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# A Reason to Believe

## How to Share Christianity in an Academic Environment

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Gerald Connell

**A** college student who grew up in the Adventist Church once said to me, "I believe in unbelief." Another Christian student attending a state college confided in me, "I'm going through a crisis. I wonder if God even exists at all. I'm wondering if I even want to be a Christian." Another person that I have now been studying the Bible with for almost two years said shortly after we began, "These lessons would be fine, Jerry, but first you have to convince me that God even exists."

These examples are not unusual for a pastor working in a church around public colleges and universities. In an academic environment where the majority of people believe that everything is relative, and that there are no good evidences to support the claims of Christianity, the issue is not What you believe?, but rather Why do you believe at all?

Unfortunately, many students have never questioned their unbelief. Often, statements such as the first I quoted above are due to disillusionment with organized religion. Sometimes they reflect a defense mechanism used by students to rationalize their chosen lifestyle. It may be an expression of alienation, a way of saying, "There is nobody in the universe who really cares." Actually, most students have never bothered to search out their reasons for unbelief. They have never asked the right questions.

I wish there were hordes of students banging on the church's doors, desperate to find answers, but such is not the case. There are, however, students with a void in their lives. Those of us who study and work in an academic environment must find the answers that

help students to consider Christianity as a reasonable belief option. Apologetics provide answers.

Below is an outline of the process through which I often put students who want a reason to believe.

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### The Case for Belief

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#### First: Establish the Implications of Unbelief

When a student tells me he believes in unbelief, I suggest that he may not have thought through the consequences of unbelief. I ask him to tell me the speed of light. He may give me a curious look while rattling off the number—186,000 miles per second. That means light travels more than 5 trillion, 865 billion miles per year. Next, I graphically describe the magnitude of the universe. Astronomers tell us that we can see 10 to 15 billion light years into outer space. In that space are an estimated 10 billion galaxies. In our one little galaxy, with a diameter of 100,000 light years, whirl 100 billion stars. I say, "You know, the universe is very big. Planet Earth is only a little speck in a giant cosmos. Do you agree?" Students always say Yes.

Then I suggest that within the massive universe is one planet inhabited by more than 5 billion

people, of which he is one. There are 5 billion who don't know or care that he exists. Within 50 years after he dies only a handful will remember that he ever lived and breathed.

I sum up by saying, "By your unbelief you are saying that you accept the fact that you have come from nowhere and that you are going nowhere. You are merely taking up a small amount of space and time with an existence that will very likely be of no consequence. You are embracing the idea that within a relatively short period of time after your death most people will have forgotten you. And it all really doesn't matter, because you are merely a speck of animated dust in a gigantic universe."

The reponse is usually, "That doesn't sound so good. I'd never really thought about it that way."

#### Second: Establish the Possibility of the Existence of God

I ask the student if he would be willing to make a wager. (It's called Pascal's Wager.) I ask if he would grant that there is a 50/50 chance that God exists. I suggest to the student that he cannot prove that God doesn't exist, hence the 50/50 chance. Since there is a 50 percent chance that God exists, no reasoning person violates logic by making either choice. The decision should be made then on what is pragmatic—how to maximize one's happiness. If God exists, you gain everything by belief and nothing by unbelief. If God does not exist, belief will bring you no worse destiny than that for millions who choose unbelief. Therefore, belief is the only prudent choice.

#### Third: Establish Further Reasons for Belief in God

*Most students have never bothered to search out their reasons for unbelief.*

I then outline for the student the four traditional arguments for the existence of God. (These arguments are expanded in *Apologetics*, by William Lane Craig.)

*A. The Ontological Argument.* Something must exist that is greater than what the human mind can conceive. God is therefore the greatest conceivable being.

*B. The Cosmological Argument.* Anything that comes into existence has a cause. Something exists; therefore, there is a first cause. As Aquinas said, "Anything that is in motion is being moved by something else. Nothing can be self-caused since nothing can bestow itself into existence." Leibniz stated it well when he asked, "Why does anything exist at all; why does the universe exist?"

*C. The Teleological Argument.* This is the principle of order. Any product is the result of a producer. The magnificent structure of the universe testifies to a divine designer.

