THE FOUR PILLARS OF CHRISTIANITY:

Essential Knowledge for Every Christian

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Many thanks!

Wade

Kevin
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Foreword

Perhaps as many as 10,000 churches have closed their doors in recent years and upwards to 80 percent of the formerly churched indicate a weak belief in God. A common response from those who have left the church is they could not get their questions answered in a safe environment. And, to throw one more rock on the pile, between 2010 and 2012, more than 50% of the churches added not one new member.\textsuperscript{1,2,3}

Facts like these point to the inescapable conclusion that the influence of the church upon modern culture is shrinking.\textsuperscript{4} Small groups and well-honed praise teams will not change these trends because they are all geared towards folks who are already in church. Even well-done sermons that address spiritual growth will likely be insufficient since the foundations for those sermons are lost on many a skeptic. If the church in America is to re-invigorate itself, we believe it will be necessary to reclaim the high ground for the intellectual defense of our beliefs.

Consider the thoughts provided below:

Modern culture is a tremendous force. It impacts all classes of society. It affects the ignorant as well as the learned. What is to be done about it? In the first place the church may simply withdraw from the conflict. She may simply allow the mighty stream of modern thought to flow by unheeded and do her work merely in the back eddies of the current. There are still some men in the world who have been unaffected by modern culture. They may still be won for Christ without intellectual labor. And they must be won. It is useful, it is necessary work. If the church is satisfied with that alone, let her give up the scientific education of her ministry. Let her assume the truth of her message and learn simply how it can be applied to modern industrial and social conditions. Let her give up the laborious study of Greek and Hebrew. Let her abandon the scientific study of history to the men of the world. In a day of increased scientific interest, let the Church go on becoming less scientific. In a day of increased specialization, of renewed interest in philology and in history, of more rigorous scientific method, let the Church go on abandoning her Bible to her enemies. They will study it scientifically, rest assured, if the Church does not. Let her substitute sociology altogether for Hebrew; practical experiences for the proof of the gospel. Let her shorten the preparation of her ministry, let her permit it to be interrupted more and more by premature practical activity. By doing so she will win a straggler here and there. But her winnings will be but temporary. The great current of modern culture will engulf her puny eddy. God will save her
somehow—out of the depths. But the labor of centuries will have been swept away. God grant that the church may not resign herself to that.

The article goes on to say:

_During the last thirty years there has been a tremendous defection from the Christian Church. It is evidenced even by things that lie on the surface. For example, by the decline in church attendance and in Sabbath observance and in the number of candidates for the ministry. Special explanations, it is true, are sometimes given for these discouraging tendencies. But why should we deceive ourselves, why comfort ourselves by palliative explanations? Let us face the facts. The falling off in church attendance, the neglect of Sabbath observance—these things are simply surface indications of a decline in the power of Christianity. Christianity is exerting a far less powerful direct influence in the civilized world today than it was exerting thirty years ago._

If you did not do so the first time, reread the above excerpts carefully. They provide a compelling analysis of the Church and its place in society today, except the words were written in 1913 by J. Gresham Machen for the Princeton Theological Review (Vol. 11). The words may be over a century old but the thoughts succinctly crystallize the position the Church finds itself in today. Increasingly, we find ourselves in a culture that, at its heart, is hell-bent on marginalizing the Church, minimizing its relevance until it and its worldview are tossed on the trash heap of similarly discredited beliefs. There is a battle raging to establish and maintain the high ground of truth and the Church cannot afford to hold back anything that supports its position.

This book is an effort to equip the Church to effectively answer a culture that grows increasingly hostile to its claims. The Church must be able to defend its core beliefs and accordingly its core behaviors. The core beliefs we refer to here are straightforward: A) The existence of the God of the Bible, B) Jesus is the divine son of God, C) Jesus resurrected from the grave, and D) The Christian perspective on suffering and evil is rational.

Absent adequate defenses of these pillars of the Christian faith, the Christian has only one thing to offer a skeptic—their personal testimony. Indeed, any life changed by the regenerative power of the Holy Spirit is a story worth telling but will that be sufficient in today’s culture? If Machen were alive he would argue it was not true in his time and he would undoubtedly assert it is not true today as well.
Defended well, the pillars of the Church assure that the church and its cause are legitimate. And, if the Church is legitimate then it is correct to argue that it is the vehicle God uses to provide a source of hope to a world desperately seeking something that can be trusted as true. We fear that many Christians are ‘low level’ consumers; i.e., they are unable to adequately articulate a defense for their beliefs. If that is the case, then they are unprepared to give an answer for the hope that they have (1 Peter 3:15).

Machen focuses on the role of seminary in preparing ministers to be effective defenders of Christ. That makes sense since his intended audiences were seminaries. Still, it is easy to generalize his thoughts to the laity as well. The Great Commission cannot be realized without the body of Christ’s participation. Speaking to others about the hope that we hold is not something assigned specifically to pastors. In fact, nothing could be further from the truth. It is the responsibility of every person who has been changed by receiving Christ to always be prepared to give an account for why they believe. We trust God that this book will be a useful tool towards this end.
Endnotes: Foreword

1. The Huffington Post reports on the trends associated with the lack of church attendance at: http://www.huffingtonpost.com/steve-mcswain/why-nobody-wants-to-go-to_b_4086016.html


3. Commentary on these issues has been provided by J.P. Moreland. A short synopsis can be found at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DdbrjUp89WM&feature=youtu.be

4. Gallup has noted the trend in in declining confidence in religion as evidenced by their 2012 report: http://www.gallup.com/poll/155690/Confidence-Organized-Religion-Low-Point.aspx. As sobering as the reported trends are, they may actually be incorrectly optimistic, perhaps overestimating attendance by more than 50%: http://churchleaders.com/pastors/pastor-articles/139575-7-startling-facts-an-up-close-look-at-church-attendance-in-america.html

5. The quote from Machen is taken from his work in the Princeton Review. It can be found at http://theologymix.com/church-life/christianity-and-culture-gresham-machen/ and it is highly recommended reading. Machen’s name may not be familiar to you but his legacy is enduring as he was one of the primary founders of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church.
WHY THIS BOOK AND WHY RIGHT NOW?

Framing the issues.

“My faith was paralyzed for five years because I did not know how to answer these questions.” A quote from a mature Christian regarding her inability to answer attacks on her faith adequately.

This book is the result of many conversations about the current state of the Church. We are writing primarily to and for believers with a couple of immediate thoughts in mind:

- First, we are convinced too many believers live out their faith with insufficient assurances for the truth of their beliefs. In other words, it might be said that they hope their beliefs are true instead of knowing that to be the case. If we are correct, many believers understandably compartmentalize their faith and keep it secret because they are not convinced it can withstand scrutiny.

- Second, if we are correct and there are too many believers that find themselves “paralyzed,” then the inevitable result will be marginally effective Christians and churches. Believers affected by incertitude are not apt to lead radically changed lives that demonstrate God is the ultimate reality and Jesus Christ, God made man, is the only means to that ultimate reality. It would be naïve to think believers of this sort will be able to speak well of their Lord. It is also naïve to think marginalized Christians will flock to this book or any other book of this nature. Equipping these believers therefore will almost certainly fall to churches and their leadership.

- Finally, as we live in an increasingly relativistic and postmodern world, absolutes and reason no longer form the basis for many people’s thinking. Experience and feelings are highly valued today. While these aspects of life and living are important, they inevitably shift. Without an assurance of belief, many Christians feel their faith is shifting and unstable. So, they are not only unable to stand firmly on their own faith, they can’t, and therefore don’t, help another find and stand on the solid Rock, Jesus.

We write to provide the believer with assurances that their faith is rational and their hope secure. Believers equipped with this knowledge are able to put on the full armor of Christ and
speak about what they believe with grace and humility. In case you haven’t noticed, popular culture demonstrates an ever-growing tendency to question Christianity so there is a real need to ‘armor up.’

Although it is true that Christianity as a faith is being questioned, the statement itself is almost meaningless because Christianity means so many different things to so many skeptics. In other words, we as the Church have not done an adequate job of defining exactly what Christianity is and exactly why these beliefs are foundational, grounded, and rational. As a result, the Church seems to be on its heels in the culture wars. Instead of defining the conversation, we are being forced to react to the ever-increasing attacks against Christianity. That need not happen. If we possess Truth, then Truth should be the starting point for our faith and indeed our lives. A long time ago, a Roman governor asked a great question: “What is truth?” We hope to answer that question.

Who are we?

At the core of Christianity, three central tenets undergird all other facets of the faith. We will refer to them as the pillars of Christianity. These pillars, in our view, represent absolutes for the faith. In other words, without these pillars, there is no Christianity.

- The God of the Bible exists;
- Jesus Christ is divine; and
- Christ resurrected from the tomb.

In addition to these three pillars there is one more necessary component to Christianity. We must be able to provide a rational answer to the problem of evil and suffering in our world. Failure to do so leaves untold numbers of people in desolate desperation with no hope for the future and no assurance that they are loved by the God of the Bible. Therefore, when we refer to the pillars of Christianity throughout this book we intend the term to include all four of these points.
Internal conversations

Christians like to argue and this dates back to the early church that had so many matters to settle they created a church council to “hold court” on doctrinal issues. You can read Acts 15 for a glimpse into its workings. Christians of today are often quite ready to carry on internal debates about the age of the earth, perseverance of the saints, predestination, God’s sovereignty vs free will, infant baptism and on and on. Each of these conversations has a place at the table at some point but none of them matter a whit if the pillars of Christianity are not true.

We often spend our time speaking with skeptics about topics that are not directly connected to the pillars. That means conversations get very confused and the skeptic has every right to point out that the Church cannot agree on these matters so why should I worry about what church folk have to say at all? It is important to separate conversations about *doctrines from conversations about foundations.* The foundational pillars of Christianity are independent of denominations and they should provide the starting point for conversations about Christianity.

Although listed separately, the arguments are all tightly connected. Christ’s resurrection speaks to his divinity as well the existence of God, for example. But, skeptics may not be comfortable starting with that argument and may note that they see no evidence for God. If that is the case, then the subsequent claims of Christianity will not be taken seriously by the skeptic.

Skeptical arguments against Christianity’s pillars tend to come from three arenas: science, history, and/or morality. As noted, arguments from science tend to focus on God’s existence. Historical arguments usually attack the veracity and reliability of scripture. Moral arguments tend to be philosophical and question how an all-powerful, all-loving God can allow evil to flourish. Within these camps there are smaller camps but in general, these three areas are where most skeptical arguments are generated.

Objectives and applications

Our aim is that you will have a foundation of knowledge that is reassuring to your own walk when you finish this book. This knowledge will also be useful when you engage skeptics in conversation. Additionally, the topics in this book are relevant to churches seeking to lay strong foundations for their congregations so they can be spiritually grounded and actively engaged in
spreading the Good News of Jesus. All that said, we are not trying to create a magnum opus of apologetics. In this sense the book is adequate but not exhaustive. Those wishing to delve deeper into any of these topics will find a wealth of written material that will challenge them even further.

The applications for this knowledge are therefore both personal and corporate. First, we hope you, the reader, benefits from the information in this book. Second, we want to challenge churches to begin to think about the issues we raise and how these issues relate to their congregations. Specifically, we want churches to actively assess whether their congregations are generally equipped to defend their faith and rely on their faith when circumstances warrant. Our own experiences tell us that many churches will likely find their congregations ill-prepared to address the rising skepticism and derision among the general population.

We are also challenging churches to revisit the attention given to the pillars of Christianity and their documentation of God’s power to provide eternal life, through Jesus Christ, to all those who believe. Being able to express these realities and then act accordingly sends a powerful message to a hurting world where suffering is all too common. If we do not behave consistent with our message then we are no more than mere mouthpieces that spout truth but never act on it. The skeptic will smell out this type of hypocrisy from a mile away.

Finally, we also want to provide individuals with one source that can speak to these issues collectively. As we noted, we are not trying to provide exhaustive analyses for any of these topics. Our goal is to promote general expertise, sufficient expertise to be able to equip the believer with the full armor of God (Ephesians 6) so that he or she can stand up for their faith in confident humility.

As Americans we should all know the Star Spangled Banner and The Pledge of Allegiance because their messages are inextricably bound to being an American. As Christians we should all know and be able to communicate rational and biblical arguments for the pillars because their messages are likewise inextricably bound to the Christian obligation to be the hands and feet of Christ.

*A rude awakening*

If the pillars of the faith are foundational then church members should be able to provide rational defenses for them. That said, we wondered what might happen in the average church if
their members were asked to write down all they know about the following four questions: What is the evidence for God’s existence? How do we know Christ is divine? What is the evidence for the resurrection? How does an all-loving, all-powerful God allow suffering?

We began by asking a Pastor with over 40 years’ experience, a former member of the Billy Graham evangelism team, and a true man of God with encyclopedic Biblical recall what he thought would happen if we asked these questions to all of the attendees that had attended the church he founded over 40 years ago. He was quick to respond that it would not be pretty; he was confident that most would not know what to write.

We followed up, asking about 100 people in our own church through focus groups and apologetics classes what their opinion would be for the general congregational response to the questions. Once again, the answers were not very optimistic with the typical response saying 10% would be able to respond and the most optimistic being around 25%. One respondent said he felt like he could answer the questions but then he went on to say he did not actually learn any of the material in church. Another response was from a former church elder with an extensive church history. He was succinct: “It would be bloody.”

This begs a question: Are these results typical of other churches or an isolated response from one particular church? What we discovered strongly suggests that this inability to offer explanations to these questions is not isolated at all.

Recently, a class was held about the four pillars of the faith. It was attended by Pentecostals, Baptists, non-denominationals, charismatics, and a couple of skeptics. The average age of the attendee was above 40 (definitely above 40!) and there were about 35 people present. Collectively, there was a lot of church history in the room with most reporting they have been nearly lifelong church attendees and they had all attended more than 1 church with several having attended about 5 churches. We estimate that there were likely well over 100 churches represented both past and present at the meeting and this setting provided an excellent opportunity to pose the question and ask people to respond not only for the church they are currently attending but also for all the churches they have ever attended regularly.

You can probably guess by now that the results were, for all intents, identical to the responses that were already given by the 100 or so folks who had already responded. In short, there was not one person who stated they had any confidence that the average attendee at any church they had attended would be able to write much of anything about these seminal issues.
Chew on that one for a while and then reflect upon your own experiences in all the churches you have ever attended and then ask yourself this: How do we as Christians speak to others about Christ as Messiah or Christ as the conqueror of death if we cannot speak to the divinity of Christ and the proof of the resurrection? Could it be that the reason so many people are nervous when speaking about their personal beliefs is that, for the most part, that is exactly what they are? Could it be that many Christians hold beliefs but do not appreciate the rational basis for those beliefs? Or worse yet, have little to no rational basis for their belief? It is one thing to hope what you believe is true and it is entirely another matter to be convinced what you believe is true. We are concerned that there are too many in the pews who base their belief on things they hope are true rather than things they know are true.

If this is the case it would go a long way towards explaining why churches are increasingly swapping members and why most churches are harbors for folks who have left other churches. Folks may very well be looking for reasons that justify their beliefs in the churches they attend. If church A does not deliver, try church B.

It would also help to explain reluctance to engage skeptics. We have all been sensitized to the mindset that personal beliefs are, for lack of a better word, personal. What you believe is your business and what I believe is mine. This type of thinking assumes there is no belief that is a better belief, or if there is, the only way to reach that belief is through personal experience. Take that thinking and extend it to a believer that cannot readily identify why their beliefs are solid and it is easy to see how the believer will rarely, if ever, engage a skeptic and follow Peter’s charge to give an account of why he believes.

When we do engage skeptics we tend to do so with a “one size fits all” mentality. But, as you will soon see from our own life stories, one size definitely does not fit all. In fact, it would not be far-fetched to look at our stories as anchors for a continuum where “the head” is on one side and “the heart” is on the other. If you do that, it becomes clear that there is no single tactic that can be used to speak to a skeptic. We will develop that theme later in the book. First, let’s take a look at our stories.
Two Decidedly Different Stories: Connecting the Head and the Heart

Kevin’s Story:

Everyone’s story of how Jesus found and saved them is different and varied. Wade’s personal story and mine are indeed different. I grew up in a home that was church going when I was young. But by the time I was an adolescent, it wasn’t. During those turbulent years I ventured into the 70’s world of “drugs, sex, and rock-n-roll.” Being suburban in nature, it wasn’t a ridiculously rebellious season. I had a loving and stable home, which made life more stable than for other teens in rebellion. Even though those years might be considered tame, my middle school and high school exploits left me full of guilt and shame.

I didn’t know anything about Jesus but I knew that if he did exist, as I understood him to be, he wouldn’t approve of my choices.

I also struggled with severe learning disabilities. Being the 70’s, there wasn’t much known about dyslexia. Its overall effect on me was to greatly affect my reading ability and to leave me feeling stupid a lot of the time. School was difficult for me and took great efforts.

I’m basically a very relational person and feel things deeply. I don’t know if my learning disabilities contributed to this, but I believe they did. So, when I came to understand Jesus, there wasn’t an intellectual hurdle to overcome. There was an emotional one. There are basically three hurdles we all face, intellectual, emotional, and volitional. Within these hurdles some tend to be larger than others. For me, the largest hurdle was emotional.

God helped me overcome this hurdle by providing a loving community, a family. This community had joy and seemed to generally be void of the isolating effects that are caused by shame and guilt. They had the authenticating mark of love. And they shared this love lavishly. This and an opportunity to hear and respond to the Gospel forever changed me.

As I grew in Jesus, the peace of God and love of God filled me though the Holy Spirit. This gave me confidence. However, sleeping within me was a desire to know more. I didn’t know the desire was there, but it was and was strong. I would spend four years mining for understanding and the reasonable side of the faith in seminary. While this knowledge was very helpful to me, what made it critically importantly to me was the ability to share it.
While I came to Jesus through my heart first, I meet many people, friends and family that started with their head first. So, I knew I needed to know more and share more of the rational side of the faith for those that had an intellectual hurdle to overcome.

I can still struggle feeling stupid. I take great comfort in the fact that those who followed Jesus were not educated, they were everyday men and woman (Acts 4:13). The rational aspects of the Christian faith are not complicated and do not require seminary training to understand. They are reasonable, biblical, and accessible. That is why Peter would say would say, “15 But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, ...” We must be prepared to share both our experience and reason. Being prepared is learning and sharing. Sharing our reasons means we have rational aspects to faith. Most important are the critical, historical, and biblical understanding of the divinity of Jesus and his resurrection.

Wade’s Story:

My father died when I was two years old so I never knew him. My sister died when I was in the 5th grade. I learned two lessons early on in life: a) Life has sorrows, and b) Death is inevitable. It was somewhere around six years of age that the Santa Claus myth came to an abrupt end. I cannot speak for others my age group regarding how they responded, but I clearly remember thinking I had been shafted. Why would adults tell me something they knew was not true? Somewhere around six the first seeds of skepticism were probably planted. My father’s untimely early death reinforced that skepticism and my sister’s death added fuel so that by the time I was 11 or 12 I was beginning to bump into big questions about life, death, and the purpose of life.

Fast forward to the teen years. School, sports, and socializing made up my day-to-day world. I can recall being 13 or so and thinking how much time I had till I would be 45. I did not see much need to engage the big questions of life although I had clearly identified them by this time. I knew that if there was no ultimate answer to why we were here then it was not much point in doing anything except living in the moment and at that point in time I felt like there were a lot of moments to spare. My mother, like most of my friends’ mothers, was a regular church goer. That meant I was a regular church goer. We were Methodists, and I do not remember many of the sermons but I do remember that Christ’s divinity and the proof of the resurrection were never
presented in a manner that caught my attention nor do I recall any pulpit conversations about the existence of God or a Christian perspective on suffering and evil.

Generally, my time during these Sundays was spent in a pretty passive mode. I liked some of the songs and I enjoyed getting up to go to communion. One particular communion opportunity we sang a hymn where God was invoked to cure his children’s warring madness. My friend and I found that line particularly humorous but the reasoning was lost for the most part on those sitting around us. Around sixteen I really started what I will call ‘the search.’ If I was wasting my time in church, then I wanted to at least know it was a waste of time. On the other hand, if there was something to be had from all this then I wanted to know what it was and how it could be known.

*The search begins*

I went to see the pastor of my church who was quite surprised that I was asking the questions I was asking. I simply wanted to know what proof he had of God, and if he had any could he share it with me. I got a book he recommended and I tried to read it. Looking back, my guess is I was handed a philosophy book from seminary. In any case, I found it unintelligible and concluded that if this was the best proof I could hope for then I was out of luck.

I was now officially jaded. If you wanted to speak to me about how Christ changed your life, I was likely to tell you I had the same experience with bad mayonnaise. To be clear, I had not rejected the possibility of a God and by extension a savior; I just wanted more proof than a profession based solely upon what someone felt. I did not trust feelings as a sole source of truth, at least when it came to something so important.

The matter simmered for a number of years. I would classify myself as a “low-level” believer. That is, I concluded the likelihood of a God was better than the likelihood he did not exist but I was not satisfied with the lack of substantial evidence I had been exposed to. By now I am in my 20’s, married, and I’ve been in a number of churches for a number of years. Methodist, non-denominational, Baptist, a short stint at a charismatic church, back to Methodist, and finally back to non-denominational. I was a traveling church goer so I heard a lot of sermons in a lot of venues but I never heard anything that made me think there was a rational basis for whatever I believed.
A biochemistry professor at LSU made an offhand comment one day that made me sit straight up. He was explaining how amino acids are ‘right handed’ and ‘left handed’ and that protein synthesis in the body can only take place with left handed amino acids. Nothing so far, until he said: “And this proves the existence of God.” I did not take his statement as Gospel but it did pique my interest to the point that I began to wonder anew if there was a means to rationally answer life’s ultimate questions. It was somewhere around this time I received my most recent subscription to Newsweek. The lead story on the cover had a headline that read something like this: What Can Science Tell Us about God?

