. This evil brought about a greater good—the salvation of a soul. If a soul is worth more than the value of the entire world (Matt 16:26), then it's reasonable that God may bring about a great deal of suffering and pain as the means of drawing a person to himself. Jesus said, "Except a corn of wheat fall into the earth and die, it remains alone. But if it dies, it brings forth much fruit" (John 12:24). Death is sometimes required for fruitfulness to occur.

Also keep in mind that God's greater good is specifically for himself and for those who love him (Rom 8:28), not for every person in the world. At times the greater good may cause evil for certain individuals, especially for the wicked, who will glorify God through their eternal punishment.

What greater good comes from evil, suffering, and/or pain?

- God's grace and justice may be displayed through suffering (Rom 3:26; 5:8, 20–21; 9:17).
- God uses evil to judge wickedness (Matt 13:35; John 5:14).
- Evil may shock unbelievers into repentance (Zech 13:7–9; Luke 13:1–5).
- God uses suffering as a means of chastening his people (Heb 12).
- Those who have suffered are able to comfort others who suffer (2 Cor 1:4).

If we presuppose that God is perfectly and completely good—as Scripture requires that we do—then we are committed to evaluating everything in light of that truth. When the Christian observes evil events or things in the world, he can and should consistently trust in God's inherent goodness by inferring that God has a morally good reason for the evil that exists. God is certainly not

overwhelmed or stymied by evil in the universe. He could put an end to it at any time. God has planned evil events for reasons that are morally commendable and good. He does not usually reveal what those reasons are. But Christians should trust that God has a morally sufficient reason for the evil which exists.<sup>3</sup>

We are not suggesting here that evil is *necessary* to achieve a greater good, but that the resulting good may be of greater significance than the evil that produced it. For example, the results of the crucifixion of Christ are of far greater significance than the temporary suffering that he endured.

## **God has promised to totally abolish evil.**

In the future, God will punish all who deserve it and reward all who deserve it. The culmination of history will reveal that God has been righteous all along. When we see Christ, all our complaints will be silenced. In the end, the problem of evil will be solved—there will be no more evil. God will triumph over it. If we believe that such a time will come, it should strengthen us to face the evils of today. We can keep trusting and obeying God despite all the wickedness in the world.

Eventually this present world order will be judged and brought to an end, and God's Kingdom will be fully manifested and established. He will wipe away every tear, and pain and sorrow will cease. Even though we should continue to pray that relief would come to those who suffer tragedy, let us never lose heart at *apparently* unanswered prayer. Instead let us pray, "Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." Our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed.<sup>4</sup>

## **Evil is not necessarily synonymous with wickedness.**

God is holy, righteous, and good. It is impossible for him to contradict his attributes. Thus, although God at times uses the sinful actions of sinful men, he is never guilty of sin. Further, sometimes what people think of as "evil" has no moral content, and thus is not actually wicked. If God were guilty of tormenting people for his own amusement, or if God's actions were somehow unrighteous, we would be accurate in charging him with sin. However, much of the suffering and pain that occurs in the world is not evil in the moral sense. In other words, suffering and pain are not necessarily associated with sin or wickedness. For example, in a natural disaster (tornado, earthquake, famine, etc.), people often experience great suffering, pain and death. Yet for God to allow the suffering associated with such natural disasters is not evil or wicked. The suffering is genuine, but God cannot be charged with sin for sending such disasters.

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<sup>3</sup> Bahnsen, *Always Ready*, 172.

<sup>4</sup> Eric Frank, "Why Doesn't God Do Something ... Now?" *WRS Journal*, vol. 3, issue 1 (Winter 1996).

## God's relationship to evil is a mystery.

In the final analysis, we have to conclude that God's infinite wisdom is beyond our grasp. All that we need to know is that the Lord of all the earth will do right and that all things work together for our good and God's glory (Rom 8:28).

Although the problem of evil is a troublesome one that does not easily yield to our attempts to solve it, the existence of evil in the universe should not cause anyone to reject Christianity. Part of the Christian life is walking by faith, trusting that God is good, holy, just, and omnipotent, even in the presence of suffering and pain. He can and often does restrain evil. Yet he also uses evil for his own purposes without contradicting his own attributes. Retaining our faith in God without wavering during times of suffering and hardship is a mark of Christian maturity.

## Conclusion

We must admit that there are no easy solutions to the problem of evil. The Bible simply doesn't explain this matter as well as we would like. The Bible is clear that God is both good and righteous, merciful and just. He will never violate his attributes. He uses evil but cannot be charged with sin. Believers must walk by faith, trusting that God knows what he is doing, and that all things do indeed work together for good for those who love God.

## Discussion

1. Is it ever wrong to question why God brings about suffering and pain? *It can become sinful if we charge God with unrighteousness or if we demand that God explain himself.*
2. What was Job's sin? *Thinking that God owed him an explanation for his circumstances.*
3. Explain the greater good defense. *God may use an "evil" to bring about a greater good. Tragedy often brings about good results.*
4. Why don't atheists have the right to complain about evil? *Because in their worldview, it's impossible to make moral judgments. They have no basis for their ethical judgments. Even "the most happiness for the most people" cannot define "good." What is "happiness"? Atheists have no way to determine what ought or ought not to be.*



## Lesson 11: Atheism and Agnosticism

Thus far in our study we've shown that it's reasonable to believe the documents and ideas central to Christianity and that criticisms of the Bible and of Christianity are weak and unconvincing. Part of the apologetic task is defensive, but part is also offensive. We now take the offensive, and our task is to show how weak and unbiblical unorthodoxy is. We'll start by examining atheism and agnosticism.

### Atheism

Atheism is the belief that there is no God. The word literally means “no-god-ism.” We live in an age when people are very skeptical of claims that cannot be proven to be true. Our culture also places a high value on science and technology, which have, to the modern mind, removed the need for God. Scientists can explain nearly every phenomenon that man encounters, so there is no more need for God. Clinging to a belief in God is a proof that one is unable to deal with the truth that we live in an impersonal universe ruled, not by a sovereign God, but by the laws of nature. Science yields no evidence that God exists; in fact, science clearly asserts that God does not exist. There is just not enough evidence to affirm the existence of God, or so the atheist claims.

A philosophy that is closely associated with atheism is naturalism. Atheists are usually naturalists. Naturalism teaches that nothing exists outside the material, natural order. The material universe is the sum of all reality. There is no supernatural realm—no gods, no angels, no devil or demons, nothing beyond that which occurs naturally. The material universe has always existed—no god created it or sustains it. Miracles are impossible because they are *supernatural*, i.e., outside the boundaries of the natural order. Everything that happens can be explained in terms of natural, material processes. Scientific laws are adequate to account for all phenomena. Man has no soul or spiritual existence, nor is there life after death. Man is the result of a purposeless and natural process that did not have him in mind. Humans are mere animals or machines who inhabit a universe ruled by chance, and whose behavior and thoughts are determined by the constant and impersonal forces of nature and environment. It's never necessary to seek an explanation for events beyond the natural realm because there is nothing beyond or in addition to nature.

Atheists tend to focus on the here-and-now rather than on the eternal. They are often concerned about the quality of human existence. Because they believe that life is strictly limited to earthly existence, some atheists seek to make their life, and the lives of others, as rich and enjoyable as possible.

Obviously atheism and naturalism are in stark opposition to Christianity. How should we respond to those who hold these philosophies?

## **Encourage them to examine their presuppositions.**

What is a presupposition? *An unproven starting point for all following arguments. Like in math there are various laws/axioms that everything else is based on. Everyone starts with certain presuppositions. These may be reasonable or irrational.*

The Christian must not allow the atheist to think that the steps by which he came to atheism are in any way superior to the steps by which a Christian comes to a theistic point of view. There is no more proof to support atheism or naturalism than there is to support theism. Science does not somehow compel open-minded people to become atheists. It's impossible for anyone to prove that nothing exists outside the boundaries of nature. People become atheists because the idea of God doesn't suit them, not because of evidence, proof, science, or sound reasoning. It's more of a religious sentiment than an intellectual conclusion drawn from the facts.

*Weaknesses of naturalism:*

- It's utterly impossible to prove that nothing exists outside the boundaries of the natural realm. Naturalism is a statement of faith, not of reason or science.
- Science seems to show that matter is not eternal. If matter is not eternal, then naturalism is invalid. If there ever was a time when nothing existed, then nothing could ever exist. Something could never come from nothing.
- Atheism has no answer for the question "Why is there something rather than nothing at all?"
- If one event could be proven to have happened outside the boundaries of nature, then naturalism is finished. We've already seen that at least one supernatural event, the resurrection of Christ, is well supported by substantial proofs.
- Naturalism cannot adequately explain how mind, knowledge, reasoning, and morality arises from random, mindless, natural processes. Atheists must assume that the personal somehow arose from the impersonal.
- The natural world is exceedingly complex and sophisticated, especially when viewed by an electron microscope. Such complexity argues against a purely mechanical origin for all things. DNA, for example, is so extremely complex that it's hard to believe that it developed without a designer.

- Naturalism generates pessimism and despair. Life is meaningless if we live in a cold, impersonal, indifferent universe. Good and evil can have no meaning for a naturalist. As one atheist stated, “Man is an empty bubble on the sea of nothingness.”