*D. The Moral Argument.* Since there is an ultimate good, something or someone must embody the ultimate good. In society we see a gradation of values. Some things are better, truer, and nobler; therefore, something or someone that is best, truest, and noblest of all must exist. That is, God.

#### **Fourth: Demonstrate How God Reveals Himself to Man**

Since there are reasons to believe that God exists, one is able to go another step. As the embodiment of the good, it is reasonable that God would communicate with human beings. The question is, How would he accomplish this? God communicates with humanity in two basic ways.

*A. Through natural revelation.* Psalm 19:1 says, "The heavens declare the glory of God." I explain to the student that God has revealed himself to us through nature. He transcends nature. In Romans 1:19, 20 Paul declares that God speaks to all people in every era through the things he has made.

## *It really doesn't matter because you are merely a speck of animated dust in a gigantic universe.*

*B. Through supernatural revelation.* Hebrews 1:1 tells us that God revealed himself to a particular people at a particular place in a particular cultural setting, culminating in the revelation of Christ.

Once the possibility of God communicating with human beings has been established, I spend a significant amount of time on a variety of important issues: the credibility of Scripture, the factuality of Christianity, the historicity of Christ, the claims of Christ, Christ as the fulfillment of prophecy, and the case for the resurrection. Each of these issues has its own particular line of evidence and reasoning, some of which appears summarized below.

### **Revelation and History**

Building the credibility of the Scriptures can be done by sharing briefly the history of the Bible. I mention, for example, the fact that the Bible was written over a period of 1,500 years by 40 authors from a variety of walks of life, both educated and uneducated. These people lived in three continents, and wrote in three languages: Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek. I point out that the Scriptures have a common theme and demonstrate agreement even though a wide variety of topics are discussed. Josh McDowell writes insightfully, "It is difficult now to take even 10 people writing at the same time and have them all agree on something." To have 40 authors write over a period of 1,500 years and agree is even more miraculous.

I discuss the findings of the Dead Sea Scrolls. I show how they help to build confidence by showing us that Scripture manuscripts hidden for nineteen hundred years are essentially the same as what we have now in translation. A university student needs to see how sacred the Scriptures were to the Jews, and how carefully they preserved the sacred texts, which were for them the very words of God. Once a student believes that the Scriptures can be trusted, it is easy to build a case for the historical factuality of Christianity.

Clark Pinnock of McMaster University is convinced that Christianity is firmly founded in history. He writes that "the facts backing up the Christian claim are not a special kind of religious fact. They are cognitive informational facts upon which historical, legal and ordinary decisions are made." Again he states, "The facts of the Christian faith cannot be set aside because of a philosophical a priori that presupposes the nonexistence of God, the impossibility of miracles, or the historicity of the resurrection" (quoted in McDowell, *Evidence that Demands a Verdict*). A student must have a sense of the methods behind the writing of accurate history. The historian's task is not to construct history from presuppositions, but to let the evidence speak for itself.

The New Testament authors themselves provide a powerful witness for the historicity of Christ. Matthew, John, and Peter were disciples of Jesus. Matthew was known in the early church as the authority on Jesus. John, a disciple from Jesus' inner circle, wrote his Gospel and Epistles so that we would believe (John 20:31). He tells us categorically that the Christ which he proclaims is someone he has seen and touched (1 John 1:1-3). Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians 15:6-8 that after the resurrection of Christ, more than 500 people saw him. As the apostle Paul stood before Festus witnessing of Christ, he said, "What I am saying is true . . . The

king is familiar with these things, and I can speak freely to him. I am convinced that none of this has escaped his notice."

Some people may doubt these historical accounts. Personally, I find it inconceivable that a book that teaches strict honesty could itself be based on lies. All Christians need to remember that believing in Christ costs something. It is difficult to imagine the disciples giving up their lives for a myth or a lie.

The early church fathers are a good source to use in demonstrating the historicity of Christ. They wrote about Jesus and quoted extensively from the New Testament. J. Harold Greenlee says that "the quotations of the Scriptures in the works of the early Christian writers are so extensive that the N.T. could virtually be reconstructed from them without the use of New Testament manuscripts" (quoted by Josh McDowell in *Evidence that Demands a Verdict*, p. 50). In fact, the church fathers of the first centuries after Christ quote the New Testament 86,489 times.

