

Apologetics Boot Camp

Goal: prepare students for entering a college environment or workplace which may be hostile to their faith.

Means: apologetics – the discipline of defending the truth of the Christian through reason and evidence.

Content: answers to common objections to Christianity as well as positive arguments supporting Christian truth claims.

I. Challenges to Christianity

A. Pluralism – are all religions equally valid?

1. **Pluralism often claims that religious truth is described by the parable of the blind men and the elephant.** Five blind men each grasp a part of an elephant. The blind man holding the tail says “An elephant is like a rope”. The blind man holding the leg says “An elephant is like a tree”, etc... But a wise man tells them that they are all holding an elephant. Postmodern moral: Every religion has one piece of the truth, but the truth is too big for any one religion to grasp
2. **We need to also consider the parable of the blind men and the five household objects.** Five blind men are holding a rope, a tree, a wall, a snake, and a fan. But a wise man tells them that they are all holding an elephant. How do you know which parable we are in?
3. **Tolerance itself is intrinsically exclusive.** Tolerance is only inclusive to those who abandon exclusive truth claims. It excludes those who believe in objective or exclusive truth.
4. **Truth may not necessarily be appealing to us.** As 21st century Western individualists, we find exclusivity offensive. But something can be offensive and still true.
5. **Believing an idea is wrong does not require you to disdain the person holding it.**
6. **Questions:** Is germ theory intolerant because it claims superiority over other beliefs about disease? Is inclusivity intolerant because it claims superiority over exclusive religious beliefs?

B. Sex – is the biblical view of sex correct?

1. **Contrary to prevailing cultural beliefs, the Bible commands either monogamy within marriage or chastity.**
2. **All cultures have significant moral blind spots. What makes us think our culture is different?** There are many historical examples of horrifying evils that were culturally accepted or even endorsed: slavery, child labor, sex trafficking. Other cultures did not feel these things are wrong or experience any guilt about them. How do we know that we are free of these blind spots?
3. **Transcendent moral values will almost always be counter-cultural.** If there are objective moral values that transcend cultures, then they will contradict every culture’s values at some point.
4. **Peer pressure is powerful.** Do not underestimate the cost of bucking accepted social beliefs.
5. **Temptation is powerful.** Do not underestimate your ability to rationalize personal gratification.
6. **Questions:** How do you know what is or is not moral? Is feeling and emotion always a reliable guide to what is right? Are there people in the world right now who would be offended by some of the teaching of Jesus? If so, should you expect the teaching of Jesus to never offend you?

C. Biblical criticism – is the Bible historically reliable?

1. **Apparent contradiction does not necessarily imply actual contradiction.** There are apparently conflicting statements made in the NY Times, the Wall Street Journal, and Newsweek. Does this mean that we can completely ignore the information presented in these sources?
2. **Objectivity is difficult or impossible when it comes to religious documents.** No one can approach any religious document or religious figure with perfect objectivity. When a document, whether the Bible or the Qu’ran or the Book of Mormon, has implications for your eternal destiny, we cannot avoid a bias. While Christians are biased in favor of the Bible, atheists are biased against it. There is no neutrality. Thus, we should not be surprised if people come to different conclusions about its contents.

3. **Our knowledge of ancient history is often extremely limited.** The vast majority of documents composed in the ancient past are now lost and archaeology can recover only a very limited amount of material. Therefore absence of evidence is not evidence of absence.

4. **Questions:** on what are you basing your beliefs in the fallibility of the Bible? Have you read a wide spectrum of books on the subject? How much physical evidence exists to reconstruct the history of the ancient world?

D. Evil – does the existence of evil disprove the existence of God?

1. **God can have morally justifying reasons for allowing evil even if we don't have access to them.** The Bible declares that God has justifying reasons for allowing evil and suffering to exist. But it affirms that not reason are often not comprehensible to us. If I do not see an elephant in the room, I can be fairly certain that there is not an elephant in the room. But if I do not see a carbon-14 atom in the room, I cannot be certain that there is no carbon-14 atom in the room. How do we know that God's justifying reasons for evil will be obvious or clear to us? Especially when the Bible tells us that they are not. Both human free agency and God's glory in showing justice/mercy are biblical justifying reasons for the existence of evil.