## **Encourage them to examine the arguments for the existence of God.**

We acknowledge that the best approach to apologetics is one that recognizes that all people know God exists, and that they have suppressed that knowledge (Rom 1:17f). People need to hear the Gospel, because within the Gospel message is the power of God unto salvation (Rom 1:16). One should not attempt to argue an unbeliever into submission. The best method is to present the good news about Jesus Christ as clearly and as often as possible, and to urge people to repent and believe. However, within a serious discussion with an atheist, a presentation of various arguments for the existence of God may be profitable. One may be able to show the unbeliever that belief in the existence of God is rational and reasonable.

These arguments are logical rather than biblical. Even though the atheist/agnostic does not acknowledge the validity of the Bible, believers may still build logical arguments that point to God.

### ***The Teleological or Design Argument***

Argue that the presence of order in the universe requires the existence of a Designer.

A typical formulation of the argument:

1. The universe manifests evidence of design.
2. All design demands a designer.
3. Therefore, the universe must have a designer.
4. This designer is the God of the Bible.

Intelligent design seems to be incorporated into nature. Many physicists and cosmologists recognize that the universe had a beginning and that many physical laws look suspiciously “fine tuned” for the existence of intelligent life. In addition, biochemists and biologists have discovered a microscopic world of mesmerizing complexity belying the simple blobs of protoplasm that Darwin imagined.<sup>1</sup>

A popular expression of the design argument is Paley’s Watch argument:<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Jay Richards, “[Intelligent Design Theory: Why it Matters.](#)”

<sup>2</sup> William Paley, *Natural Theology*, cited in Norman L. Geisler, *Christian Apologetics*, 2nd edition (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013), 88–89.

While walking through a field, one finds a watch on the ground. He naturally and rightly concludes that someone must have made it. Likewise, if one studies the more complex design in the natural world, he must conclude that there is a world Designer behind it.

This argument may be of some value, but it's unlikely that an educated evolutionist will find it very compelling.

- Various observers can look at the same thing without agreeing that it shows design.
- Modern science has shown that apparent design and chaos often exist side by side.
- The presence of apparent design might be an isolated exception. Perhaps we are an island of design in a vast ocean of chaos. Our own world may have occurred by chance, no matter how unlikely that seems.
- Design is not an inescapable deductive proof of biblical theism. Design points to the presence of a designer, but not to much more than that. Although the teleological argument makes the existence of a designer likely, the argument by itself does not lead *necessarily* to belief in biblical monotheism. It could, for instance, also support polytheism.
- Critics feel the Darwinian theory of natural selection has destroyed the teleological argument by showing that changes come from purely natural causes rather than by special design. Evolutionists commonly use terms like “design” to describe purely natural processes without implying a Designer. Nature’s “designs” are simply the unintended side effects of nature’s productive self-sufficiency.
- Modern scientists embrace a “something from nothing” viewpoint. They really believe everything evolved from nothing.

### ***The Cosmological, or Cause-and-Effect, Argument***

Science and reason assert that any effect or result must have a cause. Since the universe is an effect or result, then the universe as a whole must have a cause. Something has caused the universe to exist rather than not exist.

A summary of the Cosmological Argument

- Some dependent beings exist. *A dependent being is one whose existence is not necessary. E.g., people are dependent beings—we owe our existence to causes other than ourselves.*
- All dependent beings must have a cause or explanation for their existence.
- An infinite regress of causes is impossible. I.e., you can't trace causes back infinitely.

- Therefore, there must be a first uncaused Cause of dependent beings.
- This Uncaused Cause is the God of the Bible.

R. C. Sproul's cosmological dilemma is another formulation of the same argument. Either the universe is:

1. An illusion – but if so, then it's an illusion to my mind, so I must exist, which shows that the universe cannot be an illusion.
2. Self-created – but something cannot create itself. It's impossible to both exist and not exist at the same time.
3. Eternal – but all natural effects must have a cause. Matter is dependent, not eternal. Also, if an eternal God is unacceptable, eternal matter is as well.
4. Created by something eternal, i.e., God.

Limitations:

- If everything requires a cause, one may argue that God requires a cause. If God requires no cause, then some things do not require a cause. However, if it can be shown that the eternal existence of God is different than the (supposedly) eternal existence of the universe, this argument might hold up.
- Making the jump between the cosmological cause and the God of the Bible may present a problem. Many religions believe in a creator/designer god, but not the Christian God (e.g., Islam).

Note: God is not self-caused; he is self-existent and eternal. He did not cause himself to come into existence. He has always existed in, of, and by himself.

### ***The Moral Argument***

Moral values, the idea that certain behaviors are right or wrong, are common to all cultures. While a few cultures support certain “wrong” behaviors (e.g., cannibalism, human sacrifice), most people agree on basic ethical standards. Most cultures acknowledge that murder and theft are wrong and that it's good to be kind and generous. Ethical values for most people go beyond mere personal feelings. We believe that certain behaviors ought to be done and others ought not to be done. Where do such ideas come from? If the naturalist is correct, there should be no moral values, because the natural world doesn't seem to be governed by morality. There are no ethical standards in the animal kingdom. Survival of the fittest is the only constant. If man is the result of natural evolution, where did he get the idea that any behavior is good or evil? On what basis can

an impersonal, randomly-ordered universe develop morality? Even cultures that have no organized religious system recognize ethical standards. Why?

Obligations and loyalties arise from personal relationships, not mechanical ones. The legal system tells us that certain behaviors are acceptable and others are not acceptable. A hierarchy of moral authority suggests that there must be somebody at the top who dictates what is right and wrong. In a natural, mechanistic universe, there is no need for, nor process to explain, morality. But a higher moral law does seem to exist, and such a law seems to be independent of natural processes. If so, there must be a law-giver, and that must be God.

## **Agnosticism**

The word “agnostic” literally means “no knowledge.” Agnostics claim that they personally don’t know if God exists. Some claim that no one can know for certain if there is a God. A few agnostics dabble in religion just in case there is a God. They want to cover themselves in the off chance that God really does exist. But most agnostics behave just like atheists. Agnosticism is not a halfway position between theism and atheism; it’s atheism under another name.

Just as there are no true atheists, so there are no true agnostics, because all have some genuine knowledge of God. A true agnostic would be receptive to the Gospel, because he’d be convinced that the God of the Bible does exist. Unfortunately, most agnostics are very skeptical about biblical claims. They are self-deceived, claiming not to know if God exists, but in reality rejecting the knowledge that they have.

## **Conclusion**

The Bible teaches that atheists are fools (Ps 14:1; Rom 1:28). Scripture denies that anyone can be a true atheist or agnostic. God has clearly revealed himself to all, so that all know him, although some suppress and deny that knowledge (Ps 19:1–3; Rom 1:16–23). Believers must confront atheists and agnostics, insist that they re-examine their presuppositions, and challenge them to respond appropriately to the Gospel. Such unbelievers will not be brought to faith by weighty arguments and logical discussions. They need to understand their sinfulness and their alienation from God, and they must be challenged to forsake their rebellion and to seek forgiveness from Christ. It may seem foolish to preach the gospel to those who reject the Bible, but the gospel message contains the power to convert the most earnest atheist.

## **Discussion**

1. Define atheism. *The belief that there is no god(s).*
2. Define agnosticism. *The belief that one cannot know if there is a god or gods.*

3. Define naturalism. *The belief that nothing exists outside of natural processes.*
4. What is one supernatural event that is very well attested? *The resurrection of Christ.*
5. Why does the complexity of DNA argue for a designer? *It's hard to believe that such a complex system could arise without some outside direction.*
6. Why can't the universe be self-created? *It would have to exist and not exist at the same time, which is absurd/irrational.*
7. Briefly discuss the three arguments for God that we examined. *Design, cause-effect, morality*



## Lesson 12: Rationalism and Pragmatism

Today we'll be studying two more "isms" that have had profound impact on how our culture thinks and on Christianity itself.

### Rationalism

Rationalism is a very old idea, being found in Plato, philosophers of the Middle Ages, and in the Age of Enlightenment. We'll briefly examine the Enlightenment because it still has an immense influence on Western thinking.

### The Age of Enlightenment

The Enlightenment extended from the mid 1600s to the late 1700s. It was a time during which leading writers and scientists in Europe and America foresaw a new age enlightened by reason, science, and respect for humanity. It was a time of new discoveries in science, exploration of the world, and great leaps forward in technology.

Leading figures of the Enlightenment: René Descartes, Baruch Spinoza, Thomas Hobbes, John Locke

Of the basic assumptions and beliefs common to philosophers and intellectuals of this period, perhaps the most important was an abiding faith in the power of human reason. If humanity could unlock the laws of the universe, God's own laws, why could it not also discover the laws underlying all of nature and society? People came to assume that through a prudent use of reason, an unending progress would be possible—progress in knowledge, in technical achievement, and even in moral values.

Enlightenment thinking placed a great premium on the discovery of truth through the observation of nature, rather than through the study of authoritative sources, such as Aristotle and the Bible. Most Enlightenment leaders saw the church—especially the Roman Catholic Church—as the principal force that had enslaved the human mind in the past, and they took great joy in criticizing and ridiculing Christianity. Nothing was attacked with more intensity and ferocity than the church, with all its wealth, political power, and oppression. However, most Enlightenment thinkers did not renounce religion altogether. They opted rather for a form of Deism, accepting the existence of God and of the afterlife, but rejecting Christian theology. Human aspirations, they believed, should not be centered on the next life, but rather on the means of improving this life. Worldly happiness was placed before religious salvation.

The Age of Enlightenment is usually said to have ended with the French Revolution of 1789. Yet the Enlightenment left a lasting heritage for the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It marked a key stage in the decline of the church and the growth of modern secularism. It served as the model for political and economic liberalism and for humanitarian reform throughout the 19th-century Western world. The modern attitude that exalts science, technology and human reason is rooted in the Enlightenment.

## Rationalism Defined

Rationalism was a key component of Enlightenment thinking. It stresses the ability of the human mind to know things. Rationalists hold that whatever is knowable by the human mind is true. The human mind has an innate ability to understand things. Reasonable thought and logic become the tests of truth. Whatever is logically inescapable is necessarily true. If something is unreasonable, it must not be true. So the emphasis in rationalism is the mind, logic, and human reason.

Rationalism is not synonymous with *rationality*. To be rational is to be reasonable and logical, i.e., to be in one's right mind. But if one adopts *rationalism*, he believes that all things must conform to human reason. One can be rational without being a rationalist or adopting rationalism.

## Contributions of Rationalism

Without logic and reason, there is no way to make meaningful statements, no way to distinguish right from wrong. Also, rationalism's emphasis on the knowability of reality is good. The universe is not just an illusion. Man's mind has the capacity to know and experience reality. One need not be totally skeptical about man's ability to know truth. What is real is rational. The universe makes sense. One can employ logic to solve complex problems. Also, all people benefit from rationalism's emphasis on scientific investigation and technological progress.

## Weaknesses of Rationalism

1. The rational may not be real. That is, something may make sense without being true. For example, scientists continually change their explanations for various phenomena. Arguments often seem rational until they are proven to be wrong. Logic does not lead necessarily to reality. If one starts with wrong assumptions, he will inevitably come to wrong conclusions, even if he proceeds rationally.
2. Rationalists tend to arrive at their basic presuppositions without the use of reason. Their presuppositions are not subject to tests of logic. Rationalists think they are being rational because they are rational. It's impossible to provide a starting point for rationalism without

presupposing the truth of rationalism. Rationalism is just as circular in its reasoning as any other system.

3. Logic is best used as a negative test for truth. It can rule out what is illogical and unreasonable, but it has a hard time proving what is true. It can eliminate the false but it cannot (by itself) establish what must be true. Logic can demonstrate what may be real but not what is actually real. Again, something may seem logical and yet be untrue or unreal.
4. While some rationalists have proposed logical arguments for proving the existence of God, such arguments are quite weak and unconvincing to most unbelievers. Further, we know that unbelievers do not ultimately come to Christ because of weighty logical arguments, but because of God's work within their lives.
5. For most modern rationalists, the Bible is a mythical storybook that has little or no value. Rationalism rejects Christianity as irrational.

## **A Biblical Response to Rationalism**

1. Logic and reasonable thought are basic aspects of Christianity. Christianity is a reasonable faith and benefits from the application of the laws of logic.
2. The ways of God do not need to conform to man's sense of reason. God's ways are unsearchable and past finding out (Rom 11:34), and God's thoughts are higher than the heavens (Isa 55:8–9). We should not be surprised if God's ways exceed the human intellect's ability to understand them (Deut 29:29).
3. If God exists, it is reasonable for him to interrupt the natural order of things if he so desires. Miracles are not irrational.
4. There is no standard of truth, logic or reality higher than, or independent of, God, to which he must conform. God sets such standards. While God is logical, he need not conform to human ideas of reason. God and his ways are not irrational or illogical, although they may be beyond man's ability to grasp them.
5. God is incomprehensible. We can know God, and what we know about him is true, but our knowledge of God is not complete.

Although some rationalists argue on behalf of Christianity, most modern rationalists deny God and the Bible. Rationalism, as a philosophy of life, because it depends so much on human the intellect, does not conform well to Christianity. God is under no obligation to explain his ways to man. Rationality, on the other hand, is the handmaid of good theology. All believers should strive to be rational and logical.

# Pragmatism

“Works for me” is the mantra of pragmatism. To be pragmatic is to be practical, to insist on using whatever methods or tools that work best. A pragmatist is one who focuses on getting the job done in the most successful and simple way. He is not concerned about theories or hypothetical solutions. He doesn’t have time for the mysteries of philosophy or religion. He is a practical man, a realist, not a dreamer. He wants useful results as soon as possible. If the results are acceptable, the method that achieved them is acceptable. Whatever works best *is* best. The ends (i.e., the results) justify the means (i.e., the methods).

Pragmatism is the dominant attitude shaping American life. Americans want results. They want to do things better, faster, cheaper, cleaner, and easier. Pragmatism is the spirit of problem solving. Science and technology can provide rubber-meets-the-road solutions to virtually all of man’s problems.

Pragmatism may sound pretty harmless, but there are several dangerous implications associated with it.

1. Pragmatism is basically atheistic or agnostic. It is highly skeptical of any theological or metaphysical claims. Metaphysics and theology deal with ultimate questions. Is there a God? What is he like? What is the nature of reality? Who am I? Why am I here? The pragmatist cares little about such issues. He’s too busy putting food on the table or money in the bank. He would say that searching for the answer to such questions is a foolish waste of time.
2. Pragmatism is focused on the here-and-now, the temporal rather than the eternal. According to the pragmatist, whatever works best *now* is best. But Christianity asserts that there is a higher standard to consider: the judgment of God. In God’s judgment, whatever will bring the most glory to himself is best, whether it seems to work here on earth or not. Pragmatism rejects any kind of eternal analysis.
3. “What works” and “truth” are not necessarily synonymous. The fact that something seems to work does not guarantee that it is true or good. For example, the pragmatist would say that if belief in God helps someone cope with life, then let people believe in God. If it doesn’t help, then don’t believe in God. Success, or lack thereof, should never be the criteria for determining truth.
4. Pragmatism is another form of relativism. If truth is determined by what works for the individual, then the test for truth ultimately becomes the individual himself. “Works for me” is the pragmatist’s slogan. Thus the self becomes the highest value.
5. Pragmatism’s value system tends to be savage and inhumane. What works often causes great pain and suffering for masses of people. It “worked” for the Nazis to exterminate millions of Jews during WWII. It “worked” for Stalin and Mao to kill millions of their own

countrymen to achieve their communist goals. It “works” for scientists to destroy human embryos in the hopes of producing treatments for diseases. It “works” for women to abort their unwanted babies. Pragmatism has no basis for basic human rights, kindness or compassion.

6. Pragmatism leads to an unending pursuit of the latest and greatest method of achieving “success.” Newer methods and ideas always promise greater growth, deeper satisfaction and more exciting experiences. Those committed to a pragmatic approach to life will always be chasing the bigger and better methods.

Unfortunately, a spirit of pragmatism has crept into Christianity. This attitude suggests that any method that succeeds in spreading the gospel, packing the pews, and/or making converts is acceptable. Whatever is working to draw more people to church must be good. Churches and Christian leaders are eager to hop on the latest bandwagon and ride it until another promising trend comes along (e.g., *Prayer of Jabez*, *Purpose Driven Church/Life*). However, in Christian ministry, we know that the ends do not justify the means. That is, the goal of outreach does not validate all means of achieving that goal. Certain methods are simply inappropriate for use within Christianity because they violate the character of God. For example, transforming the worship service into an entertaining variety show may increase attendance, but it does not glorify God. Christians must do God’s work in God’s way, even if it doesn’t seem to be “successful.” A pragmatic, “whatever works” attitude has no place in Christian ministry.

## Conclusion

Both rationalism and pragmatism are hostile to Christianity. Because rationalism subjects all truth to human reason, it has no room for an omnipotent God. What is rational is not necessarily real. God’s ways go beyond man’s ability to find them out. Because pragmatism tests all things by “what works,” it has no place for virtue or morality. Pragmatism can tell you what works now, but not whether your work has eternal value.

## Discussion

1. Define rationalism. *The human mind is the standard of truth.*
2. Why is rationalism ultimately circular in its reasoning? *It presupposes what it’s trying to prove.*
3. Define God’s incomprehensibility. *God can be truly known but not fully known.*
4. What is pragmatism? *An attitude that focuses on the practical solution of problems—what works.*

5. Why can't pragmatism distinguish good from evil? *"Good" and "evil" are not categories that pragmatism deals with. "Good" for the pragmatist is what works; "evil" is what doesn't work.*
6. How has pragmatism affected Christianity? *By shifting the focus from pleasing God to pleasing man, and by asserting that the ends justify the means.*



## **Appendix 1: A Primer on Presuppositional Apologetics**

**Mike Osborne<sup>1</sup>**

Christian apologetics is the discipline or practice of defending and commending Christianity. Christianity as a worldview competes with a host of other worldviews to accurately represent things as they are. Imagine with me a Christian engaging a non-Christian in apologetics. By what criteria will he judge the arguments? Ah, but here is the kicker: The debate is about the criteria themselves.

How so? When a Christian engages a non-Christian, each makes a claim about ultimate reality—the way things really are. Now the way things really are affects the way people can know things. (Philosophy says that your ontology [philosophy of what is] has implications for your epistemology [philosophy of how we know what is].) The Christian derives his ontology and epistemology from biblical and systematic theology; the non-Christian derives his from somewhere else—if an atheist, perhaps from his own experience filtered through his own reason. The Christian and the non-Christian, because they have different ontologies and epistemologies, hold very different ideas about what is scientifically possible, morally just, or rationally plausible. (For instance, the vicarious atonement is morally repugnant to unbelievers, cf. 1 Cor 1:18–24.) Worldviews clash over ultimate issues, including what categories best sort data and what criteria best judge arguments. Christianity tells us that even more is at stake—namely, how we may be right with God.

Recognizing this conundrum, some apologists attempt to lead unbelievers to Christianity over so-called neutral ground, to appeal to assumptions and criteria “common” to both the Christian and the non-Christian. A school of apologetics called presuppositionalism, however, has disagreed with that methodology. Presuppositionalism asserts that by assuming that the believer and unbeliever have criteria in common—that there is neutral data out there they both may properly use—the apologist has already sold the farm (at least, implicitly).

I advocate presuppositional apologetics. I assume my audience shares my commitment to glorify God in all things and to recognize the Lordship of Christ in every endeavor (1 Cor 10:31; 2 Cor 10:4–5; 1 Pet 3:15). I do not assume that anyone who opts for a different apologetic methodology from me is somehow deficient in his religious affections, nor do I deny the valuable contribution non-presuppositional apologists have made to Christian scholarship or to kingdom service. I hope to provoke to love and to good works, and to advocate a method of apologetics that I believe is consistent with what Scripture reveals. First, I will summarize pertinent areas of systematic

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theology. Second, I will draw implications from theology for philosophy and apologetics. Finally, I will outline a rough strategy of presuppositional apologetics.

## Theology

The Bible tells us that God is triune, personal, purposeful, eternal, omniscient, sovereign, self-contained, self-sufficient, both transcendent and immanent. He is the unique Creator. When we say that God is self-contained and self-sufficient (in theology, his aseity, cf. John 5:26; Acts 17:25), we imply that there was a time when the Trinity was all that was (Exod 3:13–15; Ps 90:2), presumably enjoying one another’s infinite love (John 17:5, 26; 1 John 4:8). When we say God is self-contained and self-sufficient, we also imply that God looks to nothing outside himself for self-definition. He does not exist within a larger metaphysical matrix (Isa 43:10; 44:6–8; 45:21–22). Furthermore, he knows himself perfectly. The Spirit searches “the deep things of God” (1 Cor 2:10). God is perfectly satisfied with himself. He knows everything about himself, and he knows how all of that “everything” relates to the rest of that “everything.” (I speak as a fool.) Since he knows himself and all the interrelations exhaustively, his knowledge is of unique and infinite quality: no creature could ever attain to that unique and infinite quality of knowledge. It is not just a very big quantity of knowledge; it’s on a different level (Isa 55:8–9). When God created the world, he created it according to his own perfect knowledge and plan. God’s knowledge and God’s plan are mutually inclusive: All that he has planned he knows about, and all that he knows about he knows by virtue of the fact that he planned it (Ps 104:24; Dan 4:35; Isa 46:10; Heb 1:3). The Creator is distinct from his creation.

The Bible says that this God has revealed himself. There are two basic categories of revelation: general (to all men generally) and special (to some men in particular). When God reveals himself, he is successful in his purposes (Isa 55:11). Now general revelation and special revelation have different purposes, but both kinds of revelation are necessary. They work together, the one helping to interpret the other. Reformation theology teaches that with respect to his purposes, God’s revelation is authoritative, sufficient, and clear—and ultimately necessary for our existence (Job 23:12; Pss 19, 119; Prov 29:18; Isa 46:10; Amos 8:11; Matt 5:17–18; 16:1–4; John 10:35; Rom 1; 2 Tim 3:15; Titus 1:2; Heb 6:13).

As Francis Schaeffer put it, God is there, and he is not silent. But who is listening? What of man and his capacity to receive God’s self-revelation? The Bible tells us that God created man to bear God’s image and to act as a vice regent in creation. Man is rational, emotional, spiritual, moral, creative, relational, and so forth. Even in the garden, as a creature, man was finite. Unique among creatures, but still not the Creator. Genesis describes the Fall from this innocence into sin: Eve’s rejecting God’s word for Satan’s, and the subsequent tragic trajectory of a fallen civilization. Now man was not simply finite; now he was sinful, too. He never could have attained to God’s knowledge, but now his understanding was distorted, too. The Fall had noetic effects (effects on man’s knowledge). Fallen man instinctively rejects God’s truth to the point of blind self-deception

because God's truth condemns him (Jer 17:9; Rom 1:18; Rom 8:7; 1 Cor 2:14; 2 Cor 4:4; 2 Pet 3:5).

In short, because fallen man does not fear God, he has forfeited true wisdom and knowledge (Prov 1:7; 9:10). Because he is separated from God (Isa 59:1–2) and rejects Christ, he does not know where “all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” are tucked away (Col 2:2–3). Only with salvation can fallen man's mind be renewed (Rom 12:1–2; Eph 4:22–24; Col 3:10).

## **Implications for Philosophy and Apologetics**

First, because of who he is, God himself is the standard of what makes right right and wrong wrong, of what is possible and what is impossible. Because of who he is, only such a Being is qualified to speak authoritatively and interpret the facts of existence for us. The laws of the universe obey him, not vice versa. Because nothing is beyond his knowledge or control, nothing could trip him up or cause him to err; we can trust his Word (Heb 6:13). Only such a sure word can serve as a proper foundation for knowledge. As I said above, our ontology determines our epistemology. Christian ontology is about an infinite-personal God who speaks; and Christian epistemology says that no one has access to sure knowledge unless he receives it from the God who speaks.

Second, Christianity's most basic distinction is the Creator-creature distinction. God is God; everything else is not God. That's easy to say but hard for sinners to accept. We keep trying to ascend to God or to bring him down to chum around benignly among us.

Third, God's revelation is, objectively speaking, plain enough for all to see what he's saying. He says that even the lost people “know” him, although they lie like crazy and tell us the data are too ambiguous to be sure (Rom 1). IT technicians have a name for a similar problem: “Error Is Between Keyboard and Chair.” There are no bugs in God's program. The error is not with him. The unbeliever is in a pickle: he has rejected God and his Word and must fend for himself in a universe that cries out to him that he is justly condemned (Rom 1). The data are anything but ambiguous; God regards them as objectively certain. The unbeliever persists in finding out by himself. He is a God wannabe.

Fourth, all human knowledge is either an obedient or a disobedient response to God's revelation. Even in the garden, Adam and Eve did not generate their own knowledge: They received revelation from God, and their own minds constructed an interpretive model (in their own creaturely way) of what God had said. To this day, human knowledge is a construction based on what God has said. Some receive God's Word obediently; some plunder it for their own purposes. Obviously, unbelievers recognize certain data about the universe; the problem is, they try to plug that data into a worldview that is ultimately false, and hence a worldview that cannot account for the data.

Fifth, there is an antithesis in the way a believer or an unbeliever receives God's knowledge. Yes, they look at the same data in creation. Yes, they look at the same printed Bible. But they do not make the same ultimate assumptions. The unbeliever assumes that he does not need God; the believer knows that he does. One is a covenant breaker, the other a covenant keeper. Here's the crux: The unbeliever asserts that he does not need God, but this is a self-destructive assertion (see below).

Finally, Christianity is one coherent unit. Christianity is not bare theism with a Messiah tacked on. Both in reality and on paper, God is a Trinity, the Second Person of which entered into space-time history and took on a human nature to redeem mankind who had sinned grievously against him and had become hopelessly lost. Both in reality and on paper, all of those events and propositions are inextricably linked. God, Christ, the Spirit, Scriptures, sin, salvation—the sinner needs to know the basics of each to have a proper understanding of how to be saved. Furthermore, to defend bare theism (even provisionally) without Christ is to defend a god who isn't there; it is to defend a human construction, an idol.

## **How to “Do” Presuppositional Apologetics**

Which apologetic method is most consistent with Christian theology? How do we go about doing apologetics, defending Christianity, without (1) leaping into irrational fideism or (2) selling the farm and being inconsistent with everything Christianity tells us?

First, point out to the unbeliever his own creatureliness. He cannot know everything. The implications of our creatureliness are that there will always be something outside the realm of our experience and/or beyond our reasoning. How can we know for sure that anything we presently think is true, if there is the possibility that something “out there” could potentially overturn all our prior ideas? Well, we have to take it on faith. All knowledge involves a certain amount of faith.

Second, point out to the unbeliever that we all reason somewhat circularly. There are certain presuppositions (hence the name presuppositionalism that everyone holds on faith, consciously or unconsciously. We all have grids to interpret the data; these grids are fashioned according to our own presuppositions and, if truth be told, predilections.

Third, point out his sin or his anti-Christian assumptions. He has assumed there is no God who can speak as God has spoken.

Fourth, point out the self-destructive nature of these assumptions. He has built an epistemological house on the sand. When the rains of existence come down, his house won't stand. He has claimed the right to judge the rationality, possibility, and morality of things; but apart from God, he cannot make any of his claims “stick” beyond his own subjective state. He cannot explain rationality itself. Why do the laws of logic seem to work? Who says so? Why do we all have moral ideas about right and wrong and the desire to impose them? Why do we expect nature to act uniformly? The unbeliever cannot provide a satisfactory explanation for the why of the most basic

“laws,” the very criteria he wants to impose. He has to admit that either he made them up or that he accepts them on the authority of other finite creatures. The believer, however, asserts that God has spoken to us, that deep down we know this, and that God has explained these most basic laws and criteria. God has not told us everything there is to know, but he has told us enough with which to navigate existence.

Practically speaking, the believer seeks to deconstruct the unbeliever’s worldview, showing how the unbeliever has nothing to stand on. The believer has at his disposal every datum of the universe—even things as “unlikely” as evil and suffering—because Christianity provides the only satisfactory explanation for this data. He need not fear anything the unbeliever might throw at him; the very fact that the unbeliever can protest against God is a witness to the war between the seed of the woman and the seed of the serpent. When the unbeliever uses logic against Christianity, he implicitly acknowledges a God who grants us logic. This is “Judo” apologetics: Unbelievers’ energy is used against them.

In short, the Christian must assert that Christianity is the only satisfactory worldview. All else is impossible. Any other claim is too small.



## Appendix 2: Is the Text of the Old Testament Reliable?

No book in the literature of the world has been so often copied, printed, translated, read and studied as the Bible. It stands uniquely as the object of so much effort devoted to preserving it faithfully, to understanding it, and to making it understandable to others.<sup>1</sup> The Bible is one of the few texts of antiquity that is still popular today. How many other books from three thousand years ago do people still read? Not many. Other books from that period are seldom held in such high esteem as the Old Testament of the Bible is. Of course, few other books claim to be the very words of God. It is because so many people consider the Old Testament to be inspired by God that people still read and study it. The Bible is not like other books. Here “flows the fountain of life, because God himself speaks in it.”<sup>2</sup>

Critics and skeptics would have us believe that the Old Testament (OT) is not trustworthy because so many years stand between us and the original writings. Dr. C. A. Briggs confidently asserted, “We will never be able to attain the sacred writings as they gladdened the eyes of those who first saw them, and rejoiced the hearts of those who first heard them. If the external words of the original were inspired, it does not profit us. We are cut off from them forever. Interposed between us and them is the tradition of centuries and even millenniums.”<sup>3</sup> Are we truly “cut off” from the original words given by inspiration?

We must admit that none of the originals still exist; they have dissolved into the dust of the Middle East long ago. All we have are copies of copies, and many of the copies date back no earlier than the middle ages. No extant (existing) copies of the OT can be dated from before about 400 BC, and most of them are much later than that. So how can we be confident that the text of the OT is reliable? How true to the originals are the existing copies?

The study of the manuscripts (MSS) of any book in an attempt to find the original readings is called textual or lower criticism.<sup>4</sup> This is not criticizing the text, but an effort to find the best MSS and the best readings in the MSS. No one MS perfectly preserves the entire text of the OT. Because there are multiple copies of the books of the OT, scholars seek to compare the copies to weed out scribal errors and to find the readings which are most likely original. While some people claim that the available copies no longer convey the content of the originals, there is little

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<sup>1</sup> Ernst Würthwein, *The Text of the Old Testament: An Introduction to the Biblia Hebraica*, 2nd edition (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1994), 121.

<sup>2</sup> Würthwein, *The Text of the Old Testament*, 121.

<sup>3</sup> C. A. Briggs, “Critical Theories of the Sacred Scriptures in Relation to Their Inspiration,” *The Presbyterian Review* 2 (1881): 573.

<sup>4</sup> Gordon Fee defines textual criticism as “the science that compares all known manuscripts of a given work in an effort to trace the history of variations within the text so as to discover its original form” (Gordon D. Fee, “The Textual Criticism of the New Testament,” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary: Introductory Articles*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein, vol. 1 [Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1979], 419).

cause for concern that the OT is somehow no longer available in its original form. It has not been lost or so corrupted that we no longer know what the original wording was. We can be confident that we have access to the OT as it was given thousands of years ago.

Consider the following in defense of the reliability of the OT text:<sup>5</sup>

I. Background

- A. The OT was written mostly in Hebrew and a little in Aramaic. Hebrew used to be written in all consonant without any vowels. That may seem like it would be hard to read, but those familiar with the language and the text can read Hebrew without the vowels inserted. Not until well after the time of Jesus did Jewish scribes develop a system of vowels inserted into the text that we still use today. Since the vowel “points” (many vowels look like little dots) were not original to the language, they are not of primary significance when considering the original wording.
- B. The very fact that the Hebrew Scriptures persistently survived the most deleterious conditions throughout its long history demonstrates that indefatigable scribes insisted on its preservation. The OT books were copied by hand for generations on highly perishable papyrus and animal skins in the relatively damp, hostile climate of Palestine in contrast to the dry climate of Egypt, so favorable to the preservation of these materials. Moreover, the prospects for their survival were uncertain in a land that served as a bridge for armies in unceasing contention between the continents of Africa and Asia—a land whose people were the object of plunderers in their early history and of captors in their later history. That no other writings, such as the Book of Yashar or the Diaries of the Kings, survive from this period shows the determination of the scribes to preserve the OT books. But the worst foes of Hebrew Scripture were the very heirs of its treasures, because they sought to kill many of its authors (cf. Matt 23:35) and destroy their works (cf. Jer 36). One must assume, however, that from the first the OT Scriptures captured the hearts, minds, and loyalties of some in Israel who at risk to themselves kept them safe. Such people must have insisted on the accurate transmission of the text even as those of similar persuasion insist on it today.<sup>6</sup>
- C. Until recently, very few copies of OT books from before the middle ages were available. There is a good reason for this. The Rabbis regarded their copies of the Scripture with almost superstitious veneration, and when the MSS were too old and worn for regular use, they replaced them with new copies. The old copies would often be reverently destroyed, buried or hidden. It was better, they thought, to give them an honorable burial than to run the risk that the materials might be

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<sup>5</sup> Some of this material is from R. Laird Harris, “How Reliable is the Old Testament Text?” *Covenant Seminary Review* 81.

<sup>6</sup> Fee, “The Textual Criticism of the New Testament,” 214.

improperly used. Synagogues would often have a special storage room, called a *genizah* (literally, “hiding place”), where old MSS would be stored. One such *genizah* was found in Cairo in 1896. The sealed, dark room in the dry Egyptian climate allowed for the preservation the documents. The rich store of linguistic works found there shed light on Hebrew grammar and lexicology.<sup>7</sup>

D. Jewish scribes were very careful and meticulous in their copying duties. They had various means of making sure that their copies were accurate and not full of errors. They knew how many letters and words were supposed to be in each book. They even knew the word that should be in the middle of each copied page. Since the scribes were so careful in their duties, we can have great confidence that they did not essentially alter or corrupt the original readings. They conveyed the OT to succeeding generations as they found it. Because the scribes did such an excellent job, most of the available MSS agree very closely. Most MSS are virtually identical.<sup>8</sup> Small differences, such as changes in the vowels or spelling changes, did occur, but most are of very little consequence. A particular group of scribes called the Masoretes did their work from about AD 500 to 1000, and the text that they produced is called the Masoretic text (MT). There were schools of Masoretes at work in both Babylonia and Palestine; the school whose method was ultimately adopted was that of Tiberias in Palestine. Most conservative scholars believe that the Masoretes and their forebears handled the MSS with such care that very few errors crept into the text. However, a great deal of copying occurred before the Masoretic scribes began their stewardship of the text, and scholars are not sure how well early scribes handled the text. Additionally, the Jews were driven out of the Holy Land in AD 70, various wars and dispersions occurred, and the Jewish religion declined considerably by AD 200. Such events could have had a negative impact on how well the text was preserved. Nevertheless, the evidence suggests that the pre-Masoretic scribes were very careful and diligent stewards of the MSS. That is not to claim perfection for their copying skills, because scribes could never totally eradicate slips of the pen. The following types of scribal errors produced variations in the MSS:

1. Writing a letter once when it should have been written twice, or writing a letter once that should have been written twice
2. Reversing the position of letters
3. Combining separate words into one, or dividing one word into two

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<sup>7</sup> <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/History/Genizah.html>

<sup>8</sup> Many scholars believe that the consistency reflected in the MT is evidence of an official editorial process (a recension) done between 100 BC and AD 100 that produced a standardized text. Jewish scribes likely consulted their best MSS, produced an official text, and discarded those MSS that did not fit with their work. The Masoretes inherited this standardized text and conveyed it with little variation throughout the centuries.

4. Substitution of one homonym for another
  5. Misreading similar letters
  6. Omitting a section due to the copyist's eye skipping from one ending to a similar ending
  7. Accidental omission of words
- E. How do scholars deal with such phenomena? Over the years, textual critics developed rules, or "canons," that they apply to variant readings in an effort to find the right one. These rules help them determine which reading is most likely to be original. Sometimes discovery of the proper reading is easy; sometimes it is very difficult. In some instances we must admit that two or three options exist, and one of them is correct, but we are unable to tell which one it is. Do variations in the text render it unreliable? By no means. As noted above, most variants are minor and have little impact on the meaning or application of a passage. Even those variants that do affect meaning do not adversely affect the general meaning or teaching of the OT. We may not always be able to tell with absolute certainty which reading is correct, but the correct reading is available somewhere within the MS evidence.<sup>9</sup> In most cases, the MT will retain the correct reading, and one should follow a variant only rarely and for good reasons.

## II. The Dead Sea Scrolls

- A. Archeologist W. F. Albright called the original discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls (DSS) "the greatest manuscript discovery of modern times."<sup>10</sup> These scrolls were apparently used by a Jewish sect living near the Dead Sea between about 150 BC to AD 70. Around the time the Romans destroyed Jerusalem and exiled the Jews in AD 70, the Jews in that sect sealed their sacred scrolls in clay jars and hid them in nearby caves. In 1947, a shepherd boy looking for a lost goat threw a stone into one of these caves and heard pottery shatter. He went in to investigate and found the scrolls. Within a very short time these scrolls were in the hands of biblical scholars who found some of them to be hundreds of years older than any copies then available. Because of the DSS findings, copies of OT books from before the time of Jesus are now available, so textual critics can investigate how much the text has changed through the copying process over the years.
- B. The DSS contain copies or fragments of nearly every OT book. About 40,000 MS fragments were found in the caves. One very important find was a complete copy

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<sup>9</sup> In a very small number of cases, the MS evidence for a reading is so problematic that some scholars think the original reading is no longer available. In such cases, scholars attempt to restore what they think was the probable original reading.

<sup>10</sup> J. C. Trever, "The Discovery of the Scrolls," *Biblical Archaeologist* (Sept. 1948), 55.

of Isaiah from around 100 BC. A comparison of the DSS copy of Isaiah and one from AD 900 reveals very few and insignificant differences between copies separated by about a thousand years. For example, in Isaiah chapter 53, only 17 letters differ from the early copy to the later one, and of these, 10 are simply matters of spelling. Out of the 166 words in the chapter, there is only one significant difference, and it does not change the sense of the passage. In the vast majority of cases, the MSS found in the DSS materials are word-for-word identical with copies dated many centuries later. In the Habakkuk Commentary, which is dated to around 50 BC, variants are fairly numerous though minor in character, and often the obvious result of scribal error. Some of the variants found in the DSS material are helpful in providing better vocalization for some Hebrew words that are perhaps not as well preserved in the MT.<sup>11</sup>

- C. The MSS dating from the first century BC are essentially the same as those dating from a thousand years later. Comparisons of other MSS found in the DSS lead to the conclusion that the scribes of that time were fully capable of caring for the texts in their hands. The text that scribes were copying a hundred years before Jesus's time is essentially the same text that we have today. The scribes who copied the text did a wonderful job of preserving it over the years.
- D. Nothing in the DSS discoveries endangers the essential reliability and authority of the MT. They do not indicate that the Septuagint is necessarily to be exalted to a more respected position than it occupied before the finding of the DSS materials, except perhaps in a few locations where the MT seems to be defective (e.g., 1 and 2 Samuel).<sup>12</sup> Scholars believe the DSS comprise "the most phenomenal confirmation of the Hebrew text."<sup>13</sup> Textual critics believe that "the presence of a text type among the DSS (c. 200 B.C. to A.D. 100) identical with the one preserved by the Masoretes, whose earliest extant MS dates to c. A.D. 900, gives testimony to the unbelievable achievement of some scribes in faithfully preserving the text."<sup>14</sup>

### III. The Septuagint and other versions

- A. Around 200 BC, the Hebrew Scriptures were translated into Greek, which came to be known as the Septuagint, abbreviated LXX. This version probably owes its name to the story recounted in the pseudonymous *Letter of Aristeas*, according to which seventy-two scholars summoned from Jerusalem by Ptolemy Philadelphus (295–247 BC) rendered in seventy-two days a perfect Greek translation of the Pentateuch. Christian writers credited the translation of the entire Hebrew Bible to

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<sup>11</sup> Gleason Archer, *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction*, 3rd edition (Chicago: Moody, 2007), 33.

<sup>12</sup> Archer, *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction*, 36.

<sup>13</sup> Norman L. Geisler and William E. Nix, *A General Introduction to the Bible*, Rev. and expanded (Chicago: Moody Press, 1996), 465.

<sup>14</sup> Fee, "The Textual Criticism of the New Testament," 214.

these seventy-two interpreters.<sup>15</sup> Copies of the LXX do not go all the way back to pre-Christian times, but they do give us an idea of what the Hebrew text was like around 200 BC. The LXX differs from the MT in many places, and sometimes these differences are significant. Among the DSS fragments were found some OT MSS that seemed to coordinate better with the LXX than with the MT. Scholars believe that by about 200 BC, at least two (maybe three) families or strains of Hebrew text were in circulation. Textual scholars today can compare the various families of MSS to find the readings that have the best support. Many scholars believe that the MT generally provides the correct readings, but in a few places the LXX may retain the original. The process of finding and choosing readings is not an easy task. Unless one has a good working knowledge of both Hebrew and Greek, he would not be qualified to make such decisions. Sometimes it is impossible to be absolutely sure which reading is correct, but at least we can propose a couple of possible options, and one of them is no doubt correct.

- B. Many of the differences between the MT and the LXX are due to stylistic concerns like word choice. The LXX is rather free and paraphrastic in some places, quite literal in others. In some places the LXX is a fairly good representation of the underlying Hebrew and at other places the Greek translator evidences a lack of skill. And since the LXX itself has been copied over the years, it may not retain the original Greek readings in some places. Comparing the LXX to the MT, we find mostly small variations that make little difference, but occasionally the differences are dramatic. One place where a significant difference exists between the LXX and the MT is in the book of Jeremiah, where the LXX lacks some sixty verses found in the MT. Nevertheless, the LXX is in good general agreement with the MT overall. For the first three centuries of the Christian church, the LXX was the only OT that most believers read. Most of the quotations in the New Testament come not from the Hebrew but from the LXX, which strongly suggests that believers around the time of Jesus held the LXX to be the authoritative Word of God, equivalent to the Hebrew. In fact, were the Hebrew Bible to mysteriously disappear from the planet, we could use the LXX without a substantial change in faith or practice. In any particular text, whether one follows the MT or the LXX, he will not go far wrong.
- C. The OT was also translated into other languages, like Aramaic, Latin and Syriac. Versions tend to be of value for interpretation rather than for textual criticism.
  - 1. Aramaic Targums: "Targum" means "interpretation." During the Babylonian captivity, the Jews began losing their Hebrew language skills. Aramaic was the language of diplomacy and commerce throughout the empire, and the Jews transitioned into that language. A teacher reading the OT would have to repeat what he was teaching in Aramaic because the people no longer

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<sup>15</sup> Fee, "The Textual Criticism of the New Testament," 220.

understood Hebrew so well. The Targum of Onkelos on the Torah (produced in the third century AD) adheres very closely to the traditional MT in most cases. Some of the targums are quite paraphrastic and free in their renderings of the Hebrew.

2. The OT was translated into Latin starting in about AD 200. Some of these came from the LXX, not the MT. Jerome's Latin translation did come from the Hebrew and for many centuries was the official Latin translation in the Western Church.
3. About the same time as the Aramaic Targums were being produced, Syrian Christians began to produce a translation of the Bible into their Eastern Aramaic dialect (called Syriac). The Peshitta ("simple") Syriac OT must have been composed in the second or third century AD. It was likely originally translated from the MT but was revised over the years to reflect the LXX readings.
4. If we somehow lost all Hebrew and Greek MSS of the OT, we could still reconstruct the essential form of the OT from the Aramaic, Latin and Syriac (and other) versions.

#### IV. Other factors supporting the faithful transmission of the OT

- A. Much archaeological evidence supports the general outlines of history as recorded in the OT as well as minute details that could easily have been corrupted over the years. The names of kings of Israel and of the surrounding regions, both great and small, are preserved with remarkable accuracy. The Bible accurately records the names associated with certain regions. The Bible accurately describes various officers serving in foreign courts. One scholar asserted that archaeological discoveries have, "shown that not only the main substance of what has been written but even the words, aside from minor variations, have been transmitted with remarkable fidelity, so that there need be no doubt whatever regarding the teaching conveyed by them."<sup>16</sup>
- B. Sometimes the OT records the same information in more than one location. Some of the Psalms are duplicated in other books. Isaiah records the same information as is found in parts of 2 Kings. Samuel, Kings and Chronicles record some of the same information. Although a study of the parallel passages will find some differences, they are generally minor and may be traceable to other factors than

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<sup>16</sup> Millar Burrows, *What Mean These Stones?: The Significance of Archeology for Biblical Studies* (New Haven, CT: The American Schools of Oriental Research, 1941), 42.

scribal error. The accuracy of parallel passages implies that scribes faithfully copied the MSS over the centuries.

- C. A comparison of other works of antiquity shows that ancient scribes in general were quite skilled in their duties. Ages before the advent of mechanical and electrical devices, scribes were well able to maintain the accuracy of copied MSS across vast periods. Scribal practices throughout the ancient Near East reflect a conservative attitude that preserved the text. “The prolonged and intimate study of the many scores of thousands of pertinent documents from the ancient Near East proves that sacred and profane documents were copied with greater care than is true of scribal copying in Graeco-Roman times.”<sup>17</sup>

Conclusion: The evidence points to the fact that the text of the OT is reliable. There is no reason to think that the OT is essentially corrupted or lost. Variations do exist among the copies, but most differences are trivial in nature and not one of them substantially affects doctrine or practice. For all intents and purposes, and especially for the layman, the OT is a reliable document that accurately and essentially conveys the original readings to modern readers. As W. F. Albright noted, “We may rest assured that the consonantal text of the Hebrew Bible, though not infallible, has been preserved with an accuracy perhaps unparalleled in any other Near Eastern literature.”<sup>18</sup> As Skilton cogently observes, “We must maintain that the God who gave the Scriptures, who works all things after the counsel of his will, has exercised a remarkable care over his Word, has preserved it in all ages in a state of essential purity, and has enabled it to accomplish the purpose for which he gave it. It is inconceivable that the sovereign God who was pleased to give his Word as a vital and necessary instrument in the salvation of his people would permit his Word to become completely marred in its transmission and unable to accomplish its ordained end. Rather, as surely as that he is God, we would expect to find him exercising a singular care in the preservation of his written revelation. That God has preserved the Scriptures in such a condition of essential purity as we would expect is manifestly the case. The Hebrew text of the Old Testament has survived the millenniums in a substantially and remarkably pure form.”<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> William F. Albright, *From the Stone Age to Christianity*, 2nd ed. (Baltimore: John Hopkins Press, 1957), 78–79.

<sup>18</sup> Quoted in Archer, *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction*, 58.

<sup>19</sup> John H. Skilton, “The Transmission of the Scriptures,” in *The Infallible Word: A Symposium by the Members of the Faculty of Westminster Theological Seminary*, ed. N. B. Stonehouse and Paul Woolley, 2nd ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 2002).



## Appendix 3: Is the Text of the New Testament Reliable?

The average person in the pew probably does not spend much time thinking about the texts underlying the Bible in his hands. He may have no idea what historical events led to the publication of his translation. He only knows that his Bible is reliable and authoritative, and for most people, that is enough. Critics of the Bible claim that the Bible is defective and unreliable. They may charge that untrained, careless scribes inserted or deleted certain sections of the text to the extent that we no longer can be certain of what the original writings said. If that were true, it certainly would be a significant challenge to the Christian faith. However, careful examination of the facts will reveal that the text of the New Testament (NT) is reliable.

- I. Historical facts regarding the text of the NT
  - A. Most people recognize that the Bible they use did not drop straight out of heaven in the same form that we have it today. A historical process is responsible for giving us the Bible in its current format. The Bible was not originally written in modern languages like English, German or Spanish. Bibles in such languages are translations from the original languages. Our modern Bibles are the result of a long tradition of preservation and propagation.
  - B. The NT was originally penned in the Greek language.<sup>1</sup> Alexander the Great and his heirs successfully Hellenized the holy lands so that by the time the NT was written, Greek was commonly spoken in that region. Biblical scholars used to think that the Greek dialect of the NT was some sort of special, “heavenly” language, but archaeological findings have proven that the Greek of the NT is common, marketplace language. Virtually any educated person living in the Roman Empire at that time could speak or at least understand both Greek and Latin, and likely other languages as well.
  - C. Once the NT authors wrote their works, copies of these books slowly began filtering throughout the Roman Empire and eventually found their way around the world. How did that happen? Remember that the printing press was not invented until the 1400s, so all copying done before that was done by hand. A hand-written copy of the NT is called a “manuscript” (MS).

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<sup>1</sup> Some suggest that the NT may have been originally composed in Aramaic and translated into Greek very early on, but this claim cannot be verified. The oldest manuscripts of the NT are in Greek, and most scholars believe that is the language it was originally written in.

- D. As you might imagine, as churches began to proliferate, they all wanted copies of the NT for themselves. Eventually all the authorized NT books were assembled into one work. The process of canonization is responsible for giving us the Bible in the form we have it today. The word “canon” means an authorized list, and the process whereby the various books were added to the canon is called “canonization.” It took some time for the early church to recognize and affirm all the books of the NT.
- E. The four Gospels, the Acts, thirteen Epistles of Paul, the first Epistle of John, and the first Epistle of Peter, were universally recognized as canonical by AD 175, while the Epistle to the Hebrews, the second and third Epistles of John, the second Epistle of Peter, the Epistle of James, and the Epistle of Jude were by many disputed as to their apostolic origin, and the book of Revelation was doubted by reason of its contents. But in AD 367 Athanasius wrote a widely circulated letter containing the exact list of twenty-seven NT books we have today. The churches in the eastern part of the Mediterranean world accepted this list of books by that time. Thirty years later, the Third Council of Carthage (AD 397), which represented the western part of the Mediterranean world, recognized the same list of books as inspired and authoritative.<sup>2</sup>
- F. Because all copying done before the invention of the printing press was done by hand, differences (or variants) came into the MSS quite early on. The only MSS free from errors were the originals, the “autographs.” Once the process of hand copying began, slight errors were introduced into the text. In fact, there are no two copies that are exactly the same in every detail. As you might imagine, it would be virtually impossible to hand-copy a book of the Bible, let alone the whole NT, without making a few errors. Most such errors were small and of little consequence. Examples of typical variations that scribal errors introduced into the text:
1. Spelling and word order
  2. Substituting synonymous words
  3. Dropping out words
  4. Adding words
  5. Transposing or repeating words
- G. How would one go about correcting such errors? The easiest way is to compare several copies. The reading that is reflected in the majority of MSS, or the one that

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<sup>2</sup> Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 64.

comes from the highest quality copy, is probably the right one. It's unlikely that different scribes in different places and at different times would make the same error in the same place. So by comparing readings, we can usually find which one was original, or at least rule out those that are probably erroneous. The process of sorting through the various readings and selecting the one that is most likely original is called textual criticism.

- H. Today over 5,600 Greek MSS exist. Most of these are fragments of the NT, some no larger than a credit card. Other MSS include the entire NT. The oldest MSS are written on papyrus and vellum (animal skins). Papyrus is a rather fragile material, and few MSS written on it have survived until now. Vellum, on the other hand, is a relatively sturdy material, and most MSS available today were written on it.
- I. The oldest known Greek manuscript, a small portion of the Gospel of John, is dated to about AD 125, only a few decades after the original was written.<sup>3</sup> In 1994 a scholar found a papyrus fragment of Matthew that may be dated as early as AD 70. Most MSS of the Bible date from the third century on.
- J. Scholars have examined most of the available MSS and have divided them up into various “families” or types of texts.<sup>4</sup>
  - 1. The traditional text, also known as the Majority or Byzantine text—a family of texts that was used commonly until the late 1800s. The majority of existing MSS, around 90%, fit into this family, but little evidence of this text type exists before the fourth century AD. The so-called “Textus Receptus” (TR) fits into this category. Most English versions of the Bible, including the King James Version, were based on this family of texts until the late 1800s. Many Bible students still argue that this family of texts most closely reflects the original readings of the Greek NT.
  - 2. The critical text, also known as the Alexandrian text—the oldest representations of the Greek NT (most papyrus evidence) come from this family. Readings from this family tend to be shorter and rougher, which suggests that it did not go through a process of smoothing and editing by scribes. Most Bible scholars believe that this family of texts retains the readings closest to the originals.
  - 3. The Western text—this family of texts contains slightly different readings than found in the other two types. Western readings tend to be longer and

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<sup>3</sup> p<sup>45</sup>, as it is called, measures only 2.5” x 3.5” and contains John 18:31-33, 37-38. It resides at the John Rylands Library at Manchester, England. The existence of this fragment proves that the NT was known and used far from its place of composition during the first half of the second century.

<sup>4</sup> The text types reflect the region of the people who quote from or use the texts, not where the MSS were found.

somewhat unusual when compared to the other families. There are no English translations that follow the Western tradition.

Note: The fact that a certain MSS is categorized within a certain family of texts does not imply that all the MSS of that family agree uniformly. Variants do exist within the texts of the same family, but the MSS within a family agree to a large degree. The differences within families are far less than those between the families. Remember that no two MSS agree in every detail.

Another Note: Biblical scholars continue to debate which family of Greek MSS is most authoritative, reliable, and closest to the originals. Some hold that older texts must be closer to the originals, while others argue that the majority of MSS probably reflect the original readings the best. As you might guess, this is a very technical and detailed field of inquiry. Those untrained in biblical languages and in the history of the texts and textual criticism would be wise to hold their opinions tentatively.

A Third Note: How did the above families develop? As Christianity expanded and developed, copies of the NT were carried throughout the Roman Empire. In places where the church was strong and well-organized, one particular type of text prevailed and became standardized. For example, in Egypt the Alexandrian family of texts dominated, and around Constantinople (modern Istanbul, Turkey) the Byzantine family became the “received” text. Both of these cities contained scriptoria wherein the NT was copied and disseminated, so the “official” readings were most widely published. Eventually the Latin language replaced Greek in the western part of the Empire, while Greek remained the common language in the east. Western scribes began copying the Bible mostly into Latin (by about AD 250), while eastern scribes continued making copies in Greek, which explains why this type of text is now the “Majority” of Greek texts. Most scholars believe that editors and scribes “polished” or smoothed out the readings of the Byzantine text type over the centuries. This process did not occur in the west because they stopped using Greek there.

- K. Given all the above facts, some might question how reliable the text of the NT is. After all, we admit that hand copying inserted many variants into the text, and we admit that at least three families of text exist, and each of these families support different readings. This might suggest to some people that we are not sure what the NT really says. So is the NT reliable?

This is not a question of which English translation is most reliable, but of whether the original documents of the NT, written in Greek, were transmitted to us in an essentially reliable, uncorrupted form. That is, can we recover the original readings from the available MSS? While skeptics, critics and liberals no doubt would deny

it, most conservative scholars believe that we can distill the original readings from the available MSS in an essentially uncorrupted form.

## II. Facts supporting the reliability of the NT

- A. Inspiration and preservation guarantee that the original contents of the NT is available within the manuscript evidence.
1. Variants in the text do not preclude inspiration or preservation. Remember that inspiration applies only to the original process in which God “breathed out” his Word. Inspiration occurred as the author’s pen hit the paper. If we had access to the originals, we would find them to be error free (inerrant). Unfortunately, the originals almost certainly no longer exist. All we have are copies, but within these copies the wording of the originals still exists.
  2. Inspiration does not technically apply to subsequent copying or translating of the Bible. God has promised to preserve his Word (Psalm 119:152, 160; Isaiah 40:8; Matthew 5:18, 24:35; John 10:35), but this preservation has been carried out providentially, not miraculously. Normal human means of copying has preserved the documents as we have them today. God no doubt could have miraculously preserved his Word in some particular location in an error-free condition, but he chose not to. Based on God’s promise to preserve his Word, we have confidence that it has not been essentially lost or corrupted.<sup>5</sup>
  3. We do not believe that any one particular text or even family of texts perfectly preserves the original readings of the NT. In fact, the Bible says nothing about the means of its own preservation or the location of its preservation. There is no biblical evidence that the Bible must be preserved without error in one particular MS or family of MSS. Those who believe such things have no biblical basis for such an opinion.
  4. The presence of variants and imperfections does not imply that a text is unreliable or less than Scripture. As the King James Version translators clearly stated in the preface of their work, a translation may rightly be called the Word of God even though it may contain some “imperfections and blemishes.” Just as the King’s speech which he utters in Parliament is still the King’s speech, though it may be imperfectly translated into French, Dutch, Italian, and Latin; so also in the case of the translation of the Word of God. Translations will never be infallible since they are not like the original manuscripts, which were produced by the apostles and their

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<sup>5</sup> By “essentially,” I am conceding that in some cases are we not entirely confident about what the original wording was. But even in such cases, we are confident that the original wording must be retained in one of the variant readings. Thus it is important to provide optional readings.

associates under the influence of inspiration. However, even an imperfect translation like the Septuagint can surely be called the Word of God since it was approved and used by the apostles themselves. “We affirm and avow that the very meanest [i.e., lowest quality] translation of the Bible in English set forth by men of our profession . . . containeth the Word of God, nay, is the Word of God.”<sup>6</sup>

“The Old Testament in Hebrew, . . . and the New Testament in Greek . . . being immediately inspired by God, and by his singular care and Providence kept pure in all Ages, are therefore authentic; so as in all controversies of Religion the Church is finally to appeal unto them.” – London Baptist Confession (1677)

- B. Many manuscripts lend support for the text.
  - 1. As mentioned above, over 5,600 separate MSS exist supporting the NT text. And some of these MSS were copied only a few decades after the originals were written. This situation is unique to the NT; no other ancient document can claim the same level of support. Most existing works from that period in history have only a handful of documents supporting them, and many of these are no older than the middle ages. The NT has no lack of textual support.
  - 2. Where can we find the original, perfect wording of the NT? We can only affirm that it exists within the available MSS. Choosing the most probable reading is the domain of textual (or “lower”) criticism. Biblical scholars examine and evaluate the available readings and choose the one they think is most likely to be original. If they are not sure, they will often insert a marginal note suggesting that a variant reading might be right. The original King James Bible had hundreds of marginal notes and many optional readings. Because significant variants affect such a small percentage of the text, we can have great confidence that the readings in our versions accurately convey the original words. Where the reading is doubtful, a marginal note may retain the original.
- C. Most of the variant readings are minor and affect meaning only slightly or not at all.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> William W. Combs, “The Preface to the King James Version and the King James-Only Position,” *Detroit Baptist Seminary Journal* 1 (Fall 1996): 253–67. The Septuagint (LXX) is the Greek translation of the Old Testament. It is a rather free and periphrastic translation.

<sup>7</sup> From Mark Minnick, “How Much Do the Differences Make?,” in *God’s Word in Our Hands: The Bible Preserved for Us*, ed. James B. Williams and Randolph Shaylor (Greenville, SC: Ambassador-Emerald International, 2003).

1. As noted above, most of the differences among Greek texts are minor matters of spelling, word order, word choice, and small additions or deletions. Most of them do not alter the meaning of the passage whatsoever. If we look at the whole of the NT, the significant variations affect only about 2% of the text. The small NT book of Jude contains about 450 words. About 6% of the words in Jude are affected by variants, and most of these are minor. A couple of minor variants:
  - a) In verse 3, one text reads “the common salvation” while another has “our common salvation.”
  - b) In verse 12, one family of texts have “carried about” while a different text has “carried along.”
  - c) In verse 23, one text moves “with fear” to the end of the verse.
  - d) In verse 25, one text reads “glory and majesty” while another reads “glory, majesty.”

None of these variants change the meaning of the text in any significant way. Like most variants, they are very minor.

2. Some of the variants are more substantial and could change the meaning of a passage somewhat. More examples from Jude:
  - a) In verse 1, one reading has “sanctified” while another text has “beloved.”
  - b) In verse 22, one reading is “making a difference” while another is “who are doubting.”
  - c) In verse 23, one reading has “on some have mercy” while another does not contain those words at all.
  - d) In verse 25, one reading has “the only wise God” while another has “the only God.”

You can see in cases like these there is a difference in meaning depending on what reading is chosen. But again, such variants do not make a substantial difference in understanding the passage, nor do they affect the general teaching of the Bible.

- D. In a few instances, variant readings make a significant difference in the meaning of a text.

1. Examples of significant variants: In John 1:18, some texts have “only begotten son” while others have “only begotten God.” In Matthew 6:13, the entire phrase “For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever. Amen” is not found in some MSS. In 1 John 5:13, the repeated phrase “and that ye may believe on the name of the Son of God” is not found in some MSS. Acts 8:37 reads, “And Philip said, If thou believest with all thine heart, thou mayest. And he answered and said, I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God.” These words are not found at all in some Greek MSS.
2. Examples of the most significant variants: The most consequential variants in the NT are found in John 7:53–8:11, Mark 16:9–20, and 1 John 5:7–8. Each of these texts is disputed because they are found in some MSS and not in others. Various arguments can be made either supporting or denying their inclusion in the canon. Whether we retain them in the text or remove them from the text, it does not radically alter the message of the NT. Of themselves they do not affect our faith and practice in the least.
3. It is beyond the scope of this lesson to examine the processes and strategies involved with choosing the most likely reading from among the options reflected in the various MSS. Such tasks should be left to experts in the field, not amateurs. Any concerned Bible student can check the range of readings found within the better English translations. Most of the newer versions will include even those passages that are disputed, often setting them off with some indicator or sign, linked to a marginal note explaining why the reading is debatable. Whether or not the debated reading is original, it is included in the text in some fashion, at least in the case of the most significant variants.

E. Uncertainty does not equal unreliability.

1. We must admit that we find different readings among the various MSS of the NT—that is beyond dispute. We must also avoid the error of picking one text and proclaiming that it and only it has miraculously preserved all the original readings in a pristine, error-free state. Such a claim will not withstand historical evaluation. The only way to determine the original readings is to compare and analyze the MS evidence.
2. The original readings do exist within the MS evidence. As noted above, our uncertainty about the correct reading affects only about 2% of the entire NT, and in those cases we have options that do retain the original reading. We may not be sure which reading is original, but we can be confident that one of them is.

3. Modern versions are reliable in that they are the result of careful research and analysis of the potential readings. Committees of experts examined the possible readings and selected those that they thought were most likely to be original. Even if they selected the wrong reading in some cases, that does not ruin the overall impression of the work. The truthfulness of the Bible does not rest on translators picking the right word in every case.
  4. Every translation is the result of the translators picking the readings that they thought most accurately reflected the originals. Unless you can read Greek fluently, you must rely on the scholarship and honesty of the people who translated the Bible you read. Unless you are reading a sectarian version (e.g., New Word Translation) or a free paraphrase (e.g., The Message), you have no reason to doubt what your Bible says. And consulting a couple of different versions will usually keep you on the right path.
- F. None of the variants change the overall teaching of the NT. Not a single variant alters what Christians believe and practice. Variants certainly do alter our understanding of individual passages, but not a single variant teaches heresy, and all of them combined do not reduce the NT to an unreliable condition.

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*For over 99 percent of the words of the Bible, we know what the original manuscript said. Even for many of the verses where there are textual variants, ... the correct decision is often quite clear, and there are really very few places where the textual variant is both difficult to evaluate and significant in determining the meaning. In the small percentage of the cases where there is significant uncertainty about what the original text said, the general sense of the sentence is usually quite clear from the context.... [T]he study of textual variants has not left us in confusion about what the original manuscripts said. It has rather brought us extremely close to the content of those original manuscripts. For most practical purposes, then, the current published scholarly texts of the Hebrew Old Testament and the Greek New Testament are the same as the original manuscripts.<sup>8</sup>*

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Conclusion: The reliability of the text of the NT is a significant issue for anyone who claims to believe the Bible. You may find some of the above information surprising and challenging. As much as we might wish we had access to a perfectly preserved edition of the NT, we simply do not. The original contents of the NT are available to us, but it is presently reflected in the totality

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<sup>8</sup> Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 96.

of the textual record. Finding the best readings and incorporating them into modern translations is the task of textual scholars. It is a difficult task but not an insurmountable one. As the translators of the King James Bible stated, any translation that faithfully reproduces the original language texts may be considered to be the Word of God.