Historical records refer to Jesus. Writing of the reign of Nero, Cornelius Tacitus, the son-in-law of the governor of Britain in A.D. 80-84, referred to Nero's persecution of Christians, the followers of "Christus," the religious founder who was put to death by Pontius Pilate, procurator of Judea. Thallus the Samaritan, a historian writing in A.D. 52-54, tried to explain away the darkness at the crucifixion of Christ as a natural phenomenon by suggesting that it was a solar eclipse.

All this evidence reinforces F. F. Bruce's statement: "Some writers may toy with the fancy of a Christ myth. But they do not do so on the ground of historical evidence. The historicity of Christ is as axiomatic for an unbiased historian as is the historicity of Julius Caesar" (quoted by McDowell, *Evidence*, p. 81).

The well-known biblical scholar John Warwick Montgomery says,

## *It is difficult to imagine Christ's disciples giving up their lives for a myth or a lie.*

"What then does the historian know about Jesus Christ? He knows first and foremost that the New Testament documents can be relied upon to give an accurate portrait of him. He also knows that this portrait cannot be rationalized away by wishful thinking, philosophical presuppositionalism or literary maneuvering" (quoted by McDowell, *Evidence*, p. 81).

### **The Claims of Jesus**

Once the historicity of Christ is established, I then examine the person and claims of Christ. Among the major personalities of history, Jesus was unique in his claims. In the pages of the gospels we see Jesus making startling statements. People whom he spoke to realized there was something different about him. "He spoke with authority" and not as other men taught (Matthew 7:29). In an authoritative manner he claimed the following:

- His word was more authoritative than Moses'. Jesus said, "You have heard that it was said . . . But I tell you" (Matthew 5:21, 22).
- He was equal with God the Father: "The Father and I are one" (John 10:30-33). He also said, "He who has seen me has seen the Father" (John 14:9).
- When asked under oath if he was the Christ, the Son of the Blessed One, he said, "I am" (Mark 14:61-64).
- He stated that our eternal life depended on our belief in him. "Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God and Jesus Christ whom you

have sent" (John 17:3). He also said, "He who believes in me has eternal life" (John 17:3).

- He said that no one comes to the Father except through him (John 14:6).
- He claimed that all judgment was given to him (John 5:22).
- He forgave a person of his sins, thereby claiming the power to forgive sins—a privilege granted only to Deity (Luke 5:20-22).
- He taught that he should receive the same honor himself as that given to God the Father (John 5:23, 24).
- He accepted worship as God (Matthew 8:2, John 9:35-39, Matthew 14:33). In contrast, Peter rebuked Cornelius when he fell down at his feet adoring him (Acts 10:25-26).

When the evidence is presented, only two choices are apparent—either Jesus' claims are false or they are true. If they are false, then he was a deceiver and a truly evil man. No good person would make Jesus' claims if such claims were false.

Jesus fulfilled more than 60 prophecies in his lifetime—29 of them in the last 24 hours before the crucifixion. (Josh McDowell's book *Evidence That Demands a Verdict* has an excellent section that lists these prophecies and shows how they were fulfilled.) Go through these prophecies one at a time and show prophecy and its fulfillment. When students understand that Jesus had no control over events in his final hours, and thus could not have manipulated them to fulfill prophecy, this has an amazing impact on them.

Finally, beyond the startling claims and the prophetic fulfillments, the major evidence that proves the divinity of Christ is the resurrection. This last piece of evidence involves extensive documentation, for which we have no room in this short article. I recommend three books on this topic: *The Resurrection Factor*, by Josh

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without any sign or evidence of the marred history of man.

The hope of that kind of restoration gives the Christian worldview both direction and purpose. The anticipation commands the Christian to look beyond the present, to press for optimism in the midst of despair, to never give up when answers are not readily available, and to cherish the hope that the doors of learning will never close.