The search quickens

Now the search is really underway. I looked through the quotes in the article and saw that most of them dealt with cosmology so off I go to some of these sources. Without going into extended detail, it was becoming clear that a compelling case could be made, independent of the Bible, that there is a God. The overwhelming evidence that the universe had a beginning impressed me tremendously because I knew that a universe that was not eternal was also a universe that was created. “Does God exist?” was a question that could actually be answered! That led me to the Bible and a long search, still continuing, to see if it is an accurate and trustworthy source of information.

I noticed in the New Testament several places that spoke of scriptures that proved Jesus was Messiah. I cannot tell you how many times I read lines like that without grasping their significance. Finally, with some great commentaries and some wonderful external resources, I began to appreciate how the Old Testament prepared the way for the Messiah’s place in history as recorded by the New Testament. A journey that began somewhere around six years old was finally completed somewhere around 25. I no longer had to speak only about what I felt; I could also speak confidently about what I knew. Skepticism was replaced by certainty. It is actually possible to know there is a God, Jesus is divine, and the resurrection is a fact.
I was recently talking to my best friend in high school. Like many friendships forged in high school, we no longer enjoy the frequency of speaking that we once did. He was back in town to bury his mother and we began to reminisce a bit. In high school we were very similar in thought and deed and that meant if you wanted to speak to one skeptic you were going to get a double dose.

Shortly after the funeral we went to dinner before he had to return home. I found out some things I never knew. For example, his father had been an abusive alcoholic and my friend adopted an avoidance strategy that often entailed spending the weekend at my house. Who knew? But then he said something startling because the alcoholic father he was describing was not the man I knew. Sometime soon after we had become friends his dad was driving to Mississippi with his mother when he pulled off the road. She asked where he was going and he told her he had to go inside. By inside he meant inside the church he had just passed. So, somewhere in Mississippi the dad switched from skeptic to believer and according to the son, he was never the same. Violence replaced by patience and a need for alcohol removed.

It occurred to me while we were talking that his father represented the pure emotional recognition that he was in need of a savior. On the other hand, his son and I both represented a need for a rational basis for our faith. As a side note, my friend noted how his journey to faith has been a slow one and that he too was looking for rational answers. He left with some books in his hands and conversations yet to be held.

Kevin and my personal stories are nearly polar opposites. The best friend’s story and his own father’s story are nearly polar opposites. Some have reached a saving faith simply from the emotional confirmation that told them they were changed. Others need to have the facts checked and verified.

Our belief is that many churches rely heavily, perhaps too heavily, upon the ‘changed life’ testimony. Many skeptics will not be swayed by personal statements because, as we have already noted, personal beliefs are personal beliefs and therefore outside the scrutiny of others but also lacking the power to sway others. In other words, many view personal beliefs as lacking any form of objectivity.
The challenge:

We are in an age of skepticism that is saturated in relativistic thinking. Keep your faith to yourself is now an expectation of the skeptic but it gets worse. Today, the skeptic is generally convinced that us ‘religious folk’ are not the brightest of the bright. In fact, we are often viewed with ridicule. The irony of this type of relativism is there’s not much relativity to be found. All things may be relative (actually they cannot but that is another topic), but from the skeptic’s perspective their view of what is right is often much more correct than the believer’s view. Little wonder that many denominations are shrinking and there is now a rising trend of “nones.” Pew Research Center estimates that 20% of the American public and 1/3 of the population that is under 30 years old are now religiously unaffiliated. The trend in “nones” has recently accelerated. Now, approximately 1 out of 6 adults in America describe themselves as atheists and nearly 14% report no religious affiliation.2

That is the bad news. The good news, provided by the same Pew Report, indicates that over 65% indicate a belief in God but that might be tempered by nearly 60% reporting they feel connected to nature. Whatever the personal beliefs reported about spirituality, it is clear these feelings do not translate into religious affiliation or regular church attendance. The vast majority of the “nones” reject organized religion and indicate an over-emphasis on rules, politics, money, and power as their primary objections to avoid church.

Politics? Rules? Money? Power? None of these complaints have a thing to do with the pillars of our faith. If we assume the complaints are grounded it means churches just might be spending too much time on matters that are not really central to the Christian message. On the other hand, if we assume the complaints are excuses to avoid church altogether then they are simply avoidance strategies, or to be fair, perhaps unfounded assumptions. If this is the case, the real value of churches has been lost on those making the complaints. In the first case the pillars of Christianity are not communicated and in the latter case they are not valued. Neither of these possibilities is a good one.

Make no mistake, there is a pushback against the Christian worldview, and the answer to this riding tide of skepticism must come from two places: the head and the heart. That said, there has always been a pushback against what we believe, even back to the days immediately preceding
the resurrection. We should not be surprised. After all, the central basis for our faith is that the Son of God rose three days after he was crucified. Nothing to raise skepticism in that claim, right?

Shortly after the Resurrection, Peter found himself in Jerusalem, speaking to an audience comprised mostly of very skeptical Jews. According to Acts: 3, a man was healed by Peter and the crowd was abuzz; ‘Who is this man and where does he get the ability to do what he just did?’ were undoubtedly on the tongues of many who had just witnessed the event. Peter answered all of their questions and also provided the basis for his actions:

When Peter saw this, he said to them: “Fellow Israelites, why does this surprise you? Why do you stare at us as if by our own power or godliness we had made this man walk? The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God of our fathers, has glorified his servant Jesus. You handed him over to be killed, and you disowned him before Pilate, though he had decided to let him go. You disowned the Holy and Righteous One and asked that a murderer be released to you. You killed the author of life, but God raised him from the dead. We are witnesses of this. By faith in the name of Jesus, this man whom you see and know was made strong. It is Jesus’ name and the faith that comes through him that has completely healed him, as you can all see. Now, fellow Israelites, I know that you acted in ignorance, as did your leaders. But this is how God fulfilled what he had foretold through all the prophets, saying that his Messiah would suffer. Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord, and that he may send the Messiah, who has been appointed for you—even Jesus. Heaven must receive him until the time comes for God to restore everything, as he promised long ago through his holy prophets. For Moses said, ‘The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own people; you must listen to everything he tells you.’ Anyone who does not listen to him will be completely cut off from their people. Indeed, beginning with Samuel, all the prophets who have spoken have foretold these days. And you are heirs of the prophets and of the covenant God made with your fathers (emphasis added).

There is a whole lot happening in these few verses. Peter informs the crowd that he had nothing to do with the healing, it was an act of God. He then uses the opportunity and the crowd’s bewilderment to get to the points he wants to make. First, he notes that Christ was killed in ignorance. This is a very important point that speaks to what a second temple Jew anticipated from their Messiah and we will devote much attention to it in another chapter. Then, he makes a
statement that sounds very similar indeed to the one Jesus made on Resurrection Sunday while walking with the gents to Emmaus as recorded in Luke 24.

It is a tactful person indeed who, in a few sentences, can first indict a crowd for their complicity in Christ’s death, remind the crowd that their own scripture described why Christ had to die, and then amazingly conclude by noting that those listening were heirs of the prophets that had foretold the death of Christ. Peter’s response to the crowd that day is a model for every Christian to analyze and internalize.

The head

We believe it is quite likely that Peter was recalling the events of that day when he wrote his first epistle. Written 35 years or so after the resurrection, chapter 3 contains one of the more familiar phrases from the letter.

But in your hearts revere Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect. (1 Peter 3:15)

Peter’s actions in Acts translate into a general course of action that is expected to form the basis for how we speak to the skeptic. We are to be prepared to give an answer for the hope we have and we are to do so gently and respectfully. Peter certainly followed his own advice in the verses just cited. To make the point that the audience members were all heirs to the prophets and God’s covenant immediately after pointing out they had murdered the Messiah was a wonderful example of being both gentle and respectful.

But within that gentleness and respect was truth, truth that could be grasped and understood by the audience. Peter was indeed prepared to give a gentle and respectful answer to anyone who heard him on that day 30 odd years before he penned 1 Peter.

We have all been told to be prepared to give a reason for the hope we have. Many people, as we have said, believe this means we tell “our story.” But, we think the scripture is actually calling here for us to be prepared to give a rational basis for our belief. We draw that conclusion
because of the scripture that immediately follows. It is just as important to the point Peter is making and should not be left out of any discussion of this nature:

*And the heart*

...*keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander* (1 Peter 3:16).

Now Peter speaks of how we behave because of who we are, and taken in total the message is this: Be prepared to share what you know so that others will recognize how that knowledge and the transformative nature of that knowledge are inextricably bound.

As we see, the head and the heart are both in play in Peter’s scripture. They should also be in play not only in our lives but in our testimonies. We are not so sure that this is commonly the case for today’s Christian. Answering today’s skeptic requires rational justification for the existence of God, the divinity of Christ, and the historical nature of the resurrection. But, it also requires the evidence of a changed life. These were the expectations of Peter a few years after Christianity was birthed and they remain the expectations 2000 years later.

*What does this mean to the Church?*

We will develop a recurring theme in the following chapters that the central tenets of the Christian faith are beyond the realm of the average church attendee to articulate well. If our conclusion is correct, we should not be surprised at reports similar to the Pew Research we cited that show church growth is shrinking as well as the number of people who report frequent church attendance. You cannot sustain what you cannot substantiate and Christianity is no exception. Said another way, we cannot speak persuasively about Jesus as the way, the truth, and the life if we cannot affirm God is real, Jesus is divine, the resurrection occurred, and suffering and evil are not a death blow to an all-loving God.
Contrast the apparent inability of the typical Christian of today to always give an account of why we believe with the Christians of the early church who, following the model of Jesus, Peter, and Paul, fueled its explosive growth by proving insistently that Christ’s claims were validated by Moses and the prophets. Add a resurrection that produced multiple sightings post-tomb and every Christian of that day had all the evidence needed to proclaim the Good News. The early church knew that and it should be the charge of every church to produce believers who can do the same today.

We have begun an argument for a return to the historical origins for the spread of the Gospel message and we have argued that useful defenses for the pillars of Christianity are absolutely essential to the future of Christianity. We are also arguing useful defenses for the foundations of Christianity are often beyond the scope of the believer to articulate with any degree of confidence. This needs to change if the church is to realize its potential as the hands and feet of Christ.

So, we turn our attention now to the first pillar of Christianity. How do we know the God of the Bible exists? As important as that answer is, it is even more important to know how we can explain that position to a skeptic. Chapter 2 begins the journey.

Chapter 1 Endnotes

Chapter 1

1. The friend was recently baptized as a believer in his home church!


3. Acts 3.12-25 (NIV)
FURTHER REFLECTION

Central Theme:

You cannot sustain what you cannot substantiate and Christianity is no exception. Said another way, we cannot speak persuasively about Jesus as the way, the truth, and the life if we cannot affirm God is real, Jesus is divine, the resurrection occurred, and suffering and evil are not a death blow to an all-loving God.

Reflective Activities:

a. List at least three arguments a skeptic is likely to use to challenge Christianity:

b. What are the biggest doubt(s) you encounter about your own faith? Or, said another way, what topics cause you the most concern that challenge Christianity?

a. Is J. Robert Machen on to something (foreword)? Do his points resonate today?
The Big Picture:

Why is there anything at all?

Stephen Hawking: As long as the universe had a beginning, we would suppose it had a creator.¹

Alexander Vilenkin: It is said that an argument is what convinces reasonable men and a proof is what it takes to convince even an unreasonable man. With the proof now in place, cosmologists can no longer hide behind the possibility of a past-eternal universe. There is no escape: they have to face the problem of a cosmic beginning.²

Many Christians recoil from science, believing that it is a threat to their faith. We hope this chapter proves otherwise. We have compiled a series of quotes from different scientists and philosophers and we have used them to help the reader better understand that science has not buried God. In fact, as you will see, that is not the case at all.

We spend the majority of our time in this chapter focused on conversations about the origins of the universe and we do that for the following simple reason: If the universe has been purposefully created, then we have taken the first big step towards determining whether the God of the Bible is that creator.

We did not spend much time, beyond one short paragraph, on evolution and you will see why that is the case when you reach the quote by C. S. Lewis. The arguments about evolution are, if you will, chapter 22 in the book of the universe. We are much more interested in Chapter 1, because Chapter 1 explains “In the beginning.” So, with that background, let’s begin with the questions that demand big answers.
Ultimate questions, ultimate answers?

Why are we here? Can we know that God exists or are we left to “believe” what cannot be verified? How do we answer skeptics who wonder why we are so misguided as to think this universe was created, Jesus was God, and he rose from the dead? The claims do indeed seem to go from wild to unbelievably out of control. At least, that is what the world assumes. But, we know differently, don’t we?

Or do we? Clearly the world ain’t buying what we are selling which begs the question: Just what exactly are we selling? It is common in Europe to see churches poorly attended and to note a general apathy in church worship. Why mess with something you do not think is useful? America is different though. Right? America still demonstrates a “one nation under God” mentality, where the vast majority of the country accepts God as a reality and the Bible as truth. Right? Right?

Recognizing an important shift

Recently a conversation was had with a pastor. He comes from a biker background and has spent much time among some of the more infamous motorcycle gangs trying to spread the Gospel. He has been told time again by bikers they know there is a God but they just are not interested in bowing their knee to Him. Historically in our culture the next generation has been prepared by the current generation with a worldview that includes God. Accordingly, the church operated from that same framework and we could dispense with proofs of the tenets of our faith because they were generally not needed. Or so we thought.

But this same pastor noted that the willingness to acknowledge God as a given has shifted radically in a very short time. The assumption that a skeptic has even a rudimentary knowledge of church is not justified anymore, much less that there is an intrinsic reality there is a God. Today, we see many states have clear majority of citizens who attend church rarely or ever. We have a culture that grows not just intolerant of the Christian worldview but derisive of the “low brows” who believe in Spaghetti Monsters in the sky. There is now a rising trend of “apatheists,” folks
who do not even attempt to search for answers to the four basic pillars the Christian Church must defend. To these people, we are not merely wrong, we are entirely irrelevant.

Pockets of churches are beginning to recognize the necessity of sharpening their apologetic skills so that they may be prepared to give an account of what they believe. Institutions such as Biola University and apologists such as Ravi Zacharias, William Lane Craig, Hugh Ross, John Lennox, and Fritz Schaefer are working tirelessly to present the case for our cause and there are countless others as well. Churches are starting apologetics teams and hosting seminars. All good! Still, the effort is too small and we fear the urgency not realized in many churches as they continue to operate with outmoded assumptions and strategies about reaching the skeptic.

There are several advantages to having firm, rational convictions about the Christian pillars. You will be able to speak to a skeptic in such a way that allows them to challenge what you believe rather than you challenge what they believe. This is no small point. Telling a person why they are wrong can and often does lead to a defensive person. Telling a person why they are wrong without being able to articulate the basis for that evaluation can create fireworks. Asking a person to critique your own viewpoint, however, is far less combative and offers many obvious advantages. If the person is hostile to your position they may well attack it with gusto. Fine. Iron sharpens iron and each time the person attacks, your own faith defenses are sharpened. Also, it is very powerful for a skeptic to witness attacks that are met with love and compassion.

Stated simply: **We are not trying to win arguments. We are attempting to persuade people to accept Christ based on their own conclusions.** None of us should be interested in proving our intellectual shrewdness nor should we celebrate ‘crushing’ a skeptic. If we engage skeptics with a real effort to befriend them and because we genuinely like them then we have an opportunity to ask them to challenge us and we can remove the charged atmosphere that makes so many of us afraid to share our faith.
Reacting to an increasingly skeptical worldview

We live in an age of skepticism and, as we said, if we start with “your story” or “my story” it may be dismissed as a result of delirium. And, if your story is the best you can do then it sounds very familiar to the relativistic drum beat that has been pounding in a lot of skeptics’ heads for years. “Alas, that might be true for you but it is certainly not true for me.” That is a mild form of skepticism. A more severe form might attack you as unsophisticated, your thinking as childish, and your beliefs dangerous and in need of eradication. This response might be something you would expect from someone identifying themselves as a new atheist.  

Having appropriate answers to challenges for the Christian pillars is absolutely essential if we are to engage the culture that now exists and is rapidly growing. We used to say it was important to train our children going off to college so they would not have their faith mortally wounded. That is still true today but we would be beyond naïve if we do not recognize the attacks no longer are constrained to vitriolic professors on college campuses. Today, the attacks are virtually omnipresent from nearly every facet of our culture. The church has no option; it must rise to this challenge or continue to lose the intellectual high ground it possesses but defends weakly if at all.

Christ himself said the gates of hell will not prevail against His Church. We believe Christ knew what He was talking about. We also know that the Church is the hands and feet, soldiers on the ground, for the cause of Christ. It should not be lost on any of us that the first apologetic for Christ’s divinity was issued by Christ himself on the road to Emmaus. As we will see in future chapters the Apostles quickly understood how to frame arguments for the people of their time so as to allow those people to criticize the facts as they were presented. We must do the same.

One thing has definitely changed since the Revelator penned his final “Come Quickly Lord Jesus” and that is our understanding of the physical world. Science has brought tremendous progress to civilization and many believe science has placed God in a box that is continually shrinking or perhaps infinitely small.
Neil deGrasse Tyson sums up this view of science very well:

*If you don’t understand something, and the community of physicists don’t understand it that means God did it? If that how you want to play this game? Is that how you want to invoke your evidence for God, then God is an ever-receding pocket of scientific ignorance that’s getting smaller and smaller and smaller as time moves on.*

Whew. How would you answer this criticism? This is a top-down, presumptive argument that assumes the inferiority of the Christian worldview. In fact, it dangles that presumption in front of the Christian with a disdainful expectation that nothing can be said to the contrary.

Neil deGrasse Tyson is wrong. As we shall document, there is compelling evidence for God, for Christ’s divinity, for the resurrection, and for an appropriate understanding to suffering and sovereignty. Since de Grasse starts with science, we will do so as well. George H. Will helps us set the stage.

*Crisis or Purpose?*

George H. Will is a well-known columnist. He writes mostly about politics and occasionally about baseball. In one of his columns he wrote about neither. In the article, *Finding the Earth’s place in the universe*, Will speaks of a new telescope that will extend the work of the Hubble Telescope and advance knowledge about what he calls a “stupendous improbability.” In his words: “How did material complexity, then single-cell life, then animals and consciousness emerge from chaos? (emphasis ours).

Will continues: “Webb (the new telescope) will not shed light on two interesting questions: How many universes are there? Is everything the result of a meaningless cosmic sneeze or of an intentional First Cause?

Will’s job is to provide a succinct, 1000-word column on a regular basis and these columns are expected to elicit reflective responses from his readers. If that is the case, George left his readers with a real barn burner this time.
“Is everything the result of a meaningless cosmic sneeze or of an intentional First Cause?” is the question for the ages. Is it answerable or is it an unsolvable enigma? Notice also that Will is well aware of the implications of the question. First Cause, capitalized, signifies the need for a creator while a cosmic sneeze suggests quite the opposite.

So far, so good. Where Will deviates from his usual high standard of logical dissection of information is when he opines: “How did material complexity, then single-cell life, then animals and consciousness emerge from chaos?”

We think Will has gone a bridge too far; who said chaos is the instigator of the order we see in our universe? If there is a First Cause, then there is nothing chaotic about the beginning of the universe and its ultimate support of our tiny little blue planet and we are here for a reason. If, on the other hand, there is no evidence to support a First Cause then it is entirely rational to speak of a “cosmic sneeze” and his ruminations about consciousness emerging from chaos could then be a subject worthy of Final Jeopardy.

Unpacking the problem: How did the universe get here?

R.C. Sproul in Not a Chance identifies four possible explanations for the universe’s existence. These options embrace all logical possibilities and therefore one of them is the ultimate explanation for the universe.⁵

1. The universe is an illusion. It does not exist.

2. The universe has no beginning and is uncaused. This would be Will’s cosmic sneeze.

3. The universe is self-created.

4. The universe is caused by something that is eternal.
Option 1: The universe is an illusion.

Perhaps we are not real. Maybe we are nothing more than brains in a jar and the perceived reality that surrounds us in nothing more than a product of neural pathways. Then again, maybe not.

There is an old blues song, *Shout Bamalama*, recorded by the late great Otis Redding. Words to tune go something like this:

Preacher and a deacon out walkin’ one day;

Out come a bear along the way;

Preacher told the deacon to say a prayer;

He said, ain’t no prayer gonna kill that bear we got to run for it!

We are not aware of Otis’ theological training but we do think his conclusion is appropriate. If this world is not real, then these arguments do not matter. There is no bear, there is no pain, there is no joy, and everything is an illusion. Understandably this option does not receive much attention and we have already given it more than it probably deserves.

Option 2: The universe is eternal and has always existed.

This option is where contemporary science used to rest. Now, it is hard to find anyone arguing for an uncaused, eternal universe. We will explain why this is so when we get to the last option.
Option 3:

The universe is self-created. Stop and think about this one for a moment for it basically says you can get something from nothing. Although everything we know and experience tells us this is illogical we will see in a moment why more and more emphasis is being placed on this option as the best explanation for the universe’s existence by some cosmologists. When self-creation is floated as plausible it should give some insight to the actual probabilities of an uncaused universe.

Option 4: The universe is created by an eternal, uncaused First Cause.

Note that option 2 and option 4 both agree that something must be eternal. In option 2 the universe is uncaused and simply ‘is.’ In option 4 the universe is caused by something that is uncaused and simply ‘is.’ Recognizing the eternal nature of something removes one of the first arguments raised about the possibility that option 4 is correct. “Who created God?” is not a fatal question. In fact, it is not even a major impediment. Something must be eternal. That something might be the universe or its proposed father the multiverse or that something could just as logically be the First Cause. The only way to know is to investigate the evidence and that is what we will now do.

Evidence for a Creator?