2. **In the absence of God, there can be no objective standard of good and evil.** If God does not exist, then what is "evil"? Evil implies some objective moral standard. But in the absence of God, such an objective moral standard does not exist. So in the absence of God, we can affirm that the world is full of "suffering", but we cannot conclude that suffering is "evil". If naturalism is true, then "evil" is equivalent to "something we don't like". I might as well conclude that the existence of lima beans (which I also don't like) disproves God's existence.

3. **Questions:** Are we sure that we can discern the justifying reasons God has for allowing evil to exist? Does evil actually exist within a naturalistic worldview?

F. Science – is science incompatible with faith?

1. **There are numerous truths intrinsically inaccessible to empirical science:** for instance, logical and mathematical truths, the existence of other minds, and the limitations of science.

2. **Science gives us access to empirical facts, but not to values.** This is known as the is-ought gap. For instance, science can tell us that sex trafficking is taking place in Southeast Asia, how many children are involved, and even what cultural/social/economic issues are driving it. But it cannot tell us that sex trafficking is evil. Science can tell us what is, but not what ought to be.

3. **Even if we were to completely grant that science made God's existence unnecessary, that would not make the existence of God false.** If I decide one day that quantum mechanics is unnecessary for achieving my career goals, is quantum mechanics no longer true? If we decide that Christianity is not necessary for building a happy society, does that mean that Christianity is no longer true?

4. **Necessary for what?** If religion is true, then human beings have more at stake than 70 years of happiness or unhappiness on earth. What are we using to evaluate the "utility" of a given idea?

Notes:

II. Foundations:

A. Who is Jesus? Lord, Liar, Lunatic

1. The gospels present generally reliable accounts of Jesus' words and deeds

- a. **Manuscript evidence.** We have more at least an order of magnitude more manuscripts of the NT than any other work of ancient writing (5000 NT manuscripts vs. 600 manuscripts of Homer's Iliad)
- b. **Archaeological evidence.** Numerous archeological finds corroborate the existence of places, terms, and historical figures mentioned in the NT (burial box of Caiaphas, burial box of James, synagogue at Capernaum, Jacob's well, the pool at Siloam, Herod's palace at Caesarea, etc...)
- c. **Corroborating evidence.** Numerous non-Christian authors provide corroboration for major and minor statements made in the NT (Josephus, Pliny, Tacitus, Suetonius)
- d. **Internal evidence.** The NT documents contain internal evidence for their reliability such as multiple attestation, inclusion of embarrassing details, reliance on personal accounts and eyewitness testimony
- e. Alternative portraits of Jesus rely on the dismissal of large parts of the gospel narratives, are often contradictory (see Jesus seminar vs. Ehrman), and are suspiciously similar to current cultural trends

2. Jesus made claims that would have been absolutely horrifying for anyone to make but God

- a. He claimed to forgive sin (Mk. 2:1-12, Mt. 9:2-8, Lk. 5:18-26, John 8:1-11)
- b. He claimed to be the only way to God (Matt. 11:27, Lk. 10:22, Jn. 14:6)
- c. He claimed that he could heal the sick and raise the dead (Matt. 11:5, Lk. 7:22, Jn. 5:28-30)
- d. He claimed that we must love him more than our family or our own life (Mt. 10:37, Lk. 14:26)
- e. He claimed that he would return at the end of time to judge all of humanity (Mt. 19:28, Matt. 25:31, Jn. 5:28)
- f. Notice that these passages are taken from all four gospels and throughout Jesus' ministry

3. Therefore, Jesus is either God or he was a criminally insane and evil

B. A strong historical case can be made for the bodily Resurrection of Jesus.

1. The Resurrection passes three major tests for historicity used by critical scholars

- a. **Multiple attestation:** all four gospels and Paul's letters contain accounts of the Resurrection
- b. **Embarrassment:** the accounts contain details that would have been embarrassing to the early church
- c. **Dissimilarity:** the Resurrection conflicts with both Jewish and pagan conceptions of the afterlife

2. Based on the suffering they endured, the apostles must have believed they had seen Jesus risen from the dead

3. Paul, a vehement opponent of the Jesus movement, suddenly became an apostle after claiming to have had an encounter with the Resurrected Jesus

4. In 1 Corinthians 15, Paul claims that 500 witnesses, many of whom were still alive, could testify to seeing Jesus post-Resurrection