### Conclusion

Worldview is a construct—a perspectival construct about the make-up of life as it struggles with the questions of reality, truth, ethics, and history; a confessional construct that provides a point of departure, a sense of direction, a locus of destination, and a strategy of unity; as well as purposive construct that meets the basic needs of human life and action.

Given that definition, in order to find meaning for existence and destiny, Christians must be certain of their worldview. They need to have not only a theocentric certitude but also a faith-commitment to the worldview. Such a commitment need not be a source of either embarrassment or apology. All people work on that basis, and it is essential for Christians to find their anchor in the surety of their faith commitment to Christ, in whom is revealed the basis for the biblical worldview.

Such a worldview must begin with the reality of God, who stands sovereign over his creation and at the same time relates to his creatures. Yet all is not well with this world: the problem of sin and the presence of the evil one seriously challenge the character of God, the nature of his kingdom, and the existence of humankind. A conflict is raging between good and evil in human person and history, and God has chosen to expose the nature of this conflict, deal with the issues of the controversy, provide humanity a redemptive possibility, and direct history toward the in-

evitable triumph leading to the restoration of his creative purposes. The method God has chosen to accomplish this purpose is Christ. God in Christ thus becomes the central point of reference for the Christian worldview.

### NOTES

1. Brian Walsh and Richard Middleton, *The Transforming Vision: Shaping a Christian Worldview* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1984), p. 35.

2. All quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are from the Revised Standard Version.

3. Deuteronomy 5:26; Joshua 3:10; Isaiah 37:4; Jeremiah 10:10; Matthew 16:16; Romans 9:26; 2 Corinthians 6:16; Revelation 7:2.

4. Genesis 2:16; 17:1-3; Exodus 29:42; 33:9-11; Deuteronomy 5:4, 24, 27; Psalm 85:8; Isaiah 52:6; Hebrews 12:25.

5. Genesis 50:20; Job 1:12; Psalm 40:17; Proverbs 16:9; Isaiah 46:11; Jeremiah 26:3; Romans 8:28; 2 Timothy 1:9; 1 John 3:8.

6. Matthew 6:26, 28-30; 1 Peter 5:7; Exodus 22:21-27; 23:9; 1 Kings 19:5-7.

7. Genesis 6:6; Psalm 95:10; 1 Corinthians 10:5.

8. Psalm 69:30, 31; Proverbs 16:7; Hebrews 11:5; 1 Kings 3:10; 1 Thessalonians 4:1; 2 Timothy 2:4.

9. 1 John 3:16; 4:16; Psalm 91:14; Exodus 34:6, 7; Jeremiah 32:18; Isaiah 63:7.

10. Psalm 7:11; 79:5; 80:4; 85:5.

11. Genesis 18:25; Psalm 50:6; 75:7; Acts 10:42; Romans 2:16; 3:6.

12. See Owen L. Hughes, "A Christian View of Human Personality", *Dialogue*, Vol. 1, No. 2 (1989), pp. 12-14, 29.

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### Reason to Believe

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McDowell; *The Day Death Died*, by Michael Green; and *Who Moved the Stone?*, by Frank Morrison.

The claims of biblical Christianity and the evidences of the divinity of Jesus have withstood the scrutiny of intelligent people through the centuries. We do not need to abandon rationality in order to accept them. There is, indeed, a reason to believe.

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### Useful Books

Those wishing to have at hand good material on sharing their faith and answering questions about Christian beliefs will find these books helpful:

- Cornell, Edward John. *An Introduction to Christian Apologetics*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1984.
- Craig, William Lane. *Apologetics*. Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1984.
- Green, Michael. *Was Jesus Who He Said He Was?* Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1987.
- Green, Michael. *The Day Death Died*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.
- Küng, Hans. *Does God Exist?* New York: Vintage Books, 1981.
- McDowell, Josh. *Evidence that Demands a Verdict*. San Bernardino, CA: Here's Life Publishers, 1979.
- McDowell, Josh. *The Resurrection Factor*. San Bernardino, CA: Here's Life Publishers, 1981.
- Morrison, Frank. *Who Moved the Stone?* Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1976.
- Schaeffer, Francis. *He Is There and He Is Not Silent*. Wheaton, IL: Tyndale, 1972.
- Sire, James W. *The Universe Next Door*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988.