Arno Penzias was part of a research team that discovered the background radiation from the Big Bang. Those two words tend to evoke trepidation in some people of faith because it is supposedly incongruent with God as creator. Maybe not. Here is what Penzias says about the Big Bang in *Cosmos, Bios, Theos*:
In order to achieve consistency with our observations we must, according to Einstein’s Theory of General Relativity, assume not only creation of matter and energy out of nothing, but creation of space and time as well. Moreover, this creation must be very delicately balanced. The amount of energy given to the emerging matter must be enough to move it fast enough to escape the bonds of gravity, but not so fast that the particles lose all contact with each other. Enough of the initially-created matter must pull together under gravity to form galaxies, stars, and planetary systems which allow for life. Thus the second “improbable” property of the early universe, almost as improbable as creation out of nothing, is an exquisitely delicate balance between matter and energy. Third—and this one puzzles scientists at least as much as the first two—somehow all these pieces, each without having any proper contact with the others, without having any way of communication, all must have appeared with the same balance between matter and energy at the same instant.⁶

According to Einstein’s general relativity, we must assume the creation (emphasis ours) of space, time, matter, and energy from nothing. Also, there must be an incredible balance of matter and energy so that the universe has time to do all the things necessary for life on our tiny little planet. And finally, there has to be some means of communication (physical laws) either created simultaneously or prior to the creation of space, time, matter, and energy from nothing.

Henry Margeneau, professor emeritus in physics from Yale University, says this from the same book:

Referring to physical laws…They surely could not have developed by chance or accident. What, then, is the answer to the question concerning the origin of the innumerable laws of nature? I know only one answer that is adequate to their universal validity: They were created by God.⁷

Our intent is not to go into an exhaustive apologetic for the existence of the universe. There are a number of resources available for further reading if there is a deeper interest. That said, we do want to extend this conversation a little further to show why a universe created by an eternal First Cause is the most logical explanation for the universe’s existence.
Three very important observations can be had from Penzias’ quote:

1. The universe began to exist;
2. The universe is delicately balanced to ultimately provide a suitable habitat on our earth;
3. The universe is guided by an information system that precedes or co-exists with its creation.

Stephen Hawking is one of the greatest minds in the sum total of human existence. Hawking wrote a book a few years ago entitled *A Brief History of Time*. In this widely popular book Hawking takes due notice of the complexity of the universe and the implications that the initial conditions were very finely tuned and the evidence does indeed seem to point to a First Cause. Then he dropped this bombshell:

*So long as the universe had a beginning, we would suppose it had a creator (the cosmological argument.) But if the universe is really completely self-contained, having no boundary or edge, it would have neither beginning nor end: it would simply be. What place then for a creator?*

*So long as the universe had a beginning, we would suppose it had a creator.* Hawking’s words. But he is not content to stop there and he then posits a boundless universe; a universe where time is eternal and the universe therefore is eternal as well (option 2). What place then for a creator?

Is Hawking on to something? Has he discovered a dodge to a created universe? The short answer is no.

Henry “Fritz” Schaeffer is no intellectual slouch himself. A professor of quantum chemistry at the University of Georgia, Schaeffer is one of the most cited chemists in the world for his professional work. Fritz had this to say about Hawking’s musings in his book: *Science and Christianity: Conflict or Coherence?*

*Hawking and Hartle’s no boundary proposal begins by adopting a grossly oversimplified model of the universe. Then the authors make time imaginary, and prove in their terribly restricted model that the universe has neither beginning nor end. The flaw in the exercise is that the authors never go back to real time. Thus the notion that the universe has neither beginning nor end is something that exists in mathematical terms only. In real time, to
which we as human beings are necessarily attached, rather than in Hawking’s use of imaginary time, there will always be a singularity, that is, a beginning of time.⁹

Perhaps Schaeffer has misread Hawking or distorted Hawking’s words? That is not the case as can be seen in his words below:

In an obviously contradictory statement in A Brief History of Time, Hawking actually concedes this point. What we are seeing in this situation is Hawking versus Hawking. I view the following statement as Hawking speaking in his right mind: “When one goes back to the real time in which we live, however, there will still appear to be singularities...In real time, the universe has a beginning and an end at singularities that form a boundary to space-time and at which the laws of science break down (A Brief History of Time 1st edition, pg. 144). ⁺¹⁰

In real time, the universe has a beginning and an end. (Hawking)

As long as the universe had a beginning we would suppose it had a creator. (Hawking)

As we said, Hawking is brilliant. In A Brief History of Time he took his best shot at an eternal universe but was not able to finalize the effort. So where does Hawking go? Interestingly, he writes another book entitled The Grand Design (co-authored by Leonard Mlodinow) and makes this assertion:

Because there is a law such as gravity, the universe can and will create itself from nothing.¹¹

One thing to notice is that Hawking has left behind option 2 and has now embraced option 3, a self-created universe. Why? Simply put, the evidence for option 2 is not compelling. A close examination of Hawking’s latest assertion leads to the same conviction.

We now turn to John Lennox for an examination and critique of Hawking’s self-created universe. Lennox, like Schaefer is no small academic force. A professor of mathematics at Oxford, Lennox spends a great deal of time critiquing claims such as those made by Hawking from a Christian perspective. In fact, Lennox went to the effort to write a rebuttal to The Grand Design entitled God and Stephen Hawking. Here is a brief excerpt from Lennox on Hawking’s proposal:
Suppose, to make matters clearer, we replace the universe by a jet engine and then are asked to explain it. Shall we account for it by mentioning the personal agency of its inventor, Sir Frank Whittle? Or shall we follow Hawking: dismiss personal agency and explain the jet engine by saying that it arose naturally from a physical law?\textsuperscript{12}

Lennox correctly points out that Hawking has confused a law with agency. The agent, cause if you will, implements the law; laws do not create agents. For the sake of argument though we will concede Hawking’s assertion that the universe will create itself from nothing because there is a law of gravity.

\[ F_g = G \frac{m_1 m_2}{r^2} \]

Here we see the law of gravity and in simple language it says that any that any two objects will attract based upon their mass, the distance between them, and a gravitational constant. Now one can correctly wonder why there would be a law that governs gravitational attraction if there were no such things as objects with mass or even a such a thing as space that would create distances between these objects. Why would a law exist to govern things that do not exist? We agree with Margeneau’s view that physical laws must have a cause. And, we agree with his conclusion that God is that cause.

This is a good time to point out the miracle of creation. We turn to George Smoot to provide the details. Smoot received the Nobel Prize in physics in 2006 for his work on the Cosmic Background Explorer (COBE), a research project that documented expected “wrinkles” in the space-time fabric as a result of the big bang. Smoot wrote a book entitled appropriately enough \textit{Wrinkles in Time} where he explains what happened just after the Big Bang:

\textit{At a ten-millionth of a trillionth of a trillionth of a second after the big bang--the earliest moment about which we can sensibly talk, and then only with some suspension of disbelief--all the universe we can observe today was the tiniest fraction of the size of a}
proton. Space and time had only just begun. (Remember, the universe did not expand into existing space after the big bang, its expansion created space-time as it went.)”¹³

Space and time had only just begun? The entire universe the fraction of the size of a proton? Somehow all the matter in the universe appears at a single instant and then expands at just the right rate, creating the very space that this matter expands into as it occurs, allowing for incredibly balanced conditions that allow for star formation, galaxies, solar systems, planets, and eventually our planet with its ability to acquire life. This is the “stupendous improbability” that Wills alluded to when we began this chapter. We believe creation miracle is a better explanation than stupendous probability. The odds of creating a universe such as ours are infinitesimally small when viewed as a product of chance. To dodge creation, we are left with one other possibility.

*The multiverse?*

Martin Rees is a proponent of the multiverse. In *Just Six Numbers* he provides his explanation for why the multiverse is necessary.¹⁴ Here is a recap:

a) A universe like ours is exceedingly improbable.

b) We know God doesn’t exist.

c) Therefore there must be an infinite number of universes.

d) We hit the jackpot with our universe.

Rees understands the problem of explaining our universe when he says our universe is exceedingly improbable. Maybe there are an infinite number of universes and if we have that many we should not be surprised that one of them got it “right” for life to exist and for us to be wondering about matters such as these.

Although Rees is quite sure God does not exist it is important to note he provides no evidence to dispel that possibility. Remember what Hawking said: *As long as the universe had a beginning we could suppose it had a creator.* Rees dodges that conclusion by saying there are an
infinite number of universes. The dodge has problems, not the least of which is the introduction of a problem even more bewildering than what we have. If it is so difficult to explain a single universe how to account for the complexity that would be necessary to create an infinite number of universes? Regardless of how many universes one posits it seems necessary to constrain the creation of multiple universes with the same four possibilities that might explain our single universe. That is, just as the universe might be an illusion, or eternal, or self-created, or created by God so too for the multiverse. And, if the evidence is compelling that our universe has a creator then it seems impossible to ignore the implications for this multiverse as well.

The multiverse is being increasingly positioned as a means to avoid creation. Well, as we noted above there are philosophical limitations to how far you can stretch that argument. We acknowledge that we cannot verify other universes. But, as we have noted, that does not preclude us from an explanation of our universe and as we have seen, there is ample information that supports the need for a creator to explain its existence.

There will undoubtedly continue to be efforts to bypass a creator as a necessity to explain our universe. Not only will they confront the facts we have discussed they will also run up against this final piece of evidence. In 2012 Hawking had a birthday party. It was a bash that invited some of the foremost physicists to give their papers on the state of cosmology. No small feat to be invited to speak at Hawking’s birthday. One gentleman, Alexander Vilenkin, was one of those invited to speak. Vilenkin’s paper was entitled: *Why Physicists Can’t Avoid a Creation Event.* Lisa Grossman reported on the paper’s presentation in the magazine New Science and wrote these words:

> From the paper, Vilenkin concludes. "All the evidence we have says that the universe has a beginning." 15

The universe, our universe, has a beginning; this conclusion derived from a paper delivered at Hawking’s 70th birthday bash. Even if there are an infinite number of universes (and we will likely never know that) our particular universe has a beginning. Stephen Hawking, one of the most brilliant minds to grace the planet, has now spent the majority of his academic life looking for explanations for the universe that need not invoke a creator. He used imaginary time to build a model where the universe has no beginning and it was found lacking. He theorizes a self-created universe that appears out of nothing because of the law of gravity but that theory is also fatally
flawed. He holds a birthday party and at that party a paper is given that explains why a creation event is unavoidable for our universe.

We also return to Ree’s argument one more time to clear up a leap of illogic. Rees says there are an infinite number of universes. We do not know that is true but we will give him that statement. If there are an infinite number of universes, then it is logical that there are an infinite number of possibilities for those universes. If that is the case, it also stands to reason that at least one option would contain an omnipotent, omnipresent God. And, if God is omnipresent, He must be present in every universe (otherwise he isn’t omnipresent). What’s sauce for the goose is also sauce for the gander.

George Will’s comments helped open this chapter. He asks how the order that we see around us could originate out of chaos. We humbly submit it cannot. Ravi Zacharias makes that point very clear in his book *The End of Reason*:

*I want to add that our arguments for the existence of God do not hinge on the debunking of evolution. Evolution is a straw man that has been thrown up, as if all that needs to be done to achieve the crashing down of belief in God is to posit evolution. Serious intellectuals ought to know that no world view is established on one knockout argument. … For now, all I want to assert is that the atheistic starting point brings us to a contradiction in terms at worst and a random universe at best. In Miracles, C. S. Lewis takes this kind of thinking to task: “Reason might conceivably be found to depend on [another reason] and so on; it would not matter how far this process was carried provided you found Reason coming from Reason at each stage. It is only when you are asked to believe Reason coming from non-reason that you must cry Halt.”*

Note Zacharias’ points carefully. He recognizes, correctly, that a created universe requires a creator. Or, to use Lewis’ term, Reason. Non-reason, aka chaos, is not, if you will forgive the redundancy, a reasonable explanation for reason.
A review of the options and a conclusion based on the evidence

We return then to our options for the universe:
1. The universe is an illusion. (no)
2. The universe is eternal. (no)
3. The universe created itself. (no)
4. The universe is created by an eternal First Cause. (We believe the evidence is clear).

The current state of science can be summarized succinctly by an observation made nearly 35 years ago. The writer is Robert Jastrow, and he was by no means sympathetic to a creator. That said, note what he said in God and the Astronomers and then recognize his conclusion has only been cemented by the science of subsequent years:

For the scientist who has lived by his faith in the power of reason, the story ends like a bad dream. He has scaled the mountains of ignorance; he is about to conquer the highest peak; as he pulls himself over the final rock, he is greeted by a band of theologians who have been sitting there for centuries.17

More recently a book was published by Antony Flew. The name may not be familiar to you but it should be. Antony Flew published a book in 2007 entitled: There is No (A) God: How the world’s most notorious atheist changed his mind. Flew was to the atheist movement what Billy Graham might be to the Christian world. Recently deceased, Flew has quite a remarkable academic pedigree, including debating C. S. Lewis. His 1950 essay “Theology and Falsification” became the most reprinted philosophical publication of the last half of the 20th century. Flew was and still is a formidable force in academia. The contents of There is No (A) God are revealing, because they lay bare Flew’s long journey from atheism. Flew divides his book into two sections: Part 1 recounts his denial of the divine; Part 2 takes us on his journey to the discovery of the divine. Following are the chapter names for Part 2 and they should now sound familiar themes to much of what we have said. Chapter 4: A Pilgrimage of Reason; 5: Who Wrote the Laws of Nature? 6: Did the Universe Know We Were Coming? 7: How Did Life Go Live? 8: Did Something Come from Nothing?
In his book, Flew provides a quote from Alvin Plantinga, one of the foremost Christian philosophers of our time. Plantinga said: “It speaks very well of Professor Flew’s honesty. After all these years of opposing the idea of a Creator he reverses his position on the basis of the evidence.”

Evidence. As noted, we have not tried to exhaust the evidence in this chapter but we have tried to demonstrate that there is an abundance of it. When skeptics such as deGrasse Tyson rail that science is placing God in a smaller and smaller and smaller box the believer can confidently recall the major points of this chapter. Science does not deny God because it was God who created science.

*Laying the groundwork…*

We have just laid out our argument for a caused universe and we agree with Hawking that, as long as the universe has a beginning we would presume it has a creator. That said, the creator of the universe may or may not be the God of the bible. That means that the Bible can *possibly* be true since the Bible is a book about God. Okay, but that doesn’t mean the Bible *is* true. There could be another God outside the God of the Bible. But it is also possible that the God of the Bible is the First Cause that George Will writes about. One simple means of clarifying this situation is to investigate the claims for Christ’s divinity. If Christ is divine that means He is God incarnate on earth. That would also mean that the God of the Bible is also the God of the universe. With that in mind, our journey now takes us to the question of the Divinity of Christ. But first, we take one brief detour on what is often a very bumpy road.

*Age of the earth?*

Before we move on we have one last bridge to cross. Many believe the Bible requires an interpretation that leads to a 6000 year-old planet. This view is held rather strongly by some camps. On the other hand, many believe the Bible is divinely inspired and Genesis does not
presuppose nor require a 6000 year-old earth. These may be internal conversations but they have little to do with our four critical areas: a) the existence of God; b) the divinity of Christ; c) the resurrection; and d) a Christian perspective on pain and suffering. Worship style, elder led church governance, women in the pulpit, salvation assured, time of Christ’s return, are just a few areas where there has been internal disagreement. Where we should be absolutely unanimous is that God exists, He sent his son as a divine intervener for mankind, and Jesus and Jesus alone is the path to eternal life with the Father.

Interestingly, the early church had its own disagreements about the age of the earth among themselves and we believe it accurate to report that these conversations were about interpretation rather than orthodoxy. To the early church fathers creatio ex nihilo, that is, creation from nothing, was orthodoxy while the age of the earth was subject to interpretation.

The age of the earth has no impact, none, on the divinity of Christ or the resurrection. As we noted, neither do styles of worship, governance of church, eschatology, or infant baptism. While these topics often produce contentious divisions in the church none of them contribute or detract from the truth of our faith. We say this with humility but also with certainty: The Church would be better served and Christ honored if we spent more time speaking to the world about the hope we have rather than arguing amongst ourselves about the nuances of our faith.

Conclusion

We have taken a quick journey through the possibilities that might account for why we are here and discovered that the evidence is compelling for a created universe. Consequently, that means the evidence is compelling for a creator. Is this the God of the Bible? Maybe, maybe not. But if the creator is the God of the Bible we would expect that evidence to be found within the pages of the most published book in human history.

How might the Bible tell us that the God of the Bible is the God of the universe? Chapter 3 begins that journey as we investigate whether Jesus was, in fact, divine.
Chapter 2 Endnotes


3. Daniel Dennett, Christopher Hitchens, Sam Harris, and Richard Dawkins have been referred to as the new atheists. Much of their popular writing centers on efforts to refute theism and to remove the influence of religion from the public square.


10. Ibid, 65.


FURTHER REFLECTION

Central Theme:

If the universe has been purposefully created, then we have taken the first big step towards determining whether the God of the Bible is that creator.

Reflective Activities:

1. Think about the 4 possible explanations for the universe posed in your reading:
   
   a. it is an illusion
   
   b. it created itself
   
   c. it has always existed and is therefore eternal
   
   d. it was created by something that is eternal

   Are there any other options?

   What do ‘c’ and ‘d’ have in common?

2. Why not just start with “In the beginning?”

3. How does Hawking frame the cosmological argument?

4. What is he saying about the four options to account for the existence of the universe?
5. Hawking argues for a universe where time has no beginning in *A Brief History of Time* but abandons that position in his latest book *The Grand Design*. In that book, Hawking argues for a self-created universe. Why?

6. Why is Hawking’s latest argument also flawed?

7. Why did we avoid arguments about age of the earth and evolution?
Is Jesus Divine?

A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic – on a level with the man who says he is a poached egg – or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God; or else a madman or something worse. You can shut Him up for a fool, you can spit at Him and kill him as a demon; or you can fall at His feet and call Him Lord and God. But let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about His being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to.¹

In this chapter we will make a case for the divine messiahship of Jesus. We will draw upon what others thought of Jesus, what Jesus thought of himself, and what the Jewish culture of that day expected from a Messiah. In the next chapter we will also examine how his closest allies’ views changed so dramatically over the course of a weekend. When you finish with this chapter we trust you will have a deepened awareness of the case for Christ’s divinity as well as information that can be shared with anyone who questions this claim.

If Jesus Christ is God in the flesh we should see clear evidence that He and He alone can claim divinity. If we see that, then we have credible reason to understand that the creator of the universe and “God the Father” are one and the same. Jesus continually refers to God as Father, and he also claimed that He and the Father are one.

We know what Jesus believed but it is entirely possible that Jesus was wrong, misguided, or perhaps deluded. So, how might we go about testing Jesus’ claims for divinity? One way is to look at how Jesus defended His divinity post-resurrection (we look at evidence for the resurrection in the next chapter). In Luke 24 Jesus provides the first known apologetic when he spoke to Cleopas and his pal on the road to Emmaus. The story is one of the most tongue-in-cheek in scripture; the Son of God inquiring about the Son of God! We pick up Luke 24 for the details…
On the road to Emmaus

13 Now that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem. 14 They were talking with each other about everything that had happened. 15 As they talked and discussed these things with each other, Jesus himself came up and walked along with them; 16 but they were kept from recognizing him.

17 He asked them, “What are you discussing together as you walk along?”

They stood still, their faces downcast. 18 One of them, named Cleopas, asked him, “Are you the only one visiting Jerusalem who does not know the things that have happened there in these days?”

19 “What things?” he asked.

“About Jesus of Nazareth,” they replied. “He was a prophet, powerful in word and deed before God and all the people. 20 The chief priests and our rulers handed him over to be sentenced to death, and they crucified him; 21 but we had hoped that he was the one who was going to redeem Israel. And what is more, it is the third day since all this took place. 22 In addition, some of our women amazed us. They went to the tomb early this morning 23 but didn’t find his body. They came and told us that they had seen a vision of angels, who said he was alive. 24 Then some of our companions went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said, but they did not see Jesus.”

25 He said to them, “How foolish you are, and how slow to believe all that the prophets have spoken! 26 Did not the Messiah have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?” 27 And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself. (Luke: 24.13-25, emphasis added)

Just what is a Messiah anyway?

We benefit from hindsight, but we can also be hindered by it. It is an easy mistake to read about Jesus and forget that scripture is describing events that, at the time, were often very confusing to those who were actually there. For example, Jesus’ followers never got a firm grasp on the fact that he would suffer and die as an intentional act of atonement until after the resurrection occurred.
Likewise, the expectations regarding the promised Messiah from the Jewish community at large were quite different from what they saw in Jesus’ last week. Again, it was only after the resurrection when the Christian converts connected the dots and understood that Jesus was both Lord and Messiah.

The Messiah was viewed by the Jews as an anointed/appointed man of God; a king from the royal line of David (e.g., Psalm 2:6; Jeremiah 23:5-6). This man, when he came, was expected to be a deliverer for Israel, a man who would rid Israel of her all too common occupations and threats from pagan nations. In addition, he would rebuild or restore the Temple to its original specifications and institute true justice with authority given directly from God. It is important to note that none of these tasks carry an expectation of death and later resurrection. To incorrectly suppose that the resurrection was not a total surprise to friend and foe alike lessens the appreciation for the actual events that led to Christians identifying Jesus as both Lord and Messiah (see Acts 2:36). And, it clouds the amazing realization that Jesus had done something totally unanticipated by rising from the dead. We will develop this idea in the resurrection chapter.

As we will soon see, the Jewish contemporaries of Jesus were absolutely convinced, only to quickly lose that conviction during his trial and time before Pilate, he was Messiah, but they had no clue he was divine. The stiff-necked religious leaders, in fact, crucified Jesus for his “blasphemous” announcement of divinity.

Unlike these contemporaries, we can now benefit from hindsight and see that Jesus presented himself as both Messiah and Lord and backed up that claim through his resurrection. As we develop the theme of Jesus as the divine Messiah, it will become apparent why what we can now see plainly was very hard for Jesus’ contemporaries to understand. So, as you read on, keep in mind that Jesus was providing evidence that could only be fully understood after that fateful Sunday morning.

*Beginning with Moses and the prophets?*

One might think that Jesus would demonstrate his messianic divinity by showing the brutal effects of a crucifixion, but he did not. The Emmaus conversation began with an Old Testament (the only testament of that time) review. Why would Jesus do that? Stated simply, the Old Testament pays particular attention to a coming Messiah and the clues given for the identity of this Messiah provide a “draw-down” argument. In other words, the candidates for Messiah become
fewer and fewer as the prophecies progress until, at the end, there is only one credible candidate to be the Son of God. What follows is a brief synopsis of a few of the hundreds of Messianic prophecies found in the Old Testament along with the parallel verification in the New Testament. As we said, the argument is a “draw-down” argument; that is, each prophecy reduces the candidates for Messiah until there is only one credible candidate that remains.

1. The Messiah would be a man. We just reduced the sum total of candidates that have lived throughout history by approximately fifty percent!

*Genesis 3:15*

And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel.’”

*Galatians 4:4*

But when the set time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those under the law, that we might receive adoption to sonship.

2. The Messiah would be a Jew from the lineage of Abraham. Now we have reduced the Messiah to a specific ethnicity and a particular bloodline.

*Genesis 18:18*

Abraham will surely become a great and powerful nation, and all nations on earth will be blessed through him.

3. And Isaac, which further refines the bloodline.

*Genesis 17:19*

Then God said, “Yes, but your wife Sarah will bear you a son, and you will call him Isaac. I will establish my covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his descendants after him.

4. And Jacob, refining the bloodline ever further.

*Numbers 24:17*
I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not near. A star will come out of Jacob; a scepter will rise out of Israel. He will crush the foreheads of Moab, the skulls of all the people of Sheth.

5. **And the Tribe of Judah.** The candidates within the Jewish nation’s heritage are drawing ever smaller.

*Numbers 46:12*

The sons of Judah: Er, Onan, Shelah, Perez and Zerah (but Er and Onan had died in the land of Canaan).

*Luke 3:33-34*

the son of Amminadab, the son of Ram, the son of Hezron, the son of Perez, the son of Judah, the son of Jacob, the son of Isaac, the son of Abraham, the son of Terah, the son of Nahor,

6. **Heir to the throne of David**

*Isaiah 9: 6-7*

For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the greatness of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David’s throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever.

*Matthew 1:1-2*

This is the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah the son of David, the son of Abraham: Abraham was the father of Isaac, Isaac the father of Jacob, Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers.

7. **Born in Bethlehem.** Have you ever stopped to consider how few people have been born in Bethlehem? The candidate pool is growing very small.

*Micah 5:2*
But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clan of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel,

Matthew 2:1-2

After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, “Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews?

8. Born of a Virgin. This claim obviously sounds miraculous but, so does a dead man coming back to life. If the latter is true, there is no reason to doubt the former.

Isaiah 7:14

Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel.

Matthew 1:18-19

This is how the birth of Jesus the Messiah came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be pregnant through the Holy Spirit. Because Joseph her husband was faithful to the law, and yet did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly.

9. Infants slaughtered. The Messiah needs to come from a very small town. Additionally, in an act of desperation and in the hope of killing the Messiah before He can fulfill His destiny, the slaughter of small children takes place

Jeremiah 31:15

A voice is heard in Ramah, mourning and great weeping, Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted, because they are no more.

Matthew 2:16-18
When Herod realized that he had been outwitted by the Magi, he was furious, and he gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under, in accordance with the time he had learned from the Magi. Then what was said through the prophet Jeremiah was fulfilled: “A voice is heard in Ramah, weeping and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted, because they are no more.”

10. Escaped to Egypt

Hosea 11:1

When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son.

Matthew 2:13-14

When they had gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. “Get up,” he said, “take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him.” So he got up, took the child and his mother during the night and left for Egypt, where he stayed until the death of Herod. And so was fulfilled what the Lord had said through the prophet: “Out of Egypt I called my son.”

11. Ministry in Galilee

Isaiah 9:1-2

Nevertheless, there will be no more gloom for those who were in distress. In the past he humbled the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the future he will honor Galilee of the nations, by the Way of the Sea, beyond the Jordan—The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned.

Matthew 4:12-16

When Jesus heard that John had been put in prison, he withdrew to Galilee. Leaving Nazareth, he went and lived in Capernaum, which was by the lake in the area of Zebulun and Naphtali—to fulfill what was said through the prophet Isaiah:
“Land of Zebulun and land of Naphtali, the Way of the Sea, beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles—the people living in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned.”

12. Prophet Like Moses

Numbers 18: 15-18

The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your fellow Israelites. You must listen to him. For this is what you asked of the Lord your God at Horeb on the day of the assembly when you said, “Let us not hear the voice of the Lord our God nor see this great fire anymore, or we will die.” The Lord said to me: “What they say is good. I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their fellow Israelites, and I will put my words in his mouth. He will tell them everything I command him.

John 6:14

After the people saw the sign Jesus performed, they began to say, “Surely this is the Prophet who is to come into the world.”

13. Priest like Melchidezek

Psalm 110:4

The LORD has sworn and will not change his mind: You are a priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek.

Hebrews 6: 19-20

We have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure. It enters the inner sanctuary behind the curtain, where our forerunner, Jesus, has entered on our behalf. He has become a high priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek.
14. **Rejected by His Fellow Jews**

*Isaiah 53:3*

*He was despised and rejected by mankind, a man of suffering, and familiar with pain. Like one from whom people hide their faces he was despised, and we held him in low esteem.*

*John 1:11*

*He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him.*

15. **Manner of Triumphant Entry**

*Zechariah 9:9*

*Rejoice greatly, Daughter Zion! Shout, Daughter Jerusalem See, your king comes to you righteous and victorious, lowly and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.*

*John 12:12-15*

*The next day the great crowd that had come for the festival heard that Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem. They took palm branches and went out to meet him, shouting:*

*Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the king of Israel!’ Jesus found a young donkey and sat on it, as it is written:*

*‘Do not be afraid, Daughter Zion; see, your king is coming, seated on a donkey’s colt.’*

16. **Betrayed by a Friend**

*Psalm 41:9*

*Even my close friend, someone I trusted, one who shared my bread, has turned against me.*

*Mark 14:10-11*
Then Judas Iscariot, one of the Twelve, went to the chief priests to betray Jesus to them. They were delighted to hear this and promised to give him money. So he watched for an opportunity to hand him over.

17. Betrayed for Thirty Pieces of Silver

Zechariah 11:12-13

I told them, “If you think it best, give me my pay; but if not, keep it.” So they paid me thirty pieces of silver. And the Lord said to me, “Throw it to the potter”—the handsome price at which they valued me! So I took the thirty pieces of silver and threw them to the potter at the house of the Lord.

Matthew 26:14-16

Then one of the Twelve—the one called Judas Iscariot—went to the chief priests 15 and asked, “What are you willing to give me if I deliver him over to you?” So they counted out for him thirty pieces of silver. 16 From then on Judas watched for an opportunity to hand him over.

18. Money Returned

Zechariah 11:12-13

I told them, “If you think it best, give me my pay; but if not, keep it.” So they paid me thirty pieces of silver. And the Lord said to me, “Throw it to the potter”—the handsome price at which they valued me! So I took the thirty pieces of silver and threw them to the potter at the house of the Lord.

Matthew 27: 3-7
When Judas, who had betrayed him, saw that Jesus was condemned, he was seized with remorse and returned the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and the elders. “I have sinned,” he said, “for I have betrayed innocent blood.” “What is that to us?” they replied. “That’s your responsibility.” So Judas threw the money into the temple and left. Then he went away and hanged himself. The chief priests picked up the coins and said, “It is against the law to put this into the treasury, since it is blood money. So they decided to use the money to buy the potter’s field as a burial place for foreigners.

19. **Tortured**

*Isaiah 50:6*

I offered my back to those who beat me, my cheeks to those who pulled out my beard; I did not hide my face from mocking and spitting.

*Mark 14:64-65*

They all condemned him as worthy of death. Then some began to spit at him; they blindfolded him, struck him with their fists, and said, “Prophesy!” And the guards took him and beat him.

20. **Hated Without Cause**

*Psalm 69:4*

Those who hate me without reason outnumber the hairs of my head; many are my enemies without cause, those who seek to destroy me. I am forced to restore what I did not steal.

*John 15:23-25*

Whoever hates me hates my Father as well. If I had not done among them the works no one else did, they would not be guilty of sin. As it is, they have seen, and yet they have hated both me and my Father. But this is to fulfill what is written in their Law: ‘They hated me without reason.’

21. **Suffered on Our Behalf**
Isaiah 53: 4-5

Surely he took up our pain and bore our suffering, yet we considered him punished by God, stricken by him, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed.

Matthew 8:16-17

When evening came, many who were demon-possessed were brought to him, and he drove out the spirits with a word and healed all the sick. This was to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet Isaiah:

“He took up our infirmities and bore our diseases.”

22. Crucified with Sinners

Isaiah 53:12

Therefore, I will give him a portion among the great, and he will divide the spoils with the strong, because he poured out his life unto death and was numbered with the transgressors. For he bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors.

Matthew 27:38

Two rebels were crucified with him, one on his right and one on his left.

23. Hands and Feet Pierced

Psalm 22:16-17

Dogs surround me, a pack of villains encircles me; they pierce my hands and my feet. All my bones are on display; people stare and gloat over me.
John 22:27

Then he said to Thomas, “Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe.”

24. Divide Clothes at Crucifixion by Casting Lots

Psalm 22:18

They divide my clothes among them and cast lots for my garment.

Matthew 27:35

When they had crucified him, they divided up his clothes by casting lots.

25. Mocked with Old Testament Words by Old Testament Experts

Psalm 22:8

“He trusts in the Lord,” they say, “let the Lord rescue him. Let him deliver him, since he delights in him.”

Matthew 27: 42-43

“He saved others,” they said, “but he can’t save himself! He’s the king of Israel! Let him come down now from the cross, and we will believe in him. 43 He trusts in God. Let God rescue him now if he wants him, for he said, ‘I am the Son of God.’”

26. His Resurrection

Psalm 16: 9-10

Therefore, my heart is glad and my tongue rejoices; my body also will rest secure, because you will not abandon me to the realm of the dead nor will you let your faithful one see decay.

Matthew 28: 5-16
The angel said to the women, "Do not be afraid, for I know that you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified. He is not here; he has risen, just as he said. Come and see the place where he lay."

Summary of Prophecies

- As we can see the Messiah must be male.
- Not just any man, but a man of a certain Jewish lineage.
- That lineage must be combined with a certain place of birth (not to mention an unusual parental lineage!) and that birth must be accompanied by the slaughter of innocent babies.
- The surviving child’s family must flee to Egypt.
- The child, now matured, must be recognized as a prophet greater than Moses, the Patriarch of Israel and the most revered prophet of the Jewish nation.
- The Messiah must be recognized as blameless and, after a short ministry in Galilee, then be scorned by his countrymen.
- He must arrange for a donkey to carry him into Jerusalem and then persuade the authorities to kill him via the specific manner of crucifixion.
- He also needed criminals to be crucified at his side.
- We should also mention other specifics such as the request for water that was replaced by gall, the unusual foregoing of breaking the victim’s forelegs to hasten death, or the piercing of his side to confirm death.

If this was a conspiracy it was a whopper

All of these little details had to be worked out beforehand if Jesus is an impostor posing as the Messiah. Perhaps most importantly, in order to perpetuate the manufactured lie about his identity, Jesus would have to concoct a plan to have his body removed from the tomb so his followers could later claim they had indeed followed the true Messiah who was also Lord. All that would be tough enough, but somehow Jesus must also devise a means to convince multiple audiences on multiple occasions they had really seen the resurrected Christ. As we shall soon see, not only would all of these things have to be accomplished through conspiracy, the notion of a resurrected Messiah would have been absolutely beyond any belief or expectation of Jesus’ contemporaries.
Even the most paranoid conspiracy theorist would have to admit fabricating these details requires a stretch of credibility. Joseph and Mary would have to be the original conspirators and decide to start the process by claiming a virgin birth and then head to Bethlehem for the appropriate place of birth. Somehow Herod would have to be convinced that these two folks were in fact the mother and earthly father of the Messiah and order children killed in order to eliminate any future threat of a surviving Messiah.

Jesus would then have to buy the whole story that he was the Messiah and agree to remain in the area of Galilee, speaking boldly about the Kingdom of God and somehow figuring out a way to change water into wine, heal the sick, raise the dead, and walk on water. Or, at the very least, convince folks he had done all these things and more. Having played the game to this point, Jesus now knows he will be proven a fake if he cannot demonstrate he resurrected from the dead even though we will soon see there was virtually no understanding of a single man resurrecting before the end of time until the resurrection of Christ. In other words, Jesus had to create a PR campaign that would far surpass his death and indeed remain in place over 2000 years later.

The conspiracy theorist’s task is daunting while the rational believer’s task is very simple. The profile of the Messiah was made clear via Old Testament prophecies and they were so specific that any possible candidates would ultimately wither under scrutiny until only one possible Messiah remained standing. No wonder Jesus began his apologetic for his divinity with Moses and the prophets. He knew the evidence was absolutely overwhelming, and unlike his physical appearances, something that was not contingent upon eye witnesses. Make no mistake, the eyewitness accounts are also crucial to Jesus’ claim to divinity but we believe they are purposefully complementary to the words of the prophets that pointed to the day when God would walk as man on earth.

It is important to remember how hated Jesus had become by those who were in power. Certainly they thought his death would be the last word on the matter and one can only imagine their shock and incredulity when his little band of followers began to announce his resurrection. Rest assured his enemies would have produced whatever proof available to shut this movement down. Yet, none was forthcoming and the skeptic is left to ponder why that is while the believer rests in the knowledge that no proof was forthcoming because none was available.

Jesus never claimed to be divine?
A few years ago there was a fair amount of hubbub raised by “The Jesus Seminar.” The group’s founder is Dominic Crossan, a New Testament theologian who rejects the literal resurrection of Christ. The Seminar would display text attributed to Jesus in the Gospels and after some discussion vote to determine whether the text was accurate. If the Seminar voted the text out, it was considered illegitimate.2

Voting on matters such as these strike us as a very poor way of doing academic work and it exposes biases that will not allow the Bible to be considered as a valid historical document. There are numerous counters to these biases and one excellent place to begin would be N. T. Wright’s comprehensive work The Resurrection of the Son of God.3 Wright’s book is an exhaustive analysis of why we can view the New Testament as a valid historical document and his arguments are powerful. That said, we do want to note that it is indeed insufficient to tell a skeptic that “the Bible says it and I believe it.” But, it is just as wrong for a skeptic ala Crossan to say that Jesus cannot be divine therefore he is not divine. Neither position actually examines evidence so it is evidence that we now return to, beginning with John 8.

Case 1: John 8

We pick up John 8 at the end of the Chapter. It is a fascinating discourse and you should take the time to read the whole exchange that occurred between Jesus and the Jewish crowd. The problem really begins when Jesus claims that he is “the light of the world.” The Pharisees correctly note that Jewish law requires two witnesses to validate a point and Jesus begins to give an explanation of his lineage by noting that he stands with the Father who sent him. At this point in the conversation things are getting a little “prickly,” as we can see from the following exchange:

Jesus’ Claims About Himself

48 The Jews answered him, “Aren’t we right in saying that you are a Samaritan and demon-possessed?”

49 “I am not possessed by a demon,” said Jesus, “but I honor my Father and you dishonor me.

50 I am not seeking glory for myself; but there is one who seeks it, and he is the judge. 51 Very truly I tell you, whoever obeys my word will never see death.”
At this they exclaimed, “Now we know that you are demon-possessed! Abraham died and so did the prophets, yet you say that whoever obeys your word will never taste death. Are you greater than our father Abraham? He died, and so did the prophets. Who do you think you are?”

Jesus replied, “If I glorify myself, my glory means nothing. My Father, whom you claim as your God, is the one who glorifies me. Though you do not know him, I know him. If I said I did not, I would be a liar like you, but I do know him and obey his word. Your father Abraham rejoiced at the thought of seeing my day; he saw it and was glad.”

“You are not yet fifty years old,” they said to him, “and you have seen Abraham!”

“Very truly I tell you,” Jesus answered, “before Abraham was born, I am!” At this, they picked up stones to stone him, but Jesus hid himself, slipping away from the temple grounds.

You get stoned for blasphemy, and the Jews clearly understood Jesus to be equating himself with God, the highest form of blasphemy. We have a clear example of Jesus claiming to be divine here but this is only one example. We now turn to Matthew 9 and pick up the text at verse 4.

Case 2; Matthew 9

And Jesus knowing their thoughts said, “Why are you thinking evil in your hearts? Which is easier, to say, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Get up, and walk'? But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins” -- then He said to the paralytic, "Get up, pick up your bed and go home."

Something very interesting just occurred. The crowd had teachers of the Law, better known as scribes, and they studied at the feet of rabbis as part of their training and repeated the Law until it was branded in their minds. Indeed, according to Smith’s Bible Dictionary, the “words of the scribes” were sometimes honored above the Law itself and the scribes were not happy with what happened. Healing was Messianic and the scribes would be able to recite Isaiah 35: 5-6 from memory:

Then will the eyes of the blind be opened

and the ears of the deaf unstopped.

5 Then will the eyes of the blind be opened
Then will the lame leap like a deer,  
and the mute tongue shout for joy.  

Water will gush forth in the wilderness  
and streams in the desert  

Jesus recognized the scribes were “rumbling” about what had just happened. The fact that the crippled man was lowered through a hole in the roof probably soured their mood and they were spoiling for a fight because their thunder had been stolen and any rabbis who were present minimized. Here was a chance to set this fellow right, or so they thought.

Jesus did not duck the scribes’ indignant response to what had happened. Undoubtedly they were prepared to crank out learned protests to his actions but they never got the chance because Jesus seized the moment to declare his divinity by declaring: Which is easier, to say your sins are forgiven or to say to get up and walk? Forgiving sins is an act of God while the healing of the cripple would be a direct affirmation of Isaiah 35. Jesus presses on: To show that I have authority to forgive sin I command you to get up and go home.

Matthew goes on to record that the crowd was filled with awe and praised God for giving such authority to a man. Now that’s interesting isn’t it? Jesus had, in the eyes of the scribes, just committed blasphemy and we know what kind of response blasphemy draws. But it is hard to call it blasphemy when a crippled man heads home after a Jesus encounter.

Case 3: Mark 14

Then, we have this scene: It is the trial of Jesus just prior to his crucifixion. The Jewish leaders are searching for a verdict that would justify death. Jesus gave it to them. Mark 14 describes the events:

The chief priests and the whole Sanhedrin were looking for evidence against Jesus so that they could put him to death, but they did not find any. Many testified falsely against him, but their statements did not agree. Then some stood up and gave this false testimony against him: “We heard him say, ‘I will destroy this temple made with human hands and in three days will build another, not made with hands.’” Yet even then their testimony did not agree. Then the high
priest stood up before them and asked Jesus, “Are you not going to answer? What is this testimony that these men are bringing against you?” But Jesus remained silent and gave no answer. Again the high priest asked him, “Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One?” “I am,” said Jesus. “And you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven.” The high priest tore his clothes. “Why do we need any more witnesses?” he asked. “You have heard the blasphemy. What do you think?”

“What do you think?” That is a good question. What do you think about Jesus’ divinity? Did he make compelling claims or should his words be voted out by a seminar? The evidence is powerful but we have more. If someone is still not persuaded that Jesus understood himself to be divine we have this explanation from N. T. Wright.

Case 4: A Jewish perspective for the Messiah

Wright is a prominent British theologian and the former Bishop of Dunham. Wright is also a prolific writer and a prodigious scholar. In the appendix of Antony Flew’s book, There is No (A) God, Wright provides an intriguing way of recognizing Christ’s divinity. Wright puts it this way: “My faith in Jesus as the incarnate Son of God does not rest on the verses in the Gospels making this claim. It goes much deeper, in fact way back to the very important question about how first-century Jews understood God and God’s action in the world.”

At first blush Wright’s statement has some shock value. His faith in Jesus as the incarnate Son of God does not rest on the verses in the Gospels making this claim? How can that be? First of all, Wright is not suggesting the Gospels are unreliable. What he is saying is that a correct cultural understanding of the times leads to a striking claim for the Christ’s divinity that is independent of the Gospel claims regarding Jesus’ possible divinity.

Wright’s argues there are five ways of speaking about God’s action in the world and these actions were all present and active in Jesus. Specifically, they were: The word of God; The wisdom of God; The glory of God (closely aligned with the Temple); The spirit of God; and The law of God.

The Word of God
First-century Jews talked about the Word of God where God speaks and it happens. “Let there be light” from Genesis would be an example of how a contemporary of Jesus would understand God revealing himself through the Word.

Isaiah 55: 10-11 provides another example:

As the rain and the snow

come down from heaven,

and do not return to it

without watering the earth

and making it bud and flourish,

so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater,

11 so is my word that goes out from my mouth:

It will not return to me empty,

but will accomplish what I desire

and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.

The Wisdom of God

The Old Testament is replete with scripture that references God’s wisdom. Here are a few examples:

Psalm 111:10—The Lord is the beginning of wisdom

Jeremiah 10:12—He founded the world by his wisdom

Proverbs obviously spends a great deal of time on wisdom:
Example: *Keep falsehood and lies far from me; give me neither poverty nor riches, but only give me my daily bread. Otherwise, I may have too much and disown you and say, ‘Who is the Lord?’ Or I may become poor and steal and so dishonor the name of my God.* (Proverbs 30:8-9)

God’s wisdom was a near universal theme throughout the Old Testament and Jesus was quite comfortable in dispensing wisdom. He talked about the foolish man who builds the house on sand and the wise man who builds on a rock. Then, he does something extraordinary by noting the wise man is the one who hears these words of mine and does them. Jesus is not just telling stories; he is declaring that he is wisdom incarnate.

*The Temple of God*

The Temple was the site that first-century Jews looked to as the place where God resided. Jesus behaved as if he was the Temple. When Jesus told people their “Sins are forgiven,” that would have been a total shock because the Temple was where that happened, after a sacrifice. Jesus declared that you did not have to go to the Temple because essentially the Temple had come to them!

We also have the compelling exchange with Jews after Jesus had cleared the Temple in John 2: What gives you the right to do these things and what can you do to prove you have the authority? Good question, seeing as how Jesus had just wreaked havoc, but Jesus did not blink at the question. He told them to destroy the Temple and he would rebuild it in three days. His protagonists did not understand that he was not referring to a building but rather to himself but nevertheless, the challenge was answered in such a way that regardless of their understanding of his words, it was clear Jesus was acting as God.

*The Law of God*

The Law had governed Israel’s relationship with God since the days of Moses. It set apart the people of Israel to the God of Israel and it was immutable. Yet, Jesus had no reservations about not only interpreting the Law but also changing it altogether. *You have heard it said, but I say*...Jesus provided his own unique spin to centuries old dictates. Jesus did something even more remarkable when he gave a new commandment. *Today I give a new commandment, that you love*
one another as I have loved you. Changing the Law was not a prerogative of man, it was entirely God’s purview. Yet, Jesus creates a commandment, a Law. This language would have shouted to a first-century Jew that Jesus was behaving identically to the way that God acts.

_The Spirit of God_

The Spirit of God is what makes the prophets, prophets. The Spirit of God rushes upon Samson in Judges and the Spirit of God is routinely noted as allowing humans to do extraordinary things for God’s glory (e.g., Moses). Jesus knew the connection between the Spirit of God and the Kingdom of God. In fact, he specifically referenced the connection when he said: “If I by the Spirit of God cast out demons, then the Kingdom of God has come upon you.”

_Jesus did not view himself as divine?_

If Jesus did not view himself as divine, he sure was talking and acting in strange ways. His actions and words shouted to his Jewish contemporaries that Messiah had come. It is indeed interesting that one criticism of Jesus is he never claimed to be divine. Yet, we have seen this is simply not the case. He claimed to be divine, he acted like he was divine, and he spoke in ways that would document he was divine. Jesus was either deluded, or he was divine. He asked his disciple Peter, “Who do you think I am?” Peter concluded Jesus was Messiah and Jesus told him it was because His Father in heaven had helped him reach that decision. The question Jesus asked of Peter is also asked of each of us. Who do you think He is?

Of course, the ultimate claim to divinity rests in the resurrection. The resurrection is the lynch pin for all of scripture. Paul understood this when he wrote that we are to be the most pitied if there is no resurrection because our faith is in vain. So, it is to the resurrection that we will shortly turn. Before we do that, we have one last final thought, and this too speaks powerfully to Jesus’ divinity.

_What happened?_
Have you ever wondered how a crowd could welcome Jesus on his triumphal entry shouting Hosanna to the highest and a mere 5 days’ later demand Barabbas be released because “we have no king but Caesar?”

The response of the Jews to Jesus entering Jerusalem offers a significant clue. They were waving palm branches in remembrance of a great victory by Jews who were opposing Greek influences sometime around the 2nd century, B.C. The Book of First Maccabees chronicles the events of that time and in Chapter 13:51 we find the following:

51And they entered into it the three and twentieth day of the second month, in the year one hundred and seventy-one, with thanksgiving, and branches of palm trees, and harps, and cymbals, and psalteries, and hymns, and canticles, because the great enemy was destroyed out of Israel.

Those welcoming Jesus were also shouting specific verses from Psalm 118. Psalm 118 is a continuous praise of God’s love and Israel’s dependence upon God. The Psalm also details a defender of Israel, one who will cut down her enemies:

10 All the nations surrounded me,

but in the name of the Lord I cut them down.

11 They surrounded me on every side,

but in the name of the Lord I cut them down.

12 They swarmed around me like bees,

but they were consumed as quickly as burning thorns;

in the name of the Lord I cut them down.

The Psalm also notes a great celebration because of this protector:
Shouts of joy and victory

resound in the tents of the righteous:

“The Lord’s right hand has done mighty things!

16 The Lord’s right hand is lifted high;

the Lord’s right hand has done mighty things!”

Then we see the words that greeted Jesus in verse 26: “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.” Remembrance of a past victory, celebrated with palm shoots, and shouts from a Psalm of deliverance leaves no doubt what was happening. In the eyes of the people, Messiah has come! And in their view this meant he was here to deliver them from Roman occupation, provide for God-given justice and restore the Temple to its rightful place as the House of God. Scripture tells us something markedly different occurred though. Jesus did clear the Temple, but he cleared it of his countrymen making money. Roman oppression was certainly not banished in Jesus’ last week. In fact, it was on brutal display in Jesus’ trial and crucifixion.

How could the Messiah, the anointed one of God, a King who would institute justice on earth be arrested and subjected to such cruelty? In the eyes of those gathered in Jerusalem for Passover he could not. Hopes dashed, they turned their wrath on this “impostor,” demanding a criminal be released instead. After all, Barabbas had at least caused enough problems for the Romans that they had him arrested. Jesus? “We have no king but Caesar!” cried the mob. The ultimate insult to the Son of God.

Their actions are not hard to understand. The disciples themselves did not grasp that Jesus would suffer and die even though he had clearly told them this would happen so it is easy to see how those on the fringe of Jesus’ world would not understand what was happening. As we will see in the resurrection chapter, the idea of a dying Messiah was never considered possible. Yet, it quickly became the stated belief of his closest allies.

Summary
Before we travel to those three fateful days we point out once again that anyone who asks whether Christ knew himself to be divine asks a question that history has irrevocably answered. Christ thought he was divine, Christ acted as if he was divine, and he did things that would have told his contemporaries that he was the promised one. The Jewish religious leaders understood his claim to be divine and they plotted to kill him as a result.

Those present in Jerusalem sincerely believed that Jesus was God’s anointed King; so much so that they prepared a Messiah’s welcome for his last entry into Jerusalem. Finally, we have the retrospective of Old Testament Messianic prophecy that pointed to Jesus as the anointed one. As we shall soon see, the Messiah did not behave as a Messiah was expected to behave and he certainly didn’t accomplish what was anticipated from him. But, as we shall soon see, that thinking quickly changed after a rather remarkable weekend of events.

Okay, Jesus thought he was divine and the people of Israel thought he was Messiah, at least until he was arrested. The only way that Jesus could come to be known as Lord and Messiah would be to demonstrate the ability to conquer death, something that only God himself could do. Jesus in the tomb? We might have a shrine. Empty tomb? We got ourselves a resurrection revolution.

Chapter 3: Endnotes


FURTHER REFLECTION

Central Theme:

If Jesus Christ is God in the flesh we should see clear evidence that He and He alone can claim divinity. If we see that, then we have credible reason to understand that the creator of the universe and “God the Father” are one and the same.

Reflective Activities:

1. Review the Messianic prophecies in the OT provided in your course materials (a very short grouping of many more prophecies). Do the prophecies point to Christ and Christ alone?

2. According to N. T. Wright, a contemporary of Jesus would have understood the Messiah to behave in certain ways.
   a) The word of God
   b) The wisdom of God
   c) The Temple of God
   d) The Law of God
   d) The Spirit of God

Given this, why did the Jews greet Jesus as Messiah upon his triumphal entry?

What was the significance of palm branches and quoting of Psalm 118 in the triumphal entry?

3. What example(s) are in your reading that document Jesus acted as if he was divine?
4. From the Jewish perspective of Jesus’ contemporaries, what was the Messiah’s role? Why were the disciples and the community at large unable to grasp the idea that Jesus was both Lord and Messiah?

5. What would be the ultimate declaration of Jesus’ divinity?

**Resurrection**

If Jesus rose from the dead, then you have to accept all that he said; if he didn't rise from the dead, then why worry about any of what he said? The issue on which everything hangs is not whether or not you like his teaching but whether or not he rose from the dead.¹

The followers of Christ were crushed. Believed to be the Messiah, he had apparently been just another pretender destroyed by the Roman Empire and the religious powers of the day. He was dead and there was no doubt about it. His body had been removed from the cross and prepared hurriedly for burial so that no one would be unclean for the Passover. Some of the women who were his disciples came to finish the burial process on Sunday, and the Bible records a rather curious set of events from that point on.

It is absolutely critical to understand the state of mind of those who had believed Christ to be Messiah. From their immediate frame of reference on Friday, this no longer seemed possible. The closest followers of Jesus never understood that the Messiah would suffer and die. Jesus explained it to them more than once but they simply could not make the connection. There are two really good reasons this is the case: The beliefs of a first-century Jew regarding resurrection, and misperceptions about how the Messiah would rule.

*The beliefs of a second temple Jew regarding resurrection*
William Lane Craig and N. T. Wright both make the case that a contemporary of Jesus would have understood resurrection to be something that occurred at the end of time for all mankind. There simply was no expectation of a single resurrection of a single person. Also, and importantly, resurrection was not viewed as “you die and go to heaven.” Resurrection meant that there was a life after life after death. In other words, resurrection requires a physical body and there was an interim time where the spirit is separated from the body.

Wright also notes there was a strong belief that resurrection would be associated with a physical copy of the body while another school of thought looked at Daniel 12 and concluded the resurrected body of the righteous would shine like a star. Whatever the thinking of that time it assuredly did not include the circumstances associated with Jesus’ death.

*What was a Messiah expected to do?*

A second temple Jew did not believe the Messiah would be required to die. Think about that. The thinking was that the Messiah would remove political oppression, restore the Temple to its original specifications, not Herod’s redo, and reinstitute Temple worship with God literally residing in the temple.

Now imagine yourself as a disciple of Christ and bathed in these traditions. You have been waiting for a Messiah, indeed Israel had been waiting for a Messiah for thousands of years. You have these preconceptions about who the Messiah will be. These preconceptions have been fueled by rabbis who diligently searched scripture, trying to understand how the Messiah would behave when he appears. Some of the preconceptions were so strong that some read Isaiah 53 and concluded there must be two Messiahs, one that would conquer and one that would suffer. Little wonder then that John 12:16 reports that: *At first his disciples did not understand all this. Only after Jesus was glorified did they realize that these things had been written about him and that these things had been done to him.*

The graphic death of Christ and these convictions would have served to convince Jesus’ followers that all was lost. What no one could possibly understand was those darkest days were the seeds of a revolution. What they surely did not realize was that the revolution would start so
soon and in such a dramatic fashion. It takes a resurrection to create this kind of revolution—nothing smaller will suffice. People who were in absolute despair were transformed virtually overnight into the foot soldiers that became the church. Jesus himself commissioned the Disciples and he also commanded them (Matthew 28.16-20). Jesus also said he left this world so that greater things would occur (John 14.12-17). Finally, showing the utmost confidence in his followers, he announced that hell itself would not prevail against his movement (Matthew 16.18).

These early followers were radicals, willing to risk beatings and rejoice after they happened (Acts 5) or to suffer cruel deaths by stoning (Acts 7). They believed that Jesus was raised from the dead and they had good reason to do so.

Building the case for the resurrection

Something occurred on that Sunday long ago that changed despair and desperation to bewildered delight. Lots of people have advanced alternative theories why that ‘something’ could not be a resurrected Christ. In one sense, it is hard to fault them. The Christian faith holds as its central tenet that Jesus Christ, Holy God and wholly man, was brutally murdered on a cross. His remains were placed in a tomb and we all know the story about how all heaven broke loose early on that fateful Sunday. Nothing about that story that might seem odd to a skeptic, right?

Is there a rational basis for this core belief of Christianity? Do better explanations exist? To answer these questions goes a long way towards validating or discrediting the Christian faith and to answer them we move to the New Testament, the primary source of information related to the resurrection.

The scoffer might immediately jump in and cry foul. How can you use the New Testament as a source of information? How can you know those stories are even true? Since the stories are rooted in history it is possible to look at known details to see whether what is recorded in the Bible
is consistent with what was known of the ancient world. Looking at Acts in particular we find consistent historical reliability, whether it be in the peculiar titles of local officials or historical details such as the routes of the Alexandrian corn fleet. The details found within Acts are historically accurate but we should not be surprised since Luke tells us in Luke 1 he is writing a carefully reconstructed historical account.

The citation above is just one example of a mountain of defense that can be given to the historical nature of the New Testament. Regarding Jesus himself, it is the very rare historian now who tries to argue against his existence. We do not want to belabor this point too long. If you are predisposed to learning more or concerned about the historical reliability of scripture, there is a bounty of helpful materials available.

What we know

There was an empty tomb

All four gospels report an empty tomb. We know that Jesus was buried in a marked tomb. Not just a marked tomb, but the marked tomb of a wealthy man. Not just a wealthy man, but a member of the Sanhedrin, the small group of men in each city responsible for making sure that Jewish law was followed scrupulously.

It would be hard, as some skeptics claim, to imagine a scenario where the women returning to the tomb on Sunday were confused and went to the wrong tomb. That mistake is too easily rectified and even if it were not it leaves the inconvenient truth of a corpse in the correct tomb. The refutation of the empty tomb would be remarkably easy if this were the reason the story originated.

There were multiple post-resurrection reports of Jesus being physically alive

Scripture documents numerous appearances of Christ to varying audiences on different days. A timeline is provided below to illustrate this point. Note that the post-resurrection appearances of Jesus ranged from a single person to over 500 at another occasion. The multiple appearances in multiple contexts create a high level of credibility for their collective accuracy.
Women were the first witnesses to the resurrection

All four Gospels document that women were the first to discover the empty tomb. Women were not held in high regard in those days. In fact, a Jewish prayer provided in the Talmud thanks God for not making me a woman, slave, or Gentile. No surprise then that women were not considered credible witnesses in legal matters. What is surprising is the stubborn fidelity found in the Gospels. Why report a story that is sure to create skepticism? If these were myths, then their creation is certainly unusual. Here is an analogy: Given all we know about the assassination of John F. Kennedy how much weight would a biography of Lee Harvey Oswald have if it asserted that Oswald was actually in the book depository because he heard there would be an attempt on the president’s life and Oswald was really trying to provide security for the president’s motorcade? And, to make matters even more complicated, the biography was written by Oswald’s sister?

That analogy is not too far removed from scriptural reality. The Jews of Jesus’ time would have been embarrassed to report that they were told these things by women and the very fact that
women were responsible for the first reports would have gotten the resurrection argument off to a very poor start. Still, scripture never flinched, and there has to be a reason why this is the case.

*There were other appearances*

As the chart indicates, there were multiple eye witnesses to Jesus walking among them during the 40 days, post resurrection. Peter, Cleopas and his friend, and the disciples minus Thomas all received personal visits on Sunday. In the next few days, the disciples and Thomas had a personal encounter along with Jesus’ brother James. The large crowd of over 500 men spoken of in 1 Corinthians also saw Jesus during this time. Finally, there was a crowd of disciples and possibly others at Jesus’ ascension.

*The empty tomb AND the resurrection are inextricably linked*

The empty tomb by itself is a puzzle and the resurrection stories by themselves might be dismissed as visions. Collectively though the empty tomb and the resurrection stories provide powerful evidence that the Bible’s descriptions of the first Easter are historically accurate.

The resurrection of Jesus was not something that was anticipated. In fact, it was not even considered possible. As we have noted, contemporaries of Jesus, that is, Second-Temple Jews, believed resurrection occurred at the end of the age for all men. There was no consideration given to the idea that a single man would resurrect before the end of the age until Jesus was crucified.

*Bewildered disciples transform into emboldened witnesses*

*Example 1: Peter*

A funny thing happened just a few short days after the resurrection. Men who had no clue that Jesus would suffer and die were now preaching boldly that the scriptures had demanded this outcome. When the Holy Spirit arrived at Pentecost some were amazed since they were hearing their own language from folks that could not speak it moments before. Others were derisive, claiming the ones speaking in other languages were actually sloppy drunk. One thing for certain, everyone was paying attention to what was happening. It was at that time that Peter began to speak. We pick up his words in verse 22 of the second chapter of Acts:
“Fellow Israelites, listen to this: Jesus of Nazareth was a man accredited by God to you by miracles, wonders and signs, which God did among you through him, as you yourselves know. This man was handed over to you by God’s deliberate plan and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross. But God raised him from the dead, freeing him from the agony of death, because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him. David said about him:

“I saw the Lord always before me. Because he is at my right hand, I will not be shaken.

Therefore my heart is glad and my tongue rejoices; my body also will rest in hope,
because you will not abandon me to the realm of the dead, you will not let your holy one see decay.

You have made known to me the paths of life; you will fill me with joy in your presence.

Fellow Israelites, I can tell you confidently that the patriarch David died and was buried, and his tomb is here to this day. But he was a prophet and knew that God had promised him on oath that he would place one of his descendants on his throne. Seeing what was to come, he spoke of the resurrection of the Messiah, that he was not abandoned to the realm of the dead, nor did his body see decay. God has raised this Jesus to life, and we are all witnesses of it. Exalted to the right hand of God, he has received from the Father the promised Holy Spirit and has poured out what you now see and hear. For David did not ascend to heaven, and yet he said,

“The Lord said to my Lord: "Sit at my right hand
until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet—"

Therefore let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Messiah.”
Remember, this is the same Peter who denied Christ multiple times about 50 days before. His words in Acts hardly sound like someone who claimed he never knew Jesus! Also, what do we make of the crowd? Peter says they were complicit in Jesus’ death. Undoubtedly Peter was addressing some in his audience who had demanded Jesus’ death only days before. Now, they listen attentively to an explanation of a risen Christ and we know from Acts that there was an explosion of believers during this immediate timeframe. Why would these people do such an about face? Certainly hearing many languages being spoken and understood had something to do with it but that was merely the opening act for the true topic of discussion---the resurrection of Jesus. What causes a crowd to carefully consider a claim for a resurrection of a single person that they were complicit in executing? Why were so many willing to believe a claim that until only a few days before was completely beyond the imagination of everyone present? Maybe, just maybe, it had something to do with the understanding that the claims for the resurrection of Jesus were not contrived.

Whatever happened, it changed Peter irrevocably. Sometime on Resurrection Day, Peter had made his way to the empty tomb. He knew there were rumors about Jesus’ resurrection but he was still puzzled. Locked away in a ‘safe room’ and likely fearing what might happen to them, they all had this little encounter as found in Luke 24:

36 While they were still talking about this, Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, “Peace be with you.”

37 They were startled and frightened, thinking they saw a ghost. 38 He said to them, “Why are you troubled, and why do doubts rise in your minds? 39 Look at my hands and my feet. It is I myself! Touch me and see; a ghost does not have flesh and bones, as you see I have.”

40 When he had said this, he showed them his hands and feet. 41 And while they still did not believe it because of joy and amazement, he asked them, “Do you have anything here to eat?” 42 They gave him a piece of broiled fish, 43 and he took it and ate it in their presence.

44 He said to them, “This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms.”
Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures. He told them, “This is what is written: The Messiah will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance for the forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. I am going to send you what my Father has promised; but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.”

So now we know why Peter was so quick to go to scripture that indicated the Messiah must die. It was because Jesus himself went to these same scriptures and explained to his closest followers what had actually happened from Friday to Sunday; from the time of Messiah’s death to the resurrection of Messiah; from the bowels of hell to the clouds of elation.

Remember, just like their Jewish contemporaries, the disciples also had no understanding of a unique resurrection by one single person before the end of time. That idea simply was not considered possible and it explains why even though Peter had met Jesus on Sunday he still could not totally comprehend what was actually happening. After the upper room visit, where the whole story regarding the Messiah’s death and resurrection was made clear, we now find Peter on Pentecost boldly proclaiming this radical shift in beliefs.

Peter’s actions are difficult to explain from a skeptical perspective. Why would he be cowering in a room a few weeks prior trying to make sense of Jesus’ death and then confidently assert that the death of Jesus was a foregone conclusion, foretold by scripture? If the skeptic argues that Peter was not referencing a literal resurrection, that he somehow had a spiritual “aha” then the skeptic must also realize that “aha” went against centuries of Jewish teaching. Peter would have been laughed out of town if he tried to build a case for a resurrection that really was not a resurrection.

Peter made it quite clear what he wanted to say: God has raised this Jesus to life and we are all witnesses of it. Peter knew he could make this statement because there was the small problem of people conversing in languages they did not know. Anyone who was present at Pentecost would have been interested in a reason for what was happening. Pentecost acted as the launching pad for the Holy Spirit but it also was a platform where the case for Jesus’ resurrection could be presented. We know from Acts that the message of resurrection swept through Jerusalem in short order and “their numbers increased greatly.”
Example 2: James, the half-brother of Jesus

We imagine it must have been difficult being the half-brother of Jesus, particularly in the years of active ministry that are recorded in the Gospels. We get a glimpse of what it must have been like in Mark 3, where Jesus’ kin try to get some folks to persuade him to come out of a house by saying his mother and brothers were looking for him. “Who are my mother and my brothers?” This answer leads to scripture indicating that James and the family had some concerns about Jesus’ mental state (see Mark 3:21).

Yet somehow, this same James is referred to by Paul as a “pillar of the church” in Galatians. Now why would James steadfastly embrace what he first believed to be nonsense? In fact, embrace it to the point that Josephus reports he was martyred for his faith. If anyone knew Jesus, really knew Jesus, it was his half-brother James. When you are willing to die for a cause you earlier discounted and for a half-brother you thought might be mentally unstable something big has indeed happened.

Example 3: Paul: From terrorist to apostle

It strikes us that the church tends to underplay Saul’s dedication to hunting Christians. From the perspective of Christians, Saul/Paul was a terrorist, ferreting men and women from their homes simply because they were not practicing the Jewish faith. From Saul’s perspective, he was doing what God required; these blasphemers were rendering the true faith impure and as such they had to be eradicated.

1 Then Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest and asked letters from him to the synagogues of Damascus, so that if he found any who were of the Way, whether men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem. (Acts 9)

Saul was a ringleader in the stoning of Stephen. In fact, Acts 8 tells us he held the garments of those who were martyring Stephen and he looked on with approval. Saul was feared by Christians and with good reason. And then, just like Peter and James, something happened to Saul that changed his life forever, and it occurred on a dusty road on the way to Damascus. Skeptics sometime wonder if a person can be changed immediately upon accepting Christ. Saul is a striking example of that possibility.
Scripture says Saul was struck blind and left to answer a very uncomfortable question. Someone wanted to know why Saul was persecuting him. That question must have really stung Saul because he was on his way with arrest papers from the High Priest so that he could detain any who were following Christ. Saul thought his cause just, until he heard a voice from heaven. “Who are you?” Saul asked. “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting” was the reply.

It is one thing to realize your cause is wrong. It is another thing to be devoted to your cause and then discover you have been responsible for opposing what you thought you were defending. Saul thought he was pleasing God by rounding up those who believed in a risen Messiah. He had no idea until he set out for Damascus that God and Jesus were identical.

Blinded, Saul continues to Damascus where Ananias has learned in a vision that he would be responsible for restoring Saul’s sight. Ananias loved God but he still couldn’t resist pointing out to God that Saul was a murderer. Seems like God already knew that and he was not dissuaded from his plan to use Saul as a mouthpiece to the Gentiles.

Saul’s sight is restored and immediately he sets out to the synagogue to prove that Jesus is God. He was so effective the Jewish leaders put a contract for his life on him. Saul’s friends learn what is going on and get Saul out of Damascus. Saul returns to Jerusalem where Barnabas acts as his defender to an understandably leery group of Apostles. Saul eventually wins the trust of the Apostles and argues so convincingly for Christ that the Jewish leaders plot to kill him in Jerusalem as well. Saul, on fire for Christ, escapes Jerusalem and heads for Tarsus and the beginning of his ministry to the Gentiles.
Saul or Paul?

Acts 13:9 is the first time we learn that Saul has an alias. Saul was also known as Paul. Why did he adopt Paul as his name? Because Paul is the Gentile variation of Saul and Paul knew the Gentiles would be more likely to listen to someone that was “one of them.” Paul was indeed willing to be all things to all men so that some may come to know that God the Father did in fact send Jesus as God incarnate to save the world from sin. (Paraphrasing 1 Cor 9:19-23).

Paul is another inconvenient truth to the skeptic. He was educated and he was absolutely dedicated to the mission of eradicating the new movement known as The Way. He was a shining example of what a Jew should be: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for righteousness based on the law, faultless (Philippians 3:5-6).

All of that might have been true but it was no longer meaningful to Paul. In the very next verse of Philippians Paul tells us that whatever were gains he now considers them a loss for the sake of Christ. How to account for a man going from murderer to martyr? Paul says he was forever changed in an instant on the road to Damascus. Who would know better? Paul became the most prolific writer in the New Testament and he ultimately was beheaded because, as a Roman, he could not be crucified. Paul, writing some of his last words, said this in II Timothy 4:

6For I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure has come. 7I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course, I have kept the faith; 8in the future there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day; and not only to me, but also to all who have loved His appearing.

Dismissing Paul’s testimony to the risen Messiah is difficult to do. Obviously he was willing to die for his convictions. Just as obvious, his focus changed instantly from persecuting Christians to spreading the Gospel. When you add Paul to the mix of evidence that already exists the conclusion becomes all the more apparent that the Bible is scrupulously recording the most important time in the history of the world.
Maybe all these stories are concoctions written well after the fact?

A last recourse left to a skeptic would be to argue that Acts (and therefore the Gospels) were written well after the events described, allowing crazy stories and mythologies to be developed and passed as true. Men speaking in other languages? Cannot happen says the skeptic and therefore a very late date for Acts would mean these stories have been concocted rather than true.

Dating Acts (and the Gospels)

There are many reasons to reject this view and we will look at a few of them. Norman Geisler, arguing for an early dating of Acts in *Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics* lists 43 pieces of evidence that validate Acts being authored around 60-62 A.D. Listed below are six of the most important observations from Dr. Geisler:

Reason 1: Details that would not be expected if Acts were written well after the events occurred.

- Ex 1: “The Proper river port, Perga, for a ship crossing from Cyprus,” (13:13)
- Ex 2: “The proper port, Attalia, for returning travelers (14:25)
- Ex 3: “The correct route from the Cilician Gates (16:1)”
- Ex 4: The proper locations where travelers would spend successive nights on this journey (17:1).”
- Ex 5: “The correct explanation that sea travel is the most convenient way to reach Athens in the summer with favoring east winds (17:14)
Reason 2: Paul and Peter are still alive in Acts.

Nero began a staggering and systematic elimination of Christians sometime around 65 A.D. The carnage continued for five years or so until Nero committed suicide in 70 A.D. Scholars agree that Paul and Peter both were victims of Nero’s persecution of Christians. If this is the case, both would have died sometime prior to 70 A.D. Using that date as the most conservative, that means Acts would have been completed in the early to late 60’s, and that agrees with Geisler’s conclusions. We can be confident then that the Book of Acts dates to sometime prior to A.D. 70.

Reason 3: Luke was written before Acts.

If Acts dates to the 60’s then Luke must precede Acts since the two were written consecutively. We are now backing up even further towards the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ.

Reason 4: Luke appears to have used Mark as a source

Most scholars agree this is the case. If so, it means we are even closer to the resurrection.

Reason 5: You cannot make up stories of this magnitude this close to the actual event.

Reconciling the Gospels as Independent Sources

Much has been made in modern criticism about what Gospel borrowed from what Gospel and when all of these books were actually written. We do not wish to delve too far into this topic but it is important to point out that, as noted above, Mark is generally accepted as the earliest Gospel writing with Luke using Mark as a source. It is also probable that Matthew also used Mark and there is an outside chance that Mark used Matthew.8

We think these modern criticisms are interesting but also wildly speculative. Consider how Wright makes the case in *The Resurrection of the Son of God*:
(Speaking of the Gospels and their interdependence) ...there is remarkably little verbal overlap. Instead, we find in each of the stories not so much a sign of steady development from a primitive tradition to a form in which the evangelist simply wrote down what the tradition at that point had grown into, but rather a retelling of primitive stories by the evangelist himself in such a way as to form a fitting climax to his particular book. You could not take Luke’s ending and substitute it for John’s, or John’s for Matthew’s, without creating an absurdity...the evangelists have exercised considerable freedom in retelling and reshaping the narratives so as to bring out themes and emphases that were important to them throughout their work (pg. 679 and 680)

Wright is correct that any effort to explain away the Gospels as similar regurgitated efforts is fraught with issues. The Gospels do not read that way as all. They are unique narrative that tell the same story from differing perspectives. Just as multiple witnesses to a crime might all emphasize certain happenings based upon their perspective, so too the Gospel writers. The fact that the accounts of Peter’s denial differ as to how many times and when the cock crowed is not evidence of manufactured stories. Indeed, quite the opposite. If the stories such as Peter’s denial and the number of women were manufactured years after the fact, we would expect all of the “wrinkles” to be ironed smooth. There would be no difference in perspectives because all of the perspectives would have emanated from one source. But we do not have that with the Gospels. They tell their stories from their own perspectives but each makes the case clear: Jesus rose physically and bodily from a rich man’s tomb on the third day.

If the skeptic argues Acts and the Gospels are late inventions he must deal with the evidence noted above. He should also realize that it is not possible to concoct myths of this magnitude in such a short time. Especially myths that would completely contradict millennia of Jewish teaching related to resurrection in general and the expected actions of their Messiah in particular.

James, Peter, and Paul are also three powerful evidences for the resurrection. The family skeptic, the Messiah’s denier, and Jesus’ persecutor were all transformed. This is what happens when truth sets in and the movement was obviously not limited to these three men. Thousands in Jerusalem began to understand within fifty odd days after Easter that Jesus had to die as the Messiah and they too were transformed. Pentecost flipped the switch on the exponential growth of the church. None of this could have occurred without the resurrection of Christ because the bodily resurrection of Christ was what was preached at Pentecost.
Pentecost is the first time we see meek followers of Christ, lost in doubt and fear on Good Friday, transform into lions of the faith, boldly proclaiming the truth of Jesus’ resurrection. Acts provides multiple examples of this occurring and every book in the New Testament has a central theme of the resurrection of Christ.

So, now we know that the story of men speaking strange languages was not invented as a myth long after the fact to allow Jesus’ followers a platform to speak of their enlightened view of resurrection, one that was completely different to the Jewish worldview of that time. No. The story of men speaking strange languages was dutifully recorded by Luke, and it was done in a timeframe that places Acts very close to the actual day Christ left the tomb. The miracle of Pentecost was linked to the miracle of Christ’s resurrection in such a way that a Jew of that time would have been able to quickly grasp that the Messiah they had hoped for had indeed arrived.

Reason 6: Resurrection becomes THE POINT of Christianity

Just like today the early church argued about a lot of stuff: circumcision, Jewish ritual, appropriate behaviors, you name it. There were so many things that were being argued about that a council was set up in Jerusalem to settle matters of doctrine (Acts 15). There was one thing though that the early church never argued about. The resurrection of Christ was a settled matter from the beginning of the Christian movement. Also, the resurrection of Christ was the absolute centerpiece of the movement. Paul noted that if Jesus did not rise from the dead then our faith is in vain. The resurrection of Christ was the driving force that fueled the early church. Unlike Judaism, were resurrection was important but not central, resurrection in the Christian faith became the basis from which all other facets of the faith developed.

There is no rational explanation for why such a marked and immediate shift in the thinking of both the disciples and the people of Jerusalem except for a steadfast conviction the resurrection of Jesus had indeed occurred. Christianity was not an evolution of previous beliefs; it was an explosion of a new argument concerning how God would intervene in the affairs of man.

In 1 Corinthians, Paul draws a succinct summary of this radical new movement:

For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures,
Christ died, he was buried, and he was raised on the third day. All this according to scripture. That is the summation of our faith and we should appreciate how strong the evidence is supporting these claims.

*How else to explain all of this?*

Competing theories attempting to explain the resurrection are bogged down by innumerable difficulties. Suggesting the tomb was not really empty is easily dismissed because of how easy it would be to relocate the actual burial spot. We think it more than likely that the powers of that time would have paraded the body through the streets of Jerusalem to quell the foolishness of a resurrected corpse. But they did not do that did they?

To argue the disciples stole the body is to ignore all their words that indicate their absolute insistence that Jesus had physically risen from the dead. This theory requires a collective band of lunatics to replace the otherwise normal disciples that scripture describes.

Suggesting the disciples collectively suffered from post-traumatic stress and they all saw ethereal visions they interpreted as an actual risen savior is problematic as well. There is no documented case of deluded masses experiencing identical visions and we cannot think of any way this could ever happen. And, once again, if these visions were delusions it would be really simple to parade the body around town and take care of that problem.

Then we have the women, embarrassments to the story due to their inability to serve as credible witnesses. A myth would not be expected to begin with sources that are so easily discredited. That said, all four Gospels report women as the first to find the empty tomb.

Explaining Saul to Paul is also a difficult task for the skeptic. What possesses a person to claim they have had a personal visitation from Jesus, especially when this Jesus is precisely the enemy you have been railing against? Saul the murderer to Paul the Apostle. The very traits that made Paul so zealous for his religion would later serve him well as he became even more zealous for his savior. Paul’s life and death are powerful testaments to his unshakeable belief that Jesus was the risen Messiah.
We also have the transformed lives of Peter and James. Both martyred for their faith and both with amazing testimonies that point conclusively to the fact that they were irrevocably convinced that Jesus is Messiah and he had resurrected bodily from the dead, all according to God’s plan.

Finally, we have this remarkable exchange that took place in Acts 2 where Peter speaks to a large crowd that includes actual participants in the exchange with Pilot that ultimately led to Jesus’ crucifixion; the same people who thought Jesus was a fake because their understanding of a Messiah was one who would re-establish proper Temple worship while expelling the Roman oppressors. Surely, the man called Jesus did none of these things and the response of the Jews of that time was swift. But, somehow, these same people were now willing to abandon the beliefs held for centuries by their forefathers regarding just what exactly the Messiah was supposed to do. What changed their mind?

Whatever the objection is to the historical reality of the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus it is difficult to see how any objection provides greater explanatory power than that proposed by scripture. If one presumes there is no God, then one is obliged to figure out a way to demonstrate that there is also no son of God. But, as we have seen, the evidence for God is compelling and the evidence for the resurrection is equally powerful.

There is still one powerful objection to Christianity and it comes from morality. How can an all-powerful, all-loving God allow evil?

Chapter 4: Endnotes


6. Craig, Ibid.


8. A thorough discussion of the origin of Christian understanding of resurrection can be found in N.T. Wright’s comprehensive work, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*. Stated succinctly, there was no parallel for the Christian understanding of resurrection to be found in the Jewish or the pagan worlds of that day. The Christian understanding of resurrection, that one man was bodily resurrected before the end of the age, had no precedent.
FURTHER REFLECTION

Central Theme:

A second temple Jew did not believe the Messiah would die. The thinking was that the Messiah would remove political oppression, restore the Temple to its original specifications, not Herod’s redo, and reinstitute Temple worship with God literally residing in the temple.

Reflective Activities

1. How does the skepticism of second temple Jews about Jesus’ resurrection compare to modern skepticism about the resurrection?

2. How might you respond to a skeptic who says the New Testament is not a historical document?

3. What symbolism is present in the actions of those welcoming Jesus into Jerusalem upon his triumphal entrance?

4. How do the empty tomb and the physical appearances of Jesus combine to create a powerful argument for his physical resurrection?

5. Is there an alternative explanation that better explains the immediate shift in thinking of James, Peter, and Paul regarding Jesus’ bodily resurrection?
What About Suffering?
How Can Evil Exist if God is All-Loving and All-Powerful?

If God does not exist, then everything is permitted.¹

A powerful argument against God is the existence of evil. We do not know anyone who would argue that evil is not a problem on this planet. Pick up the paper any day of the week and you will be bombarded by man’s inhumanity to man. History reminds that Hitler was responsible for viciously slaughtering 6 to 7 million souls in the Holocaust and as horrific that number is, it pales in comparison to the 20 million people eradicated by Joseph Stalin’s regime.

Today, we are faced with al Qaeda and ISIS, entities that hardly anyone knew about in the western world until 9/11 and subsequent unrest in the Middle East. It seems like the more we “progress” the more we are reminded that evil continually lurks and all too often interjects into the affairs of man. Evil has been with us as long as there has been an “us.”

This reality has lead skeptics to posit that evil is evidence that there is no God. Essentially the argument looks like this:

1. God is all good;
2. God is all loving;
3. An all loving, all good God would not allow evil;
4. Evil exists;
5. Therefore God does not exist.

This attack on God is, in our opinion, one of the most dangerous. It must be answered and answered well if the skeptic’s understandable concerns will be addressed. Maybe even more important, it must be answered well if we as Christians are not to be doomed to live in constant doubt about whether God is really there and whether he really cares.
Notice the skeptic is basing the whole argument on the existence of evil. Well, what is sauce for the goose is also sauce for the gander. Consider the following:

1. God is all good;
2. God is all loving;
3. Without God objective moral values do not exist;
4. Evil exists as an objective moral value;
5. Therefore God exists.

Note the similarity between the two arguments. The big distinction is the way evil is dealt with. The skeptic says evil cannot exist if God exists. We counter that by noting evil does exist but cannot do so unless there is a basis for objective moral values. Without objective moral values everyone is free to decide for themselves what is and is not evil. In essence, everyone is free to act as their own god and if that is the case then Hitler and Stalin are both free to make their own rules regarding what is and is not evil. Without objective moral values, how would we even know what evil is?

This is not say that an atheist cannot act in a moral fashion. That line of reasoning is obviously fallacious and there are innumerable examples that disprove that argument. Atheists can and do behave morally. Having said that, it is important to separate a moral behavior from an objective moral reality. Man may interpret what is moral but man cannot create objective moral values. For every person that says taking an innocent life is evil there is an example of a Hitler or Stalin who would argue the deaths brought about a greater good because those who were killed were inferior or drains upon society. Who’s to say who is right? Suppose Germany had won World War II? Would we hold the same view of evil that we do today? The answer is yes only if we hold to an objective moral reality that defines evil independent of the current views of society.
What is the source of evil?

In the skeptical argument against God, evil is viewed as God’s responsibility. Either he created evil or he is impotent to stop its progress. If he created evil, then God is not all good. If he cannot stop evil, then he is not all powerful. But, what if God is not responsible for evil? What if evil derives from another source?

We deny that evil is God’s responsibility. God did not create evil because evil is not created. It is a consequence of choice. God will stop evil but that time is not here yet. There will come a time when there is a new heaven and a new earth where there is no sorrow or suffering but that is certainly not the present situation.

Jesus was quite aware of the presence of evil in this world. In John 16:33, Jesus said this: In this world you will have troubles. But take heart, I have overcome the world. What then is the source of these troubles? Many books have been written about the source of evil and how its existence can be reconciled with God. One of the best and most succinct explanations we have seen comes from a book co-authored by Peter Kreeft and Ronald K. Tacelli entitled Handbook of Christian Apologetics.\(^3\) We highly recommend the book as a tremendous source for common sense answers to many difficult questions.

This is how Kreeft and Tacelli make the case:

To help understand Creation and the Fall, the image of three iron rings suspended from a magnet is helpful. The magnet symbolizes God; the first ring, the soul; the middle ring, the body; and the bottom ring, nature. As long as the soul stays in touch with God, the magnetic life keeps flowing through the whole chain, from divine life to soul life, body life and nature life. The three rings stay harmonized, united, magnetized. But when the soul freely declares its independence from God, when the first iron ring separates from the magnet, the inevitable consequence is that the whole chain of rings is demagnetized and falls apart. When the soul is separated from God, the body is separated from the soul---that is, it dies---and also from nature---that is, it suffers. For the soul’s authority over the body is a delegated authority, as is humanity’s authority over nature. When God the delegator is rejected, so is the authority he delegated. If you rebel against the king,
his ministers will no longer serve you. Thus both suffering and sin are traced to man, not God (pg 135).

We suggest you read the above slowly. It is the most succinct and easy to understand explanation for the presence of evil that we have come upon. The conclusion it draws---namely that man is responsible for both sin and suffering---is the Biblical worldview. Man was told all the perks of Eden were free and readily available. Everything man could want was there and there was only one thing man was not supposed to do. We know the story but it is important to note something about human nature at this point. We are inevitably drawn to that which we are not supposed to be draw to. Theologically, this is known as a sin nature. Paul railed against his own nature in Romans 7 and then reminds himself and all of us there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ. None of us are immune to this disease and here’s a simple proof that we are all burdened with it: DON’T THINK OF THE MONA LISA!

What, pray tell, was the first thing that came to your mind? It is impossible not to think of DaVinci’s famous painting. So too with sin. When we are told not to do something our natures immediately turn to the very thing we are not supposed to do. Paul speaks clearly of our old sin nature and how it no longer holds us in bondage. But, as we said, Paul had to remind himself of that reality and it is a good thing for us to do so as well. Because of our sin nature we now have a world where suffering and sin are indeed all too real.

James, Paul, Job and Jesus: Examples of How to Deal with Evil:

*James*

The Book of James provides this little gem of advice:

> Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything. James 1:2-4

Note that James does not dwell on the nature of the trial but is instead totally focused on the response to it. From James’ perspective, the trial is a circumstance that creates an opportunity to depend upon the source of faith. James’ scripture is totally congruent with Jesus’ admonition
that we will have troubles in this world but we should not despair because he has overcome the world.

Paul

In 1 Thessalonians 5 Paul writes these words:

*Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.*

Paul, like James and Jesus places his emphasis on the response to the circumstance, not the circumstance itself. Paul was certainly no stranger to “circumstances.” Note what he wrote to the Philippians:

*I rejoiced greatly in the Lord that at last you renewed your concern for me. Indeed, you were concerned, but you had no opportunity to show it. I am not saying this because I am in need, for I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do all this through him who gives me strength.*

Lots of people recite the last words of this passage without giving due to the context. Paul is reminding his audience that the response to the circumstances is far more important than the actual circumstance. Sound familiar? And then we have the example from Job.

Job

Job is likely the first recorded psychological field trial to document the source of man’s behaviors. Satan posits that Job’s dependence upon God can be shattered by manipulating the environment. God allows the trial to proceed, with the condition that Job cannot be killed.

And so, the experiment into man’s true nature begins. Satan is certain that Job will curse God if enough bad things happen to him. It is important to notice in the Book of Job that God is, for the most part, passive. Job constantly reminds himself that God is worthy of worship after the various calamities strike him but God remains quiet. Job’s friends opine about all the bad things
Job has done and suggest that he should just curse God, die, and get it over with. Job 7:20 provides one gut wrenching example of Job’s anguish:

\[
\text{If I have sinned, what have I done to you, O watcher of men? Why have you made me your target?}
\]

The middle chapters of Job are an ongoing conversation between Job and his circle of friends. They keep pointing out truths that Job is well aware of and then they conclude that Job’s situation is a result of something Job did wrong. In Chapter 12, it becomes clear that Job has had enough of the pandering advice he is getting and he basically goes “all in” and remarks that:

\[
\text{Men at ease have contempt for misfortune (vs 5).}
\]

Job then makes some very important observations that fly directly in the face of what his friends were asserting. They kept claiming that something Job did provoked God to create his misery but Job knew that the truth was far deeper:

\[
\text{The tents of marauders are undisturbed, and those who provoke God are secure—those who carry their god in their hands. (vs 6)}
\]

Job then goes through a series of scenarios where he emphasizes God is sovereign and notes that both the deceived and the deceiver are his. Job was building up to a melting point with his friends and their condescending advice.

\[
\text{What you know I also know; I am not inferior to you. But I desire to speak to the Almighty and to argue my case with God. You however, smear me with lies; you are worthless physicians, all of you! If only you would be altogether silent! For you, that would be wisdom. (Job 13:2-5)}
\]

Even in the face of Job’s withering rebuke, his friends cannot resist further ruminations. Consider Eliphaz’ reply in Chapter 15:

\[
\text{But you even undermine piety and hinder devotion to God. Your sin prompts your mouth; you adopt the tongue of the crafty. Your own mouth condemns you, not mine; your own lips testify against you. (vs 4-6)}
\]
Job finally answers all this “advice” with a reply we should all give careful thought to:

*I could also speak like you, if you were in my place; I could make fine speeches against you and shake my head at you. But my mouth would encourage you; comfort from my lips would bring what you need.* (Job 16: 4-5)

On it goes; with the book of Job pointing out that the “friends” were doing nothing more than providing sanctimonious patronage of Job the man, continuing to belittle him even after Job called them out for doing so. Back and forth the argument goes until Chapter 38, where God shows up.

*The test no one can answer*

In Chapter 38, we hear from God and the questions are direct: “*Where were you when I laid the earth’s foundations?*” was the first question posed to Job and the ones that followed were not any easier. *Have you ever given orders to the morning or shown the dawn its place?*

These questions are the start of the hardest exam that has ever been given on earth. Chapters 38 and 39 document 50 odd questions that God asked Job that could only be answered by God. It does not take a genius to figure out that God was not asking Job questions and expecting answers. God was making a point and he was doing it in such a way that there would be no doubt as to who the Creator was and who was the created. The quiz concludes with this command: *Will the one who contends with the Almighty correct him? Let him who accuses God answer him!*

Job’s answer to all the questions? *I am unworthy—how can I reply to you? I put my hand over my mouth.* (Job 40:3)

*What can we learn from Job?*

- In the midst of Satan’s antics, God remained silent.

Think about that one for a moment. In all of the arguments between Job and his friends about why all this stuff was happening, God remained silent.
• Just because God was silent does not mean God was indifferent.

• Job refused to let what was happening around him influence what he knew in his heart to be true.

• Job proved definitively that our beliefs about God should not be based upon our circumstances in life.

• Job also noted clearly that many times good things happen to bad people, e.g., Job 12:6.

• Job demonstrates clearly that God was more interested in Job’s response to the trial than the details of the actual trial itself. (Sound familiar?)

Many people turn to the end of Job and conclude that the moral of the book is that Job persevered so he was blessed. That, in our view, is an incorrect read of the book. Job had no idea that he would ever be restored so there was no expectation or “name it/claim it” on his part. Job only knew that God was not to be cursed; that the very nature of God was not to be questioned. Job placed his fate in God’s hand (not without considerable consternation) because he knew there was no better option.

There is another event recorded in scripture where someone placed their life in God’s hand and it was also done with considerable consternation. Once again the person knew there was no better place to be than with God, regardless of the circumstances. He was God’s son.

_The Gethsemane prayer_

We all know the scene: Hours before his capture and eventual crucifixion, Jesus is alone in the Garden of Gethsemane. He is anguished to the point of torture and torment. Here we had God talking to God. Jesus spoke his heart: _Abba, everything is possible for you. Take this cup from me._ (Mark 14:36)

What a prayer. It was accompanied by such stress that capillaries were rupturing at the skin’s surface, flooding layers of skin and eventually oozing out through pores. Jesus was literally sweating blood. Then, Jesus made a remarkable statement: _Yet not what I will, but what you will._
The most powerful prayer ever uttered in the history of the world was met with “no.” Chew on that for a second. God the Father and God the Son speaking in the most poignant conversation ever recorded. It is crucial to note that the conversation did not end with God’s reply. If we leave it there, it sounds like we should be prepared to accept that God will not always do what we want and that is not the point at all, although it is certainly true. Jesus’ answer to God’s will is our example to follow. Recognizing the path he would take, Jesus turned to what he knew must be done if man were to ever be able to stand in God’s presence. The trial in this case, even a trial as heinous as a crucifixion of the Messiah, is not the main point of the Gethsemane prayer. The main point is that Jesus’ response was not to focus on the trial but rather how he should respond to it.

Job also understood that how we respond to the trial is more important than the trial itself. He suffered unspeakable loss but it is not hard to read Job and conclude that a summation of the Book of Job is: Not my will but yours.

Paul was a warrior for Christ, enduring many hardships. He was beat several times, faced hunger, and was imprisoned for his faith. He was ultimately beheaded. It would not be incorrect to read all of Paul’s writings on trials and sufferings and also note they can be summarized with the same conclusion—not my will but yours. So too for James. The implications should now be obvious about the reality of suffering in our lives. As Jesus points out in John 16:33, we will have trouble in this world. It will surround us at times and it may even engulf us. At times we may be complicit in the cause of our troubles and at other times it may simply arrive at our doorstep. This is the reality of life on planet earth.

Why is suffering so common?

As Christians we take comfort that the source of our salvation is also the solution for our suffering. Even though that is true, it does nothing to explain why our world is continually bathed in suffering. We believe there is an answer to be had and we find that answer in the temptation of Jesus.

Matthew 4 sets the scene: Jesus, led by the Spirit, goes to the desert to fast. There Satan, hoping to catch Jesus in a weakened mental state, launches an all-out assault on Jesus as Messiah.
Attack 1:

*If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread.*

*Jesus:*  *It is written: Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.*

Attack 2:

*If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down. For it is written: He will command his angels concerning you, and they will lift you up in their hand, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.*

*Jesus:*  *It is written: Do not put the Lord your God to the test.*

Attack 3:

*Again the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor. All this I will give you if you will bow down and worship me.*

*Jesus:*  *Away from me, Satan! For it is written: Worship the Lord your God and serve him only.*

Note Satan starts out with “If you are the Son of God” in two of his attacks. Why would Satan say that? He knew full well who Jesus was, else why would he be tempting him? Satan was playing against the human temptation to answer an insult. Questioning Jesus’ divinity was the ultimate insult and Satan was banking on raising Jesus’ dander so much that he would do something to demonstrate that he was indeed the Son of God. If Jesus responds, he demonstrates he is the Son of God but he relinquishes the claim to Messiah. Jesus will not take the bait.

Satan is now left with his last card. No more pretenses about pride, and Jesus being the Son of God. No, Satan goes for broke and takes Jesus to a vantage point where he can see all that Satan can tempt him with; namely the kingdoms of the world. How can Satan offer something to Jesus if he really did not have the authority to do so? If Satan were not able to offer the kingdoms
of the world, it would have been incredibly easy for Jesus to point that fact out. But, he did not do that.

Does Satan have dominion over the kingdoms of this world? In one sense, the answer is yes and we see it in a title bestowed upon Satan—the Prince of this world (John 12:31). Satan offered the kingdoms because he is currently the benefactor of a lend/lease arrangement with the world and all it has to offer. There will come a time when the lease will be broken and there will be a new heaven and a new earth as a result. That said, an ongoing result of sin is the disconnect of the soul, the body, and nature from God. We therefore should not be surprised at the amount of evil in the world when we consider the current lease holder is evil incarnate.

_Sovereignty of God and free will of man_

You might question why Satan would go to the trouble of tempting Christ. Or, why Satan would tempt Job. If God is sovereign, wouldn’t he already know the answers to these questions (and any other question)? And, if God is sovereign, how can man do something that God doesn’t control?

Skeptics rightfully ask these types of questions. So do Christians. These are important questions because they get to the heart of the tension between God’s sovereignty and man’s free will. How is it possible for both to exist simultaneously? Or is it possible at all? Major contentions have developed within the church around this issue. Are Christians predestined to be Christians? Are non-believers predestined to hell as well?

We would like to take a moment to investigate these questions and we will start by revisiting Job and the temptation of Christ. Did God know how Job would respond when put to the test? Absolutely. Was Job capable of not persevering through his trials? Absolutely. Did God know how Christ would respond when tempted? Absolutely. Was Christ capable of succumbing to the temptations of Satan? Absolutely. How can both be true? We turn to Psalm 139 for the answer.
Lord you have searched me and you know me. You know when I sit and when I rise; you perceive my thoughts from afar. You discern my going out and my lying down; you are familiar with all my ways. Before a word is on my tongue you know it completely O Lord. (vs 1-4)

The Psalmist informs us that God knows all things but the Psalmist makes it equally clear that God is not directing all things. Note that God knows when we sit and rise but God allows those things to occur as a result of our will. God even knows what we will say but He doesn’t take the credit or blame for those words.

Psalm 139 makes it clear that God can see the end from the beginning as does Isaiah 46:10. This has huge implications for our lives. Yes, we do have the capacity to choose or reject God and yes God knows beforehand who will choose wisely. God’s ability to see the end from the beginning is sometimes referred to as middle knowledge. 4 Because of middle knowledge, God can so order the world that every person of accountable age will have sufficient opportunity to choose to recognize their need for a savior. This squares well with scripture such as 2 Peter 3:9:

The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.

And with Romans 1:20:

For since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse.

While simultaneously reconciling with verses regarding predestination such as Romans 8:29:

For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters.

We pose that God in his sovereignty arranges every person’s condition such that it provides sufficient opportunity to accept his saving offer of grace through Jesus via their free will. He wishes none to perish. Those who do not accept grace are without excuse. Those that will accept the offer are foreknown by God in the same manner that he foreknows what a person will say before they say it. Since they are foreknown, they are therefore predestined.
We see no scriptural basis to suggest that God predestines anyone to hell. In fact, the opposite is true. Knowing this may prove very useful when talking to a skeptic about God’s love or God’s sovereignty. Unfortunately, some have made an argument that attempts to position God in a double predestination model. It is not surprising that these explanations often horrify a skeptic and make them question why they would ever want to worship a God that would do such a thing.

What about the person who never hears the good news?

We have entered delicate grounds here and so we tread carefully. The Bible is clear that Jesus is the only path to salvation. The Bible is also clear that faith comes by hearing the word of God. So what to do with the person who has never been exposed to the Gospel? Are they lost because of their circumstances? Born in the wrong place at the wrong time?

Some would argue these people are indeed lost and often point to Romans 1 as text that indicates culpability of those who have never heard the Gospel. Consider the following quote from David Allen as a proper representation of this view:

Strange asks, in what way is this category of people (those who never hear the gospel) savable if they don’t have the opportunity to respond? The answer is really quite simple: they are not savable unless they believe the gospel, and they can’t believe it unless they hear it. They are, nonetheless, culpable before God since they have the witness of both creation and conscience a lá Romans 1:18–32.

Allen’s argument concludes that Romans 1 precludes salvation without someone actually speaking the Gospel to that person. No person, no salvation. But, is this what Romans really teaches? The only way to know that is to take a look at the verses in question:

Romans 1:18-23

18 The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of people, who suppress the truth by their wickedness, 19 since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. 20 For since the creation of the world
God’s invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse.

21 **For although they knew God**, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. 22 Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools 21 and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like a mortal human being and birds and animals and reptiles.

Contrary to Allen’s argument, Romans 1 is not a proof text that no man is saved without someone speaking the Gospel to them. In fact, the opposite is true. Romans 1 is strikingly clear that what may be known about God is plain because God has made it so. Note carefully that man plays no agency in this scripture. Rather than being a text that says man must speak to man about God for salvation to occur the text actually says that God spoke clearly to these men, making what may be known plain to them. In fact, what was “made plain” was so plain that these men knew God.

It is generally accepted that God grants saving mercy to infants that do not reach a time of accountability. That means we already have an exception to the expectation that man cannot be saved unless another man speaks to him. And, how would the deaf, blind, mute of times past had these truths communicated to them? What about the severely mentally impaired?

We believe the way that God works is often beyond the scope of man’s reason. We know that scripture says that God wishes none to perish. 1st Timothy:2 and 2nd Peter:3 explicitly reference this fact. We also know that God is sovereign, meaning there is nothing logically possible that God cannot accomplish.

So, we offer the following argument to bring this conversation into clear focus:

1. God is sovereign;

2. Therefore, God **could** arrange every individual’s life so that they are provided necessary knowledge for salvation;

3. God is love;
4. Therefore, God does not want any individual to perish;

5. Therefore, God will arrange every individual’s life so that they are provided necessary knowledge for salvation;

6. Everyone who will respond, does respond. God’s wish that none would perish is maximized.

7. Anyone who does not respond to the opportunity(s) for necessary knowledge given them would not have responded to any opportunity. They reject what God provides and furthermore would reject any other opportunity that might have been provided. There is no circumstance that God could provide that will not be rejected.

8. Therefore, as Romans 1 states, none are with excuse.

   We are convinced that the God who declares the ability to thread a camel through the eye of a needle also has the capability to provide sufficient knowledge to anyone who would believe. We are equally convinced that God’s loving sovereignty in no way diminishes our responsibility to be the hands and feet of Christ. Indeed, we may be the supplier of the knowledge necessary for a person to transition from separated from God to eternally reconciled with God.

One more word

When will Christ return? We cannot answer that question in terms of a calendar but we do note that Christ’s return will take place only after every person who will accept Christ’s offer of salvation has done so. Anything else would not square with scripture that clearly notes God wishes no one to perish.
Why we can trust a sovereign God

Exodus 12 provided the Jewish nation directions for Passover observance. The observance was initiated to recall God’s judgment upon Egypt for refusing to release the Jewish nation from bondage. Israel suffered under Egyptian rule for 400 years (Genesis 15:13; Acts 7:6) until Moses was designated as the earthly leader of the liberation effort. After several plagues, Pharaoh’s neck remained stiff and he would not free the Israelites. In the final plague rendered by God, death visited the firstborn male of every family. Exception was granted to those houses who had marked their houses using specific instructions found in Exodus 12: 1-14:

The Lord said to Moses and Aaron in Egypt, “This month is to be for you the first month, the first month of your year. Tell the whole community of Israel that on the tenth day of this month each man is to take a lamb for his family, one for each household. If any household is too small for a whole lamb, they must share one with their nearest neighbor, having taken into account the number of people there are. You are to determine the amount of lamb needed in accordance with what each person will eat. The animals you choose must be year-old males without defect, and you may take them from the sheep or the goats. Take care of them until the fourteenth day of the month, when all the members of the community of Israel must slaughter them at twilight. Then they are to take some of the blood and put it on the sides and tops of the doorframes of the houses where they eat the lambs. That same night they are to eat the meat roasted over the fire, along with bitter herbs, and bread made without yeast. Do not eat the meat raw or boiled in water, but roast it over a fire—with the head, legs and internal organs. Do not leave any of it till morning; if some is left till morning, you must burn it. This is how you are to eat it: with your cloak tucked into your belt, your sandals on your feet and your staff in your hand. Eat it in haste; it is the Lord’s Passover. On that same night I will pass through Egypt and strike down every firstborn of both people and animals, and I will bring judgment on all the gods of Egypt. I am the Lord. The blood will be a sign for you on the houses where you are, and when I see the blood, I will pass over you. No destructive plague will touch you when I strike Egypt. This is a day you are to commemorate; for the generations to come you shall celebrate it as a festival to the Lord—a lasting ordinance.”
Lambs were selected on the 10th day of the month and were sacrificed on the 14th. This is a lasting ordinance given to the Jewish nation. The lambs were to be firstborns and without defect, their blood identified the occupants of the house as God’s chosen.

For millennia Passover was observed as a reminder of the time when Israel was released from Egypt’s bondage. One might think the point of Passover was to remind Jews, and by extension New Testament Christians, that God will deliver on his promises. You would be partially right. We say partially right because that framework is retrospective, focusing on a past event.

For God, however, the first Passover was not his ultimate focus. Freeing a country from bondage is definitely a big deal but it pales in comparison to freeing mankind from the bondage of sin. That occurred on another Passover, and it is truly amazing how many details of the account given to Moses and Aaron so many years before are fulfilled at the last supper and in the next few days.

The final Passover

The following section draws heavily from Chronological Aspects of the Life of Christ, a wonderful book authored by Harold H. Hoehner. It should be required reading for every Christian at some point in their walk. Shortly before the final Passover Jesus was working his way towards Jerusalem (John 11:55). According to John 12:1, Jesus arrived at Bethany six days before Passover was to commence; this would be a Saturday. That evening, Jesus was anointed at Simon the leper’s house (Matthew 26:6-13; Mark 14:3-9; John 12:1-8). On Sunday, the next day a large crowd came to Bethany to see Jesus (John 12:9-11).

John 12:12 then states that the next day, Monday, Jesus made his triumphal entry into Jerusalem. This would be the very day that the masses gathered in Jerusalem to celebrate Passover would have been selecting their lambs. This was lamb selection day, the day that Jesus Christ, the lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world (John 1:29) rode into Jerusalem on a borrowed donkey to fulfill the prophecy offered in Zechariah 9:9.

If Jesus arrived in Jerusalem on lamb selection day it is a straightforward analysis to determine that Jesus was slain on the day that the nation of Israel observed as an ordinance of God.
that a firstborn male, without defect, was to be offered as a means to identify who actually belonged to God. And, the means of identification was the blood of that male.

There’s more. According to scripture, Jesus died around 3 pm on Friday afternoon. What is significant about that time? According to the Jewish Encyclopedia of 1906, the Passover sacrifice is to begin at 3pm. Before the individual sacrifices could be rendered there would first be a national sacrifice, offered by the high priest. He was to be spiritually and physically clean and in case he was not, a rope was tied around his leg so he could be drug from the inner temple in case he died as a result of his unclean condition. He would take the lamb selected as the national sacrifice, and at 3 pm he would offer its blood in the Holy of Holies to God as a means of atonement for Israel’s collective sins. It was at that time that the real sacrifice was concluding on a hill called Golgotha when Jesus uttered his last living words (before he resurrected) at 3 pm: *It is finished!* (John 19:30).

Providing THE Passover Lamb on lamb selection day is surely no accident. Sacrificing THE Passover Lamb at the moment when Israel’s High Priest was sacrificing a Passover lamb is surely no accident.

The connection between the Passover of Exodus and the final Passover of the New Testament shows clearly and conclusively that God’s clock may grind slowly but it grinds inexorably. God is sovereign and therefore he and he alone is able to orchestrate events so that all things work for good for those who love the Lord (Romans 8:28). Before time began, God knew how he would solve the dilemma that man created. Man made a mess of paradise, God provided a solution. Man left God deliberately and by doing so declared himself god and God made a way to mediate for that blasphemy. Man never could attain holiness but God made a way for holiness to be imparted. Man could never atone for his sins so God provided grace.

These truths are immutable. They are far more relevant than your bank account, your societal status, or your latest checkup. They are more relevant than a cancer diagnosis or even the death of a loved one. These truths are ultimate because they transcend this world and its troubles. To be possessed by God is to be totally secure in this world and for all eternity. No wonder Paul asked If God is for us who can be against us (Romans 8:31)?
Endnotes: Chapter 5

1. Dostoyevsky, Fiodor. *The Brothers Karamazov*. Some ado has been made by skeptics as to whether Dostoyevsky actually wrote the quote so commonly attributed to him. His novel has been translated into many languages from its original Russian, English included. A thorough analysis of the text and its accuracy can be found at [http://infidels.org/library/modern/andrei_volkov/dostoevsky.html](http://infidels.org/library/modern/andrei_volkov/dostoevsky.html). Ironically, the discussion provides a thorough defense for the accuracy of the quote only to later suggest Dostoyevsky did not intend the statement to be interpreted as is common custom. With apologies to Shakespeare: Alas, poor Yorick, we disagree!

2. The philosophical argument that objective moral reality is dependent upon a transcendent God can be found in a number of writings. A concise presentation may be found in *On Guard* by William Lane Craig.


4. Middle knowledge derives from Molinism. Luis de Molina was a Jesuit priest who argued that God’s sovereignty is not challenged by man’s free will. He posited that God possesses middle knowledge; that is, God is aware of every free choice option that man will choose and He is able to work his sovereign plans accordingly. Psalms 139 is an excellent example of how middle knowledge can interact with sovereignty. Alvin Plattinga has a thorough treatment of the subject in *God, Freedom and Evil*.

5. [http://evangelicalarminians.org/category/exclusivism/](http://evangelicalarminians.org/category/exclusivism/)


7. The entire Jewish Encyclopedia of 1906 may be found at: [http://jewishencyclopedia.com/](http://jewishencyclopedia.com/)
FURTHER REFLECTION

Central Theme:

This attack on God is (the existence of evil), in our opinion, one of the most dangerous. It must be answered and answered well if the skeptic’s understandable concerns will be addressed. Maybe even more important, it must be answered well if we as Christians are not to be doomed to live in constant doubt about whether God is really there and whether he really cares.

Reflective Activities:

1. Does the presence of evil provide evidence that God is not all-powerful or all-loving? What evidence counters this claim?

2. Was evil created?

3. How might God’s sovereignty and man’s free will both be realities?

4. We have argued in this chapter that God’s sovereignty + his nature require that every person have a sufficient opportunity for salvation. Do you agree with our position?

5. Why were Job’s friends so insistent on blaming Job for his problems?

6. We have argued in this chapter that our response to trouble takes precedence over the problem itself. Do you agree with our position? If so, what are the implications for a believer?
Prepared to Give an Account for the Hope We Have

Then you will know the truth, and the truth shall set you free.¹

We hope that we have demonstrated the Christian faith is not blind. It is based upon fact and reason because God has been generous in the clues he left for anyone that might believe. All that said, we find ourselves increasingly in hostile waters from the world’s perspective. Consider the following online post with a religious theme as a typical example:²

“Religion demands the removal of all logic and reason. No thanks, I like being sane.”

“Faith in a magical sky fairy? You prove my point.”

“We don’t laugh at religion, only at its followers.”

We could go on but this short discussion thread distinctly documents the gulf between skeptics and believers. We are painting with a broad brush here, but we maintain the premise we present is true more often than not. Namely, skeptics tend to criticize our beliefs from their head and believers tend to defend beliefs from their heart. It is also true that many skeptics criticize our beliefs from a perspective of pain and suffering. They might say that even if there is a God he is not worth my time. We want to discuss these lines of attack separately since they are so different and we begin with the first scenario.

Knowledge: Necessary and often lacking

We are certain there is truth to the generalization that skeptics attack from the head (and as we will see shortly, perhaps from the heart as well). Therefore, it is imperative that churches adapt strategies that accentuate the rationality of the Christian faith while still maintaining the emphasis upon spiritual growth and maturity.

If a church expects to attract skeptics, it seems like we will need to appreciate the mindset the skeptic is likely to bring. Given the derision that is found among many skeptics to our beliefs it is to be expected that we must first implement a practical approach to explaining not only what
we believe but, just as importantly, why be believe. If we cannot answer the why, a skeptic is almost certain to dismiss the what.

So, how do we proclaim the good news to those who are not particularly interested in hearing it? First, by becoming grounded in our beliefs. We really need to know and communicate a rational argument for the existence of God and the divinity of Christ. We also better be prepared to speak to someone about how God can exist in a world inundated with pain and suffering.

This is a first step, but it is not the final step. If we internalize the truths of God and the Bible, it is hard to see how they would not be transformative. Said another way, since we are new creations in Christ we should behave that way. God has made that doable for us by providing His Spirit to indwell us, to live with us and to produce fruit through us.

If we as believers hold the upper hand in these matters why are we so reluctant to engage discussions with skeptics? Our conclusion is the reluctance stems mostly from a lack of appreciation for how well grounded our cases are for the four pillars of Christianity. Although we hold credible answers for the difficult questions posed by skeptics we do not tend to access them as often as we should and this is a major impediment to the proclamation of the Gospel. Furthermore, the lack of appreciation for the soundness of our beliefs is likely having major consequences in churches and their members. For example, it has often been noted that the divorce rate for Christians and non-Christians is essentially the same. How can this be if the transformative power of the Holy Spirit is guiding our marriages? How can it be that churches fail to add a single member in a year? Or, that so many churches are closing their doors?

Perhaps a major reason for all of these tragedies is the lack of appreciation for the pillars of our faith? If we as believers are absolutely convinced that God exists, Jesus is divine and that he denied death and provides a means for us to do so as well; if we are convinced that the solution to a world so plagued by pain and suffering is a relationship with the one true God that promises we will one day be removed from pain and suffering forever, why isn’t that translating into results? The forces that drove 12 men to change their world are still available to us today and the God who created this universe is still alive and well. Maybe, just maybe, if churches emphasized why we believe as much as what we believe it might make a difference? Maybe?
Good things...But not sufficient things

Churches are sensitive to the challenges we just noted but we are afraid the strategies often employed to meet these challenges are hamstrung because their focus is on peripheral changes rather than core truths. In an effort to attract new members, churches have retooled their delivery strategies. To reach a new generation, new songs are sung. To increase socialization, coffee shops spring up. To demonstrate the inclusiveness of the Gospel, pastors dress casually. To enhance personal accountability, small groups are emphasized. To a skeptic, these efforts may make the church appear contemporary, inviting, and interested in fostering friendships. Good things all, but none of these accoutrements are sufficient to convince someone (anyone) that the Church possesses Truth.

James Emery White tackles the problem of the rising percentage of people who no longer consider church important in his book Rise of the Nones. White argues that churches a few years ago erred when they moved too far towards a “let’s go and be” at the expense of “come and see.” Friendliness, children’s ministry, music, building, and the importance of the visual are identified as crucial for a church to be sustainable.

White may be correct about the cultural attractiveness of these strategies but it begs this question: What is the value of an attractive church that cannot or does not answer ultimate questions? That question is not posed to bash White or his book but the fact that it can be asked indicates the lack of attention that is provided to addressing the four pillars of Christianity by one of the most popular books on reimagining the experience of church in print today. Certainly there are some who are attracted to church because of these attracting strategies. Ultimately though, every person who has ever attended and will ever attend a church wants to know whether the whole exercise is a charade or whether there really is a God that provided a means for sinful man to be reconciled with Him for all eternity. For whatever reason, this universal truth is under recognized and too often ignored by far too many churches and efforts to revision churches. As we have continuously asserted, the church tends to assume that our truths are accepted and we have seen the crippling results of this flawed conclusion. Unfortunately, a lackadaisical approach to our truths is directly correlated to the continued demise of the Church’s influence and indeed its credibility in the eyes of skeptics.
We believe that, on any given Sunday, pews are full of “hopers,” i.e., people who have no way to validate that what they believe is in fact true. They feel the presence of God but they also wonder whether the feeling is self-created. They pray to a living God but they wonder if they are speaking to themselves. They wonder about their salvation because they wonder about whether anything they believe is believable.

If this is the case, no amount of environmental improvements will fill the void created by doubt. A church can be friendly, inviting, and contemporary and do little to assuage the doubts of the believer in the pew. And if the church is not easing the doubts of the believer it should be all too clear what is happening in the skeptic’s mind.

A large segment of churches follow White’s conclusions, focusing on the experience of worship at the expense of the defense of the message. Strong words. But, how else to explain the repeated attestations by “grizzled” believers we alluded to in Chapter 1? How else to explain how they have never been exposed to the core rationales for the Christian faith in their respective churches? If the mature believer does not have a grasp of the rational basis of their faith how do they grow during worship? Most importantly, what are they really worshiping? Their plight seems to be more similar than dissimilar to the “hopers” we just described.

The failure to build a strong foundational argument for your case would be fatal in a court room, a board room, a family, or virtually anywhere else. That said, the institution that guards the most important truth of all is often failing to build its case. The loss of cultural influence and relevancy the Church is experiencing today is due to many factors but none carry more weight than the failure to adequately explain why we know what we believe is true.

It is intuitive to say there are two reasons people attend church, either they are looking for God or they have found God. It may be intuitive but it is also fatally simplistic. Many are attending out of habit, others are attending out of fear, hedging bets as it were. Still others are wrestling with many of the doubts we have articulated while others are looking for a reason to believe. We could go on but you get the point. There are as many reasons people are attending church as there are people in the pews. The glue that should bind them all should be the commonly held beliefs about the existence of God, the divinity of Christ, the reality of Christ’s resurrection, and a proper perspective of pain and suffering but unfortunately, that is just not the case.

In his book, White correctly notes that churches are composed primarily of folks who are already churched. Said another way, churches keep trading church members and typically are not
terribly effective at reaching new members, at least not new members who tend to approach Christianity from a skeptical perspective. We are recycling Christians and, for the most part, failing to reach the skeptic and the doubter.

Knowledge + Application: Both are necessary and neither stands alone

There is another situation that the church must do a better job of addressing. The reality of pain and suffering is often seen by the skeptic or cynic as game, set, and match when it comes to accepting Christianity as rational. This problem involves both the head and the heart. It is not enough to explain suffering, we must be willing to engage it if we are to have any shot at credibility. Nothing replaces a friend that stands with you when times are particularly bad. Job’s buddies were very good at providing rationales for his anguish but they were no help at all. Telling the woman who had a miscarriage that is was God’s will and then walking away causes more problems than it solves. The head cannot be separated from the heart in God’s economy.

In Auburn, Alabama, a group of internationals met weekly for language classes. Friendships developed and moved beyond the Wednesday meetings. A family from South Korea began meeting with Wade and his family. Eventually, the man revealed he was mad at God because his mother, a Christian, had died from cancer even though there had been fervent prayer for healing.

Time passed, and eventually the family was to return to South Korea. The last night in Auburn they were hosted for dinner by Wade and his wife. It is reasonable to assume they were the only South Koreans in America eating seafood gumbo but that is another story. As the man, wife, and his three-year old child left the house for the last time, the gentleman turned and gave his last goodbye: “Many people have talked to us about love but you have shown it. We have much to think about.”

Aha, you say. That story demonstrates that he never questioned why we believe but here is the rest of the story. A few weeks prior to that encounter a group of internationals were sitting at a table eating dinner before the language classes began. One turned to Wade and said: “I want to believe in God but I need proof.” “What kind of proof would you like?” “I want to see that salt shaker move.”
It was pointed out at that point that there were stories of folks being raised from the dead and people being healed that, although seen, did not serve as “proof.” In other words, if that was the burden of proof expected it was not going to be reached. But, when asked if a rational explanation for the existence of God was something he would like to see he enthusiastically said he would.

A week later, at a Saturday BBQ, there were about 75 Internationals. They were there to play table tennis, eat BBQ and hang out. They had been told if they wanted to they could stay for a presentation on the rational existence of God. Everyone stayed. The room was jammed with doctoral and post-doctoral students along with their spouses.

They went through a rational explanation for the existence of God and asked for questions. One remarked that Wade should write a book and everyone agreed the presentation offered a strong defense of God’s existence.

Our South Korean friend was there at that presentation. He had begun to weigh the validity of the arguments and he was no longer willing to dismiss God as an artificial construct. Now he had to wrestle with how the Christian God could allow his mother to suffer and die. It was clear in his particular case that the rationality of the message AND the expression of love that comes from God’s grace were BOTH necessary ingredients for him to renew his own struggle to determine ultimate reality. The rationality of the belief would have been insufficient without the expression of love that accompanies a life in Christ and indeed, the expression of love would have been insufficient without the rational basis for its source.

We return now to a now familiar scripture. It has served as the starting point for this book and it is a reminder to us all that we cannot separate the head and the heart when it comes to God.

15 But in your hearts revere Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, 16 keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander.

Always be prepared to give an answer is another way of saying be able to tell people why you believe. Do this gently and with humility so that people cannot slander you because of your good behavior. People should know we are changed by Christ because we should be broadcasting
this fact to a skeptical world that is trying just as hard as we are to make sense of what they see around them.

The head and the heart at work. This is how the church is designed to operate. We hope our thoughts will serve to remind Christians everywhere that we do not have to shrink when our beliefs are challenged. So, what now?

Chapter 6: Endnotes

1. The words of Jesus as recorded by the Apostle John 8:32.

2. Three things are now certain in life: death, taxes, and the launching of insults by both sides any time an article with Christian overtones is posted on a web site.

3. The Barna Group tracks divorce rates for Christians and non-Christians. The good news is the often reported 50% failure rate for Christians and non-Christians is a myth. Barna reports the general divorce rate around 33% and notes that those who identify as Christians have a divorce rate of 32%. If one is looking for ‘good news,’ those who identify as evangelicals had a divorce rate of 28%. https://www.barna.com/research/new-marriage-and-divorce-statistics-released/


5. The Pew Research Center has an extensive bank of research on the trends associated with church attendance. An example of their research can be found at: http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2013/09/13/what-surveys-say-about-worship-attendance-and-why-some-stay-home/
REFLECTIVE ACTIVITIES

Central Theme

If we cannot answer why we believe, a skeptic is almost certain to dismiss what we believe.

1. Are churches responding appropriately to the rising skepticism they face?

2. In your opinion, do churches tend to assume the average church attendee is well-versed in the pillars of the Christian faith?

3. Is there a strong likelihood that many attending church today do so hoping the Christian faith is true instead of knowing that to be the case?
A Call to Action for Churches

More and more churches are relying on marketing strategy to sell the church. That philosophy is the result of bad theology. It assumes that if you package the gospel right, people will get saved.¹

Jesus told Peter the gates of hell would not prevail against his church. If we know anything it is that Jesus can be trusted. The Church is God’s primary means of spreading the Gospel and maturing the believer. Indeed, the former will not take place without the latter. Additionally, the Church is a sanctuary for the wounded and the displaced. In other words, the Church is a place where the head, the heart, and the hands are all engaged.

We believe the previous chapter makes it clear that churches are very sensitive to the hands and heart but not quite as focused on the head. We also believe this shortcoming is a significant hindrance in furthering the cause of Christ. With this in mind, we now turn to a set of recommendations that every church should carefully gauge to see if there might be cause to incorporate some or all of the following.

*Every church should provide members with an adequate base of foundational knowledge*

1. Believers Need Information

The focus here is on the believer’s well-being. Changing oil and filters, rotating tires, and performing tune-ups at the correct mileage intervals are necessary to keep cars running optimally. By the same token, knowledge maintenance is necessary to ensure believers are equipped to fend off the attacks that are being generated at an ever increasing rate. These attacks tend to originate from science, history, or morality and Christians should be able to recognize them and deal with them. Like cars, churches should have a “service engine soon” option that allows believers to deal with doubts, acquire knowledge and ultimately live confidently that their faith is not blind and their hope is not whimsy.
As we just noted, skeptical arguments are almost certain to come from science, history, or morality. Christians should feel confident in dealing with these issues, and towards this end, churches should provide regular presentations on the existence of God, the divinity of Christ, the evidence for the resurrection, and the Christian response to evil.2 Included with this book are reflective questions for each of these topics. Churches may choose to use these resources or develop their own but in either case it is important that the effort be provided high priority on the calendar.

2. Believers need to know how to share their knowledge with grace and humility.

We have argued there has been a not-so-subtle shift in the culture that makes “sharing your story” very difficult. First, the church has not been terribly effective in guarding its own intellectual property. As a result, many skeptics now assume that Christianity and superstition are synonymous. Second, there is a loss of credibility because of this and the church is now placed in a defensive mode where any efforts to evangelize are met with cynicism. Third, the culture is becoming increasingly secular and there is a growing view that religion has no place in daily conversation.3

All of these factors mitigate against a testimony based primarily upon personal experience. That type of witness is likely to be seen as an irrational attestation to something that is not real, the motives as questionable, and the whole effort as intrusive. Recently over lunch, a friend of ours relayed how he had tried to speak to his neighbor about God. He asked his neighbor about his walk and the neighbor said my walk is fine, why? The friend replied he meant how was his walk with God? The neighbor responded: “God who?”

Ouch. Hard to go anywhere from there. We need to recognize that this type of response is no longer uncommon. If we start from the supposition that God is understood to be a reality, we are quite likely going to be shocked at how quickly that supposition is challenged. We should also be aware that as general church attendance declines, fewer and fewer people have been exposed to Sunday school and sermons where Biblical stories have been retold. As a result, the level of Biblical illiteracy is on a steady uptick. People who are Biblically illiterate are not likely to have any interest in pursuing the claims that the Bible makes. For the most part, it is correct to assume the illiteracy is a result of apathy or rejection of the Bible altogether. Asking this type of skeptic about their walk with the Lord is just about guaranteed to be met with derision.
So how then do we make our case? First, we are most likely to gain an audience when we are speaking to someone we know. We are all bombarded with spam and robo calls and we have all become accustomed to quickly screening what we wish to hear and what we wish to delete. If we are not careful we will become “human spam” that becomes a nuisance before we ever get to the heart of a conversation.

Most people are not real comfortable doing this though. Speaking to someone you know about what you believe can seem a little disingenuous. No one likes to be invited to dinner to find out it was really an excuse to present an investment scheme. So too with the skeptic. If there is a feeling that the whole conversation is contrived it may already be on borrowed time. This problem is not unique to our current time. In fact, Peter anticipated the problem.

15But in your hearts revere Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect (1 Peter 3:15)

People do not generally ask strangers to give a reason for the hope that they have. Peter is suggesting that people see something different in us and they will want to know what it is. That means they know us and they not only know us but they know us well enough that they want to know the motive behind our behavior.

Returning to the previous example, it is clear the neighbors have known each other for quite some time. So far, so good. The problem is the neighbor did not ask. If he would have said: “I don’t think I’m right with God, what do I need to do?” it would have been very appropriate to take that invitation and answer with gentleness and respect. Bringing the question to the table without those dynamics colors the whole conversation as we saw.

We are not suggesting the neighbor should remain in stoic silence until an opportunity to respond with gentleness and respect arises. If he did that, there would likely never be an opportunity to be had. We are suggesting initiating a conversation of this nature has a greater chance at success if the skeptic is asked to critique what we believe rather than having to defend what they believe. This is not far removed from the bulk of everyday conversation that everyone engages in. We routinely explain why we like one car over another, why we choose to eat at a particular restaurant, and so forth. Explaining why we believe there is a God, why we believe Jesus is the Son of God, why we believe in the physical resurrection of Christ, and why we believe
there is a Christian perspective to suffering that explains how evil and God can both exist is far different than telling “our story.” In the right circumstances, our story is not what we say but what we do. Our story in this case is that our lives become a testimony that prompts someone to ask why we behave the way we do. Now we get to give a reason for the hope that we have.

That will not be the norm for many of us though. In many cases we will be speaking with someone that we simply do not know well enough for that type of a question to arise. That does not mean we cannot be ambassadors for Christ but it does mean we will likely need to adapt our conversation to a place where we ask someone to critique what we believe. But, if we do that, we had better be prepared to give rationale for our beliefs or the conversation will serve to heighten the skeptic’s conviction that the whole “Jesus thing” is nothing more than a personal claim to truth instead of an absolute standard of reality.

3. Churches need to provide practical training on how to speak to a skeptic

Churches have diligently covered how to witness to others but these efforts typically assume a willing participant. That is, they assume that you are witnessing to someone who is actively seeking or at the very least open to considering your personal testimony. There has been little attention given to reversing the conversation and allowing the skeptic to question the “whys” of our faith. That needs to change.

There is a desperate need for churches to provide opportunities for their congregation to learn how to speak intelligently about their belief in God, the divinity of Christ, the evidence for the resurrection, and the Christian perspective on suffering and evil. Training of this nature should allow members to practice in real-life scenarios with people who can skillfully challenge the argument that is laid out by the apologist. Practice, perseverance, practice. This process builds confidence in what you want to say and how you want to say it. It allows for self-analysis about ways to confidently respond when our beliefs are challenged (and they most assuredly will be challenged) and it is based on real world expectations.

4. Churches should focus on the essentials

The existence of God, the divinity of Christ, the evidence for the resurrection, and the Christian perspective on evil/suffering are the big issues. If a skeptic wants to argue the sun cannot go backward, for example, it might be a good time to note he/she is arguing against the
possibility of a miracle (an argument from science). Since that is the case, it would be useful to investigate the wildest miracle claim of all, the resurrection of a man three days dead, to see if it holds water. If that miracle can be verified, the other miracles are certainly within the power of an omniscient and omnipotent God.

If the skeptic contends that the Bible is a book written by men, full of errors, it might be useful to point out the prophecies about Jesus and their fulfillment in the New Testament. Of course this will lead to other discussions but that is precisely the point. Now we are having discussions about what we believe rather than disparaging the skeptic for what they do not believe.

It should be obvious that these types of conversations will be fluid and will require a foundational knowledge base and an ability to speak clearly to the points that are being made. This is why churches need to get directly involved in training programs to help their members develop strong apologetic skills.

5. Churches should consider working together to host apologetic conferences and speakers

The topics we have covered are foundational, not denominational. The willingness of churches to band together in a common cause of educating their members would have numerous advantages. Small churches simply cannot afford this type of enterprise but working with other churches there would be an adequate economy of scale so that even the smallest church’s members could benefit. Also, these efforts could create synergy between churches, something that is far too rare in today’s world. The ability of churches to work beyond denominational lines is going to be essential if the church is going to realize its true potential. Ecclesiastes 4:12 comes to mind and although the context is about people, the same principle applies if you substitute churches.

*Though one may be overpowered, two can defend themselves. A cord of three strands is not quickly broken.*

6. Churches should create training teams to assist other churches

There will be times when, for whatever reason, churches may not be able to pool their resources. In these cases, churches that have the means should develop teams of trainers and coaches to assist other churches in their efforts to build a foundational knowledge base for their congregations. This means that you need apologists who can hit the road. It also means you need
teams that can follow up with the real world training that is vital to producing confident witnesses for Christ.

In today’s world the Church operates far too often as a single entity. This type of exercise could be a launching point where churches merge their talents and strengths for the single cause of Christ.

7. Churches should talk about these topics regularly

Foundational pillars of the faith should continually be affirmed and honored. It is incumbent upon the Church to announce to skeptics and member alike what our core beliefs are and why we know them to be true. Repeating these truths and their defenses regularly is the primary means of ensuring they are passed to the next generation.

The future church

Tremendous amounts of time and talent are being expended on re-inventing churches to meet the shifting cultural sands. Churches are working diligently to be viewed as warm and open environments where people can find friends and refuge. This progress should take with it the never changing argument for the truth of our message. The message is always more important than the medium used to disseminate it. The way we conduct church is simply a tool to convey universal and timeless truths about the veracity of the Christian worldview.

The message too often seems to be lost in translation. The church of the future will need to recognize it is facing multiple challenges on simultaneous fronts. It seems there has been a tendency to attack these challenges in silos, i.e., Sunday school for youth, contemporary services for Gen X and Y, traditional services for the grey hairs, and on and on. These are all tools to carry the message. Yet, as we have seen throughout this book, there is a pretty good chance that the message being delivered by these tools does not adequately prepare believers to address attacks upon the pillars of our faith.

The next generation of believers will be challenged to reclaim ground that has been lost in the intellectual battle with non-believers. We cannot afford to remain passively silent while atheists work zealously to undermine our credibility. And, we certainly cannot assume it is
someone else’s responsibility in the church to provide the defenses. Finally, we cannot afford to get caught up in details about how we deliver the message at the expense of the message itself.

So, what exactly is the message? It is simply this: The God of the Bible exists, Jesus Christ is divine, he has risen from the grave, and he and he alone provides a solution to the pain and suffering we all feel in this life. Accepting these truths and recognizing the need for Jesus to intervene on a person’s behalf so that they can be brought into an eternal relation with the Father is the ultimate end for this message. Defending this message is the mission, and we pray this book has contributed towards that end.

Chapter 7: Endnotes

1. MacArthur’s musings on the subject can be found at: http://www.gty.org/resources/articles/A163/Gimme-That-Showtime-Religion

2. We find it remarkable that so much is assumed about foundational beliefs for church attendees. Many churches hold ‘101’ courses but they often focus on what the church believes about certain denominational positions rather than why (and how) the whole enterprise of Christianity can be rationally defended.

3. As documented in the foreword, there is a disturbing trend in the public’s rising skepticism of the credibility of religion. This bad news is exacerbated by an apparent gross misrepresentation of the attendance rates for church attendance by perhaps as much as 50% or more.

4. This necessity is likely one of the most overlooked in churches today. We are aware of several instances of poorly prepared apologists having their arguments tossed back at them because many have said so at our presentations. These people went on to say that the experience was so disquieting that they were very reluctant to ever engage those types of conversations again. Thankfully, these stories were shared within the context of how they would now be able to speak confidently to other people because they were equipped to do so.

5. The further we travel from the fundamentals of the faith the more likely we are to create a hazard or diversion from belief. As an example, the age of the earth has no bearing on the resurrection of Christ. Yet, much time and energy is mistakenly placed upon winning
that argument, thereby losing the opportunity to have the larger and more important
conversation.

6. An unfortunate irony about God’s church is the incredible lack of economy of scale.
The opportunity to work hand-in-hand with other churches on large issues is something
we do not do very well.

REFLECTIVE ACTIVITIES

Central Theme

The topics we have covered are foundational, not denominational. Foundational pillars of
the faith should continually be affirmed and honored.

1. What do you see as the biggest threats to the Church’s ability to meet the challenges we
have covered?

2. Where do you see the church in 10 years?

3. From your perspective, has the Church adequately defended its four foundational pillars
from skeptical attacks?

4. Do you feel more confident about your faith and your ability to express the evidence for
your faith to others?