5. The tomb of Jesus was probably empty of Easter morning

- a. All four gospels record that the empty tomb was first reported by women despite the fact that women's testimony was not considered legally valid and would have undermined the case for the Resurrection
- b. The rapid spread of the church and Matthew's story of the guards at the tomb are both consistent with a historical empty tomb
- c. Jesus' tomb was not venerated by early Christians, despite the fact that they venerated the tombs of others
- d. The majority of scholars accept the historicity of the empty tomb
- e. Numerous skeptical scholars who deny the Resurrection still propose scenarios which would have resulted in an empty tomb (reburial hypothesis, stolen body hypothesis, etc...)

6. **There are non-Christians who affirm that a ‘strong historical case’ can be made for the Resurrection**
 - a. Jeff Lowder, agnostic founder of infidels.org: “there are strong historical arguments for the Resurrection...but...there are good reasons to reject such arguments.”
 - b. Anthony Flew, atheist turned deist (but not Christian): “The evidence for the Resurrection is better than for claimed miracles in any other religion. It's outstanding in quality and quantity...”
 - c. Pinchas Lapide, orthodox Jewish scholar: “I accept the resurrection of Easter Sunday not as an invention of the community of disciples, but as a historical event.”

C. God can be known through revelation

1. **The God of the Bible is a revealing God**
 - a. If God exists, then he could make himself known
 - b. If the God of the Bible exists, then he desires to make himself known to mankind
2. **God reveals himself both through general and special revelation**
 - a. Since God created the universe, he is reflected in creation albeit unclearly and nonverbally
 - b. If Scripture of any kind exists (the Bible, the Qu’ran, the Book of Mormon), then God reveals himself in words, not just in mystical experiences
3. **Jesus is God’s ultimate revelation**
 - a. If God is personal, then the ultimate revelation of himself God could provide would be in a person
 - b. As God himself, Jesus fully reveals God’s character as one of love, holiness, justice, and compassion

D. What is the gospel? I am a great sinner; Jesus is a great savior.

1. **If objective moral values exist, then by any normal standard I am an utter moral failure**
 - a. I fail to live up to the own moral standards I had as a child
 - b. I abandon the moral standards I claim to hold deeply when they conflict with my personal gratification
 - c. I fail to live up to the objective moral standards of atheist philosophers like Peter Singer or Sam Harris
 - d. I fail to live up to the moral standards prescribed by various world religions like Buddhism, Confucianism, and Islam
 - e. I fail to live up to the moral standards prescribed in the Bible
 - f. I fail to live up to the moral standard set by Jesus to “Love God with my whole heart and love my neighbor as myself” which he said is the essence of God’s law
2. **Jesus alone offers complete forgiveness and acceptance to moral failures**
 - a. Jesus alone does not pretend that we are not radically evil
 - b. Jesus alone offers complete forgiveness for those who are radically evil
 - c. Jesus alone offers to transform my heart (i.e. my will, mind, and emotions)
 - d. Jesus alone claims that my hope for forgiveness, acceptance, and transformation rests not on my own goodness, but entirely on the work of Another

E. Questions: If Jesus appeared to you in an undeniable way and told you that the Bible was true in all it said, what would be your reaction? Would you rejoice? Would you gladly submit to Jesus’ teaching and turn your whole life over to his lordship? Would you rush out to tell your friends about the forgiveness you had received in Christ? If not, doesn’t this mean that intellectual issues cannot be the only reasons behind your rejection of Christianity?

Notes:

III. Safeguards:

A. Right foundations

- 1. Regarding all Christian beliefs as equally important is silly and dangerous.** For instance, the Lordship of Jesus, the atonement, baptism, cessationism, church polity, and eschatology should not all carry equal weight with us
- 2. Scripture ought to be central to all our beliefs**
 - a. Jesus trusted the Bible completely
 - b. The apostles believed that their teaching was authoritative, inspired, and commanded by Jesus
 - c. The Bible has been viewed as foundational and inspired throughout all Christian traditions for 2000 years
 - d. Christians have experientially affirmed that God speaks through Scripture for 2000 years
 - d. Abandoning the Bible leaves a void of authority that nothing can fill
 - e. Personally, I have witnessed the power and necessity of Scripture to inform our beliefs about God
- 3. Our trust in Scripture should be inferential or presuppositional, not deductive**
 - a. **Inferential** – Jesus is completely trustworthy. Jesus trusted Scripture. Therefore I trust Scripture.
 - b. **Presuppositional** – The Bible is God’s Word. Therefore it is trustworthy.
 - c. **Deductive** – My perfect knowledge of Greco-Roman and Near Eastern history, Greek, Hebrew and Aramaic leads me to conclude that Scripture is inerrant. My ability to resolve all biblical difficulties leads me to conclude that Scripture is inerrant. **This is obviously not a good approach.**
- 4. Inerrancy of Scripture is not equivalent to inerrancy of interpretation**
 - a. **Inspiration** – the Bible is in some way inspired by God
 - b. **Infallibility** – the Bible is accurate in all it teaches regarding matters of faith and practice
 - c. **Inerrancy** – the Bible is accurate in all it teaches (see Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy)
 - d. **“Fundamentalism”** – my reading of the Bible is accurate in all it teaches. **This is not a good model.**
- 5. Inerrancy does not mean that we will always find good answers to all of our questions**

B. Active prayer life

- 1. Persevering in the Christian life is impossible apart from God.** Faith is not primarily a matter of intellectual belief. It is the response of a personal relationship with God. Faith grows as our personal intimacy with God grows. Apart from God, you will abandon Jesus. So seek God daily and his help to persevere.
- 2. We can directly apprehend of truth through the work of the Holy Spirit.** Apologetics is important. But the vast majority of Christians throughout history have not had access to the apologetic resources that we have. Does that mean that apologetics is useless? No. But it means that God can make his truth directly apprehensible to us. We need not just intellectual knowledge of the truth but experiential knowledge of the truth.

C. Active discipleship

- 1. Doubt often accompanies temptation.** Do not underestimate your innate sinfulness. Intellectual doubts often come at times when it would be convenient if Christianity were false.
- 2. Faith grows through perseverance.** Our faith grows through the testing of our faith. The longer our faith is tried and tested, the stronger it grows.
- 3. Faith grows through obedience.** Despite all my interest in apologetics, I find my faith is strongest when I am serving or ministering to those in need. If faith flows primarily from a personal relationship with Jesus, then faith will be strengthened by active love and obedience towards him as much as it is strengthened by intellectual arguments.

D. Active church membership

- 1. There are no new questions.** Do not imagine that you are the first person to ever grapple with some questions. Talk to a pastor, a friend, a mentor. If they don’t know the answer, ask someone else. Make

use of the gifts that God has given to the church. You need the body of Christ and as radically individualistic 21st century Americans, we need to be constantly reminded of this.

2. God is at work in his church. One of the best places to encounter God is in the body of Christ. You will hear his word preached, see him healing the sick and witness his gospel lived out. If someone doubts that the sun exist, I could sit down and explain astrophysics to him. But it would be far more effective to lead him outside to a green field on a sunny day. The best evidence for God's existence is an encounter with the living God.

Resources:

www.shenvi.org/ - My own website. Contains responses to the work of the Neoatheists, various essays, and course notes. I would be more than happy to correspond with any of you if you have questions, concerns, etc.

www.reasonablefaith.org/ - website of philosopher and apologist Dr. William Lane Craig. Contains a great Q&A database

www.leaderu.com/ - CRU's website. Contains excellent apologetic resources

www.apologetics315.com/ - best apologetics blog on the Internet.

Book list:

Beginner:

The Reason for God by Tim Keller – best apologetics book and presentation of the gospel I've ever read

The Case for Christ by Lee Strobel – a readable introduction to historical evidence for the Resurrection

Mere Christianity by C.S. Lewis – not perfect, but a must-read for its classic treatment of the moral argument

Intermediate:

Reasonable Faith by William Lane Craig – summary of philosophical arguments for Christianity

The Universe Next Door by James Sire –fantastic catalogue of worldviews (theism, deism, naturalism, etc...)

The New Testament Documents: Are They Reliable? – F.F. Bruce. Classic work on NT reliability

Advanced:

The Resurrection of Jesus by Mike Licona – extensive treatment of the Resurrection

The Blackwell Companion to Natural Theology - edited by William Lane Craig and J. P. Moreland. 700 pages.

\$170 but available on Kindle for \$37!

Notes: