

# **OVERCOMING OBJECTIONS TO CHRISTIAN FAITH**

**BRIAN JOHNSTON**

Copyright © 2014 HAYES PRESS

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form, without the written permission of Search for Truth UK.

Published by:

**HAYES PRESS CHRISTIAN PUBLISHERS**

The Barn, Flaxlands

Royal Wootton Bassett

Swindon, SN4 8DY

United Kingdom

[www.hayespress.org](http://www.hayespress.org)

Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from the HOLY BIBLE, the New King James Version® (NKJV®). Copyright © 1982 Thomas Nelson, Inc. Used by permission. All rights reserved. Scriptures marked NIV are from New International Version®, NIV® Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.™ Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide. Scriptures marked NASBB are from the New American Standard Bible®, Copyright © 1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1995 by The Lockman Foundation. Used by permission. ([www.Lockman.org](http://www.Lockman.org))



# CHAPTER 1 – INTRODUCTION

*“Always be prepared to make a defence to anyone who calls you to account for the hope that is in you.” (1 Peter 3:15)*

That was the Apostle Peter's inspired advice geared towards helping thoughtful non-Christians. The word he uses for 'defending' or 'making a defence' is the word from which the term 'apologetics' comes. Not that we have to apologize for our faith, but it's our responsibility to always be ready to defend it. Nor should we think even for a moment that we can argue people into God's kingdom. Not at all. While it's necessary that we can defend our beliefs, any reasoned argument we can make will never be sufficient in itself. The power of logic cannot do what only the power of God's Spirit can. But the Spirit of God can use us – just as he used the Apostle Paul when he reasoned, explained, gave evidence and persuaded the crowds at Thessalonica (Acts 17:1-4).

I can remember the case of a neighbour whose name was Kath. For weeks in a house group Bible study a few of us in the local church shared our faith. The questions came pouring out of Kath. They were honest, sincere questions – pretty well all the classic objections to the Christian Gospel. But still Kath wrestled with the issue of coming to faith in Christ. Then the opportunity came along to take her to a Gospel Rally or Crusade – in fact it was a Search For Truth National Rally conducted by the Churches of God. This was back in the mid-80's. Kath heard the Gospel powerfully presented in song, testimony and sermon that

evening, and God spoke to her. She wanted to go forward and give her life to Christ, but in the end she felt she couldn't negotiate the crowds and the narrow gaps between the rows of seats. But on the bus on the way home we had the joy of leading her to Christ. I mention this because one of her neighbours asked her the very next day: "But what about all your questions, Kath? Have you finally accepted the answers to them all now?" Kath's reply indicated that her understanding of the answers previously given to her hadn't changed – it was simply that she had taken a step of faith and now found that those same answers satisfied her. They were a support for her faith, but could never substitute for it.

It's important we make that point clear as we begin this study. But notice again with me the Apostle Peter's words. He asks his fellow-believers to be prepared to give an answer; and if we're to be prepared to give an answer – to anyone who asks after the reason for the hope we have, then that must imply that our lives have already been drawing out questions from others – our lives must have already been declaring the sure hope that we have in Christ. So that's the very first challenge that speaks to my life here. The fact that we have such a living hope should make our lifestyle choices distinct from people around us, and that in turn should stimulate discussion. We need to be prepared for that discussion. That's Peter's next point in the verse with which we began. It's about being prepared to make a defence of our Christian hope and faith.

We've to be prepared to give an answer – literally, an 'apologetic' answer, by which we mean an answer that defends our faith. Apologetics is the term that's usually applied to the kind of pre-

### OVERCOMING OBJECTIONS TO CHRISTIAN FAITH 3

prepared answer we might give to questions like those we'll be looking at in this study. We'll aim to cover all the usual ones, one at a time, like the objection which asks, "But why do the innocent suffer?" We often meet this type of challenge when we've been witnessing to the fact that God is a God of love. But if he's a God of love, some object, why does he allow innocent people in this world to suffer? We need to be assured that there's a solid basis for what we believe in God's Word, one which cannot be overturned. The Christian faith is a reasonable faith. God, graciously, has furnished us with evidence we can use.

Another point from the Apostle Peter is that we've not to reflect back any malice coming to us from the questioner. That's not the spirit of Christ, who did not revile those who reviled him. We're to give our answer with gentleness and respect. This will glorify God, and may be used by him to bring about conviction in the heart of even a foul-mouthed accuser!

## CHAPTER 2 - WHY DO THE INNOCENT SUFFER?

How might we be prepared to handle the challenge often faced during witnessing, which basically asks, "Why do the innocent suffer?" Why do some individuals seem singularly unfortunate, and why do natural disasters happen, killing women and children? Typical responses are, "How can there be a God?" or "Why does God allow it?" The assumption is that suffering in this world is inconsistent with the existence of a God of love. Either God is not all-loving or he's not all-powerful; for surely – or so it's presumed – he cannot be both when we see examples of innocent people suffering.

There's no doubt that we need to handle this issue with special sensitivity when dealing with hurting people. I'm reminded of a time when Malcolm Muggeridge, the British journalist and author, had been speaking at All Soul's Church in London, UK. There followed a question and answer time during which the speaker was often called upon to defend his conversion to Christianity. After what had been described as the last question was dealt with, Muggeridge noticed a young boy in a wheelchair trying to say something. He said he would wait and take his question. The boy struggled, but no words came out. "Take your time," Muggeridge said reassuringly. "I want to hear what you have to ask ... I'll not leave until I hear it."

Finally, after a real struggle, one often punctuated with agonizing contortions, the boy blurted out, "You say there's a God who loves us." Muggeridge agreed. "Then, why me?" Silence filled the

## OVERCOMING OBJECTIONS TO CHRISTIAN FAITH 5

room. The boy was silent. The audience was silent. Muggeridge himself was silent. Then, he asked, "If you were able-bodied (fit), would you have come to hear me tonight?" The boy shook his head. Again Muggeridge was silent. Then he added: "God has asked a hard thing of you, but remember he asked something even harder of Jesus Christ. He died for you. Maybe this was his way of making sure you'd hear of his love and come to put your faith in him." In any situation like that, empathy should be first and explanations – such as we're able to give – a very definite second. When we sense we're dealing with a sincere enquirer, and when the time seems appropriate to enter into a reasonably detailed exploration of the subject matter, then what we can do is map out an overall biblical framework that helps us to begin to understand suffering, at least in principle.

Let's see what explanation the Bible gives. It tells us that suffering is a consequence of the separation that exists between God and man. And that this separation has been caused by sin. So we can't blame God for human suffering. The Bible tells us that God created the world in love and that he loves us individually. But if God is good, and on the side of good, why do terrible things happen? What's gone wrong? The Bible's answer is: we did. The London Times leader column said the day after a massacre at an Infant school in Dunblane, Scotland (13 March 1996): 'Christ was born among innocent slaughter and died on the Cross to pay the cost of our terrible freedom – a freedom by which we can do the greatest good or the greatest evil.'

The Bible makes it clear that God created us with free will ... but then we chose to disobey God and do our own thing. That broke our relationship with our loving Creator. It's this separation be-

tween God and ourselves that's the cause of all the suffering that's in the world – and which will finally result in eternal separation from God unless we each personally obey the message of Christianity. For only God has the answer to this problem. And Jesus Christ is God's answer. When Jesus died on the cross, he took on himself the consequence of our disobedience. His death made a way between us and God again. By rising from the dead Jesus conquered the power of death for ever. Now God requires that we each personally repent and receive Jesus, his Son, as our Saviour.

What's more, it's clear that God is concerned about our pain – to the extent that, in the person of his son, he came as a man, Jesus Christ, and 'joined us in suffering.' That was the expression used by a Church of Scotland minister when interviewed by a BBC News reporter on December 21, 1988, when Pan Am Flight 103 exploded in the sky over the Scottish town of Lockerbie. "It was like meteors falling from the sky," one resident said. Others told how pieces of plane as well as pieces of bodies began landing in fields, in backyards, on fences and on rooftops. Fuel from the plane was already on fire before it hit the ground; some of it landed on houses, making the houses explode. Twenty-one houses were destroyed with 11 occupants killed. The total death toll was 270, including those on the plane. The reporter turned on the minister and asked, "Where is your God now?" To which the calm reply was: "God has joined us in suffering – in the person of his son, he came as a man, Jesus Christ, and joined us in suffering."

Beyond that, Christ's sacrificial death on the cross for our sins laid the basis for bringing all suffering to an end, but the time for



## OVERCOMING OBJECTIONS TO CHRISTIAN FAITH 7

that hasn't arrived yet. And until it does arrive, God uses suffering to work out his higher purposes in our lives – in a way that's not very different from how a surgical procedure involves pain, but is directed towards a positive outcome for us. Becoming a Christian doesn't guarantee freedom from physical suffering on earth while we wait for Jesus to come again and take believers away from suffering to be forever with him. The Bible teaches that God treats as a Father those who are his children by faith and this can also involve suffering for corrective purposes – just as happens in an ordinary human family.

Suffering can also be for God's glory. Today there are many believers suffering persecution for the Name of Christ. It is God's will for them: humbly they accept it, and God is glorified. Many have come to discover true meaning, and purpose in their lives through tragedy. Their crises have brought them to faith. It was like that with a young Jamaican girl I heard a preacher talk about. She had been terribly assaulted and her body left a real mess of marks by her attackers. She was understandably very bitter. The preacher spoke compassionately of his saviour who also had marks on his body — the marks of the cross. She took his Saviour as her own and later rejoiced in a joy she'd never experienced before. In sharing the Gospel, we learn to expect that events like the attack on the Twin Towers on 11 September 2001 in New York will be raised as an objection to the very existence of God. In responding to events like this, someone spoke for many when he said, "I want to sue [God] for negligence, for being asleep at the wheel of the universe."

But we betray our instinctive morality when we react to things that happen by labelling them 'good' or 'evil'. Can words like

'good' or 'evil' really have meaning if we don't believe in God? One bold atheist, Oxford University's Richard Dawkins, would say, "No." Since he doesn't believe in God, he also flatly says there's 'no evil and no good'. At least he's being consistent. But suppose you were to accept there's no God – and so basically no 'good' or 'evil', can we then accept that September 11 is just a morally meaningless event in a meaningless world? If we feel we can't go that far, then we're forced to draw the conclusion that a consistent atheist doesn't appear to have any answers after all – and what's more – no basis for even asking the questions about the morality of such atrocities.

The more you think about it, the more the existence of evil in our world points us towards the existence of God – and not away from it. Why? Because unless we refuse to label atrocities as 'evil', we're still faced with the reality of God. But what's the relevance of Christianity to the atrocities of this groaning world? Edward Shillito, while viewing the destruction of the Great War, helpfully wrote: 'to our wounds only God's wounds can speak'. Yes, there's pain and suffering at the heart of the Christian message, but it's not only human pain: it's the pain of God. After all we've said, a question mark remains over human suffering, but we do need to put it in the context of the cross of Christ – which is the mark of divine suffering. We may have to wait for justice and peace in the world, but we can know God's forgiveness for our sins on a personal level and be at peace with him right now. For God has joined us in suffering to give us the offer of ultimately being with him in a pain-free future:

*“He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old*

## OVERCOMING OBJECTIONS TO CHRISTIAN FAITH 9

*order of things has passed away.*" (The Book of the Revelation 21:4).

## CHAPTER 3 - DON'T ALL RELIGIONS LEAD TO GOD?

“We believe that all religions are basically the same -  
at least the one[s] we read [were].

They all believe in love and goodness.

They only differ on matters of creation, sin, heaven,  
hell, God, and salvation.”

So says the poet Steve Turner in one of his satirical poems. The lines we've just quoted aim to make the point that the reality about various religions is very different from popular opinion. People say, "All religions are basically the same", but a closer look shows this isn't the case at all. Even if all roads were to lead to Rome, it's certainly not true that all religions lead to God. Although the packaging might seem similar at a casual glance; the actual contents are very different. But, someone could respond: "Does it really matter anyway?" To answer that, allow me to share a story which may quickly become familiar:

It had been a thirsty journey. The stranger, now tired, sat by the village well. After a while he saw a figure emerge from the neighbouring city and head towards the well. It was a Samaritan woman from Sychar, a city of Samaria, coming to draw water. As she approached the well, she'd no reason to believe this day would turn out to be much different from any other; no reason at all to suspect that the stranger at the well would turn out to be

## OVERCOMING OBJECTIONS TO CHRISTIAN FAITH 11

the Son of God. What was immediately obvious to her was his Jewish-ness, but when he began to speak to her revealing supernatural knowledge of her past life, she realized he must at least be a prophet. No doubt she felt uncomfortable – because her past life wasn't one to be proud of. At the very first opportunity, she tried to steer the conversation away from this topic, by introducing the vexed issue of religious differences between Jew and Samaritan into their conversation. "Our fathers worshipped in this mountain," she pointed out, as recorded in John's Gospel, chapter 4, "But you Jews say that Jerusalem is the place where people ought to worship."

It seems there's nothing like religion when you want to be controversial. Sadly, just as here, it's often used as a smoke-screen to divert attention from personal issues. But this woman would have to return to those – just like we all do sooner or later – when face to face with the claims of Jesus Christ. Jesus did actually comment on the religious differences between Jew and Samaritan, but went on to speak of a time (already beginning then) when there would be an end to all religious barriers between Jew and Samaritan and between Jews and the Gentile world at large. The Jews had been privileged, but from now on, Jesus said, they would be on an equal footing. It would take a profound event to bring about a change like that, and Jesus was looking ahead to his own death on the cross. Back at the well, Jesus brought the Samaritan woman to the point of decision, for when she talked of the coming Messiah or saviour, Jesus said plainly, "I am He." And so, a woman with a non-Jewish religious background came to accept Jesus as the saviour of the world. He is the saviour of

the world, for in all its nationalities and cultures, there's no alternative.

During his life, Jesus confronted those of his own nation with the same claim that he was the Messiah or saviour, indicating that the way of salvation was no different for proud, religious Jews. He could say to them, bringing them also to the point of decision, "*Except you believe I am He, you'll die in your sins*" (John 8:24). There's that same claim again – "I am He" – this time to Jews. Jesus claimed to be the one the world had been waiting for ever since the disaster in the Garden of Eden. Whether to practising Jews or to non-Jews – in fact, whatever our religious background or culture – God's message to the world, and to every race following the death of his Son, is believe on Jesus and be saved – meaning saved from the penalty our sins justly deserve.

But when Jesus says, "*I am the Way, the Truth and the Life, no one comes to the Father but by Me*" (John 14:6), that's an exclusive claim. When Jesus said, "I am the Way," he was meaning 'everyone else is not the way'. I'm reminded at this point of Edison, the inventor of the light bulb. Before he found the way to do it, he first experienced 1,100 failures! When someone sympathized with him, "You must have felt like you'd wasted your time," Edison's reply was remarkable in its precision. "Not at all," he said, "I first found out eleven hundred ways how not to do it!" Arguing in the same manner, we can say that Jesus is the way to God and everyone or everything else is not the way.

Very often today you find a reaction against exclusive claims like that. In the mood of the world nowadays such exclusive claims are regarded as unacceptable. But what are we to do? To back

## OVERCOMING OBJECTIONS TO CHRISTIAN FAITH 13

away from the plain intent of Jesus' words would be to redefine Christianity – and then it's no longer Christianity. In any case, society's preference for being inclusive cannot be held to apply to a matter of truth like this. How can truth ever be all-inclusive? If it is, then there can be no such thing as error, and of course if there's no such thing as error, then there's no such thing as truth either. Jesus Christ said, "I am the Way, the Truth and the Life." It's a bit like saying 2 plus 2 equals 4, not 3, nor 5, but 4, for that's the way it is: the 3 and the 5 are excluded from being the correct answer.

But someone could say, "That may be what you believe to be true, but it may not be the truth for some other people." Sometimes they give an illustration of what they mean. They say, suppose a student is tied to a railway track for a prank. He should be okay, for the approaching train is on the next track right alongside. But when the train whizzes by on the next line, the student has a heart attack and dies because he wasn't told that the train was on the other line. As far as he's concerned the train may as well have been on his line. He believed it was true, and so it became the truth for him. In a similar way it's claimed that what's not true for me may actually become the truth as far as you're concerned. Truth is supposed to be relative. In fact, we're told that there's no such thing as absolute truth. But this is nonsense! The objector is simply cheating with words! For, tell me, how can it be absolutely true that there's no such thing as absolute truth?! It can't, obviously, for that would be self-contradictory.

Today there are still those who think they've found an alternative way of salvation, or a religious counterpart to Jesus Christ, or else they may exclude themselves from Christ on account of their re-

ligious background – all of them holding these views very sincerely. But all the sincerity in the world can't change reality. We may cling to a system of beliefs which are very laudable in as far as they go, but all the sincerity in the world can't alter objective truth. Reality doesn't oblige us by changing for us just because we want it to. Jesus Christ is the truth and he, the Bible says, died for our sins and rose again. No-one else has done that. The truth about Jesus Christ is the all-important issue. It's a person's attitude to Christ that determines his or her eternal destiny. No matter the merits of other belief or value systems – and no matter how sincerely held – the truth is that God was in Jesus entering human history and fulfilling his plan of salvation, and unless we believe that, we'll die in our sins. While it's true that we all have a right to believe what we like, we've all got to accept the consequences.

There are many laws that can be changed, for example by governments, but there are other laws, like the law of gravity, that belong to a different category. Let's imagine that you decide to try to suspend the law of gravity – and you believe very sincerely that you're really able to do this. The moment you step off the roof-top you'll discover that's one law you're powerless to alter. All God's laws are like that, and so, when he commands us to turn from our sins and turn to his son Jesus in simple faith, we must accept this.

The Bible says plainly *"that in none other is there Salvation [other than Jesus] for neither is there any other name under heaven that is given among men, wherein we must be saved."* (Acts 4:12). All paths to God are not the same, they differ on the crucial point of who Jesus Christ is – he's the only way to the Father.



## OVERCOMING OBJECTIONS TO CHRISTIAN FAITH 15

Former UK Prime Minister, Tony Blair, set-up in 2008 what he's calling a Faith Foundation. Its aim is to secure the co-operation of major world faiths in working together to tackle major political and social problems which are global in scale. It seems a very laudable ambition, politically. It remains to be seen whether dialogue between world faiths can help with physical needs – but let's be absolutely clear that only the Christian faith has the answer to humanity's spiritual need. Different faiths or religions may look as though there are major similarities in terms of how they're packaged; but in terms of their actual contents they are radically different:

1) Christianity says there's only one God; other religions say that there are many, even millions of so-called gods. Some religions even claim to work equally well if there's no god.

2) Biblical Christianity says we're appointed to die only once, not many times – unlike claims made in some world religions.

3) Christianity says God has a son – a fact denied elsewhere in the world of religion.

4) Christianity tells us that Jesus Christ, the Son of God, came in the flesh, died on the cross for our sins. But you can find at least one other major religion which claims the opposite – that Jesus Christ was not in fact executed on the cross. This is fundamentally important, for the historical reality of Jesus' crucifixion is an essential teaching of the Christian faith.

Christ died for our sins (1 Corinthians 15:3). And this, Christianity explains, was to bring forgiveness to all who believe in him. And there we have it:

5) No other faith system offers forgiveness. This is the uniqueness of the Christ of Christianity – the one who is the way, the truth, and the life.

## CHAPTER 4 - WHAT ABOUT THE HEATHEN?

In this little book we're studying how to give an answer to those who challenge the Christian faith. In the Bible, the Apostle Peter says we should be able to defend our faith. He encourages us to prepare to give good reasons for why we believe what we do. We now tackle our third objection – the one that says: 'What about the heathen?' The idea in the challenger's mind presumably is: if what Christianity claims is unfair by discriminating against some people groups, then it's not worth even considering Christianity in the first place.

I wonder if we could begin by remembering a story from Luke's Gospel. Luke chapter 7 tells us about a particular Roman centurion, someone who, as a military man, would know all about receiving and giving commands. For, he was in charge of a hundred men, plus servants. The Gospels record that this centurion admitted he was accustomed to being obeyed whenever he said, "Go," "Come," or "Do." And so it had been with interest, I'm sure, that he'd listened to reports – or perhaps observed for himself – the authority of Jesus Christ. The power of Jesus was obvious when he spoke, when he healed diseases and when he exercised divine authority over both the natural and spiritual worlds.

Then, quite suddenly, the centurion was faced with a domestic crisis. His devoted servant became seriously ill, and it was clear he was going to die. As it turns out, this particular centurion was a good master, he was someone who cared for his servant, and now he realized he needed Jesus' help. "But it won't be easy," he

thought, knowing that Jewish religious teachers didn't associate with 'the heathens' – and he knew that's how he would be regarded by them. So he sent others to Jesus on his behalf – to appeal for him. This proved successful, and when the centurion received word that Jesus was coming to him, he sent again to Jesus saying, "Don't trouble yourself Jesus, I'm not worthy for you to enter my house. Please say the word where you are, and my servant will be healed. Just say the word, like I would give a command to one of my men."

Jesus stopped. All around were unbelieving Jews, curious as always to see him perform miracles; but here – by contrast – was a heathen centurion who didn't seem to need to see the miracle – he already had every confidence in Jesus' ability. In response to such humility and faith, Jesus there and then healed the servant who was back at the centurion's home. Then, turning to the Jews, he announced that he had not come across such great faith anywhere in Israel. He had found nothing to compare with the faith of this heathen centurion. Obviously, the Jews knew much more than the centurion and had greater privilege and opportunity. But it's interesting that Jesus compared them unfavourably with this man who simply acted according to what he knew, however little that was in comparison.

Nor is this the only time when Jesus compared the Jews of that time unfavourably with others who by comparison had relatively little knowledge of God. Once, he assured his audience that a worse fate awaited them than the heathen inhabitants of a foreign city called Nineveh. This was because those heathens or pagans had previously changed their ways at the words of a preacher who had been sent to them (that was Jonah, of course). They

## OVERCOMING OBJECTIONS TO CHRISTIAN FAITH 19

responded to the light of the little knowledge of God they had, while the Jews of Jesus' time, although more moral in their lives, hadn't responded even after being privileged to listen to a far greater preacher, Jesus, the Son of God himself. They refused to change their attitudes and accept him. In the sight of God, greater opportunity and privilege always brings greater responsibility.

So what is the relevance of this to us today? For those of us who have heard the good news of Jesus Christ, our responsibility is clear. God commands us all to repent and to believe on the Lord Jesus for salvation. If we refuse to personally accept that Christ died for our sins and rose again the third day, we simply can't expect to have a plea of ignorance accepted by God in the day of final judgement – a day which will come to us all. There will be 'no excuse'.

But what about those who have never heard the gospel? This is a question raised by some as if to side-step their own responsibility. That's not possible, by the way; we will all one day stand before Jesus Christ to be held fully accountable. But how will God deal with the heathen? We have to admit we don't have all the answers. God hasn't revealed everything. Our small minds are very limited anyway. God's thoughts are far above ours, as the Bible makes clear. However, we can have every confidence in the absolute fairness of a holy God (who is our Maker and Judge). All the Biblical evidence confirms this. Take, for instance, the account of a man concerned that all the inhabitants of a notorious city should not unfairly share the fate of the wicked. He even spoke to God about his concern. It's right for us, too, to be concerned for others, but we can trust God in this matter – Abra-

ham, the man we're referring to certainly did. Finally, he reassured himself with the words: *"The Judge of all the earth will deal justly"*. (Genesis 18:25). And so he will.

Having said that, no one in reality is totally ignorant of God. For by looking around at this marvellous universe we really ought to acknowledge the existence of an Almighty Divine Being who is its creator. Because of this, the Bible says everyone is without excuse. Even though some might never have heard of the Ten Commandments as such, what remains true – because the Bible says it – is that God has implanted a moral code within everyone on this planet. The voice of conscience makes us aware of it. God will judge everyone by the appropriate standard. Those ignorant of anything else, will be judged according to the law of conscience by a God who's totally fair. All of this is summed up by the Apostle Paul in the first two chapters of his letter to the Romans. He sums up the case of the so-called 'heathen' – for want of a better term – those who have not enjoyed a revelation from God like the Jews received. This then is what we read in Romans chapters 1 and 2:

*"For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse ..."*

*"For there is no partiality with God. For all who have sinned without the Law will also perish without the Law, and all who have sinned under the Law will be judged by the Law; for it is not the hearers of the Law*

## OVERCOMING OBJECTIONS TO CHRISTIAN FAITH21

*who are just before God, but the doers of the Law will be justified.” (Romans 1:20)*

*“For when Gentiles who do not have the Law do instinctively the things of the Law, these, not having the Law, are a law to themselves, in that they show the work of the Law written in their hearts, their conscience bearing witness and their thoughts alternately accusing or else defending them, on the day when, according to my gospel, God will judge the secrets of men through Christ Jesus.” (Romans 2:11-16)*

I'd like to make clear three things we can learn from those verses we've just read together:

- 1) Everyone has enough information to know that God exists – no matter what their lifetime circumstances or when they lived in human history (Romans 1:20). There's simply no excuse for not believing in a creator. As we've already said, the wonders of creation are sufficient evidence. For every effect there must be a cause. For an effect so magnificent as this vast universe, there must be an even greater First Cause, a supreme Being.
- 2) Everyone violates the standard they know. Men and women down throughout history, who never enjoyed a revelation from God will still be judged by their God-given conscience (Romans 2:12-16). And, as the verse, says: there are definitely times when our conscience accuses us. Our conscience is like the little red light on the dashboard of our lives which warns us when we go against what we intuitively or otherwise know to be right.

3) God is the righteous and impartial Judge (Romans 2:11). Let's be clear: if Paul, or elsewhere James, sometimes appear to be talking about being judged according to our works, this in no way contradicts the Bible's teaching that we're saved only by God's grace through faith on our part. It's just that every true believer has works. There's always going to be some outward evidence of true faith ... so any appearance of people being judged by their works is not in conflict with salvation by faith. The works serve only to visibly demonstrate the faith behind them.

So, summing up the Bible's own answer to the objection which asks, "What about the heathen?" – let's repeat the three facts which Paul shares in opening his defence of the Christian message to early Christians at Rome, in a letter preserved for us in the Bible, so having status as the Word of God:

- 1) Everyone has enough information to know that God exists
- 2) Everyone violates the standard they know
- 3) God is the righteous and impartial Judge

As if to the objector who's been challenging the good news of salvation through Jesus Christ, the Bible says 'you are without excuse.' There's no excuse for not believing God's Good News of how we can find forgiveness in the person of his Son, Jesus Christ. For it's true that all have sinned and fallen short of God's requirement, and Jesus is the only way of salvation. No one will be judged for not having heard the gospel. But you have now. Greater opportunity, as we've seen, brings with it greater responsibility. It's those who have heard who need to be personally con-



## **OVERCOMING OBJECTIONS TO CHRISTIAN FAITH23**

cerned. What will you do with Jesus? I urge you now to follow the example of the Roman centurion; repent in humility and accept Christ in faith as your Saviour. He really does have the power to forgive sins.

## CHAPTER 5 - ISN'T THE CHRISTIAN EXPERIENCE ONLY PSYCHOLOGICAL?

Suppose someone wanders into the room where you are right now, and he has a fried egg dangling over his left ear. That would be weird enough, but then he claims he's getting joy, peace, satisfaction and purpose in life from this fried egg. You may think he's a crackpot, but how do you argue against what he claims he's experiencing? This may seem like a rather silly example, so I will explain.

Have you ever had people treat your Christian experience in much the same way as you might react to the man we've imagined? Perhaps they try to tell you that it's all psychology when you testify to them of the joy, peace, satisfaction and sense of purpose in life which you've discovered in Jesus Christ. People say it's just a crutch for those who can't cope! Or else they suggest that Christian beliefs are mere wish fulfilment. All the imagined benefits are really only down to positive thinking, they say! How do we respond?

Well, it may help us to think back to the fried egg chap who claims he's getting joy, peace, satisfaction and purpose in life from the egg. What can you do? You can investigate his experience. How? It would be fair to make enquiries to see if anyone else has found the same benefits from this strange use of a fried egg. Then you could also make an examination of what objective facts this experience is related to. Perhaps that then helps us see the kind of evidence we need to provide for those who are sceptic-

## OVERCOMING OBJECTIONS TO CHRISTIAN FAITH<sup>25</sup>

tical of Christian experience in this way. Of course we find that, for 2,000 years, millions of people from all over the world have been making the same claims that they are experiencing forgiveness of sins and peace with God through their Christian faith. But could this be the result of some kind of pre-conditioning? If the Christian experience is to be claimed to be purely psychological, then we might expect there to be some recognizable type of person who is disposed to become a Christian.

However, when we investigate the facts, we find that converts come from every imaginable background. Let me share just a couple of examples with you. One is recent and the other dates back to the very beginnings of Christianity. We begin with a skeptic's view. British journalist Mark Tully had been revisiting the scene of Jesus' life to interview people for a BBC TV series on Jesus. He ended with his own view in which he said: "[Jesus] taught in strange riddles. He didn't convince his fellow Jews and he didn't overthrow Rome. From that failure I have come to what, for me, is the most important conclusion of all. That the hardest ... article of Christian faith, the resurrection, must have happened. If there had been no miracle after Jesus' death, there would have been no grounds for faith ... No resurrection ... no church."

I'm not sure if Mark Tully would actually claim to be a Christian, but he's definitely professing that he believes the central event of Christianity to be true: Jesus Christ did rise from the dead. I share this with you is because I feel it's a clear example of a case where there was no obvious pre-conditioning to such a faith. We tend to think of journalists as hard-nosed, relentless in their pursuit of the facts. If anything, by his own admission, Mark Tul-

ly was disposed against believing when he started out on his research. My other example is an extreme one – the conversion of Saul of Tarsus. We join the story as we find it in the Bible book of Acts, chapter 9, with Saul, the deeply taught and highly trained Jewish scholar, who detested the very name of Jesus Christ. Approaching Damascus with his escort, he had a letter in his possession that gave him authority to hunt down any Christians he could lay hands on and bring them back to Jerusalem. It fired him with a sense of purpose.

He was nearly there. It was now noon, with the sun at its brightest. Suddenly, a light shone from heaven – a light brighter than the sun. Stunned, Saul and his party fell to the ground. He was next aware of a voice of authority speaking to him by name. "Saul, Saul why are you persecuting Me?" "Who are you lord?" he replied. The response to this enquiry utterly devastated Saul, for the voice came again, "I am Jesus whom you are persecuting." It was the name he hated, and in the vision he saw the one he had taken to be nothing but a blasphemer. How wrong can you be! After encountering Christ personally, the rest is history, as they say – all about how his life changed. He went from Saul the arch-persecutor of the early Christians, and self-confessed chief of sinners, to Paul the Christian apostle and fearless preacher, who himself suffered so much for the sake of the person he once persecuted.

We mentioned earlier how the sceptic often talks of religious experiences or conversions as arising from subtle pre-conditioning in early life. With Saul, however, there was absolutely no such pre-conditioning to accept Jesus as the Christ. Rather, the opposite; his background was one of hatred of the name of Jesus.

## OVERCOMING OBJECTIONS TO CHRISTIAN FAITH<sup>27</sup>

In many respects he was different to many of the other disciples. Whereas in psychological experiments, the psychologist often attempts to keep all of the factors constant except one, in his search for explanations of modes of human behaviour; when we investigate the lives of those who become Christians, we find that there are no common threads.

We could bring the examples right up to date with modern stories of dramatic conversions featuring those whom we might have thought to be the least likely material for Christian disciples – the likes of General Manuel Norriega, converted and baptized in a state penitentiary, and many more, including top sports stars and others from the filthy slums and barrios of developing nations. So different from relatively rich, western, well-educated church-going types who, after years of following traditional religious service, discover the Biblical truth of the need to be born again. Some of those who come to Christ, already in the eyes of the world, appear to have everything, while some are sunk in grinding poverty. Some are Ivy League graduates; others are capable only of a very simple faith. There really are no common factors.

The essence of the Christian gospel is an inward change – the new birth. It's this inward reality that's demonstrated outwardly in the dramatically changed lives of so many who become Christians. Try as he might, the psychologist cannot explain this mode of behaviour in human terms. There are no constant factors in the backgrounds of those who come to Christ. For, as in the time of Jesus' ministry, so also today, people from religious backgrounds, and others from no religious background; even thieves, gang-leaders and murderers have found new life in Jesus Christ

by simple faith in Him. So there is no single type of people who become Christians.

There are those who dismiss Christianity as wishful thinking – some sort of desperate response to a felt need within themselves – or see it as merely being a crutch in life. One person I was recently talking with on the west coast of Canada was trying to argue the case that 'religion is simply not objective'. He thought of it as a purely subjective experience. When people use that argument against Christianity, they all overlook just one thing – the objective fact of Jesus Christ, from which the individual experience of every Christian derives. Underlying the faith there are the facts which lead to faith. The case for Christianity rests on two main historic facts, set out by the Apostle Paul at the beginning of First Corinthians 15:

*"I make known to you ... the gospel ... that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that He appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. After that He appeared to more than five hundred brethren at one time.*

There we have the fact of Christ's death, as evidenced by his burial; and the fact of his resurrection, as evidenced by his appearances. And to this testimony of the Bible, we add supporting evidence from other historical records outside the Bible. Cornelius Tacitus (55-120 AD), 'the greatest historian' of ancient Rome wrote: 'Consequently, to get rid of the report, Nero fastened the guilt and inflicted the most exquisite tortures on a class hated for their abominations, called Christians by the populace. Christus,

## OVERCOMING OBJECTIONS TO CHRISTIAN FAITH29

from whom the name had its origin, suffered the extreme penalty during the reign of Tiberius at the hands of one of our procurators, Pontius Pilatus, and a most mischievous superstition, thus checked for the moment, again broke out not only in Judaea, the first source of the evil, but even in Rome.'

So much for testifying to Jesus' death as an objective reality, for the case of his resurrection we turn to a legal verdict. Lord Darling, former Lord Chief Justice of England has written: 'There exists such overwhelming evidence, positive and negative, factual and circumstantial, that no intelligent jury in the world could fail to bring in the verdict that the resurrection story is true.' That's about as objective as it gets – and this, from a man totally experienced in sifting and evaluating evidence to find the real truth among all the fabrications. These are the facts on which the Christian bases his or her belief that God has entered human history in the person of Jesus Christ. He, the Son of God, came down into manhood for the very purpose of allowing himself to be crucified. And there, as the representative man, he bore our sins in his own body on the tree as God punished him there for us. He arose the third day and will yet be the Judge of all. In order for us to escape God's wrath, he commands us to repent of our sin and believe on the Lord Jesus.

The reality of the Christian gospel can be further seen to be demonstrated in the preparedness of many believers to suffer and even die because of their unshakeable conviction of its absolute trustworthiness. In this world of escapism, we actually need to turn to the Bible to find reality!

## CHAPTER 6 - ARE MIRACLES POSSIBLE?

At some time when we're witnessing, we may well meet someone who claims that they have a problem believing in the miracles which the Bible tells us Jesus performed. Many people prefer to accept that there must be some natural explanations for Christ's miracles. They say that it simply isn't rational to believe that Jesus literally walked on water, fed over 5,000 people with just 5 loaves and 2 fish, turned water into wine, and so on. Let's take just one of the miracles: a beggar whose blindness Jesus cured in John 9. After testifying that he was the light of the world, Jesus spat on the ground, made clay of the spittle, anointed the man's eyes and sent him to wash in the pool of Siloam. The man went away believing, and returned seeing.

It was yet another wonderful miracle performed amongst countless others by the Lord Jesus Christ while here on earth. But did everyone rejoice at the power of God? Sadly, no. Even in those days there were those who refused to accept the evidence that confronted them. Take the neighbours of the previously blind man, for example. They quickly divided into two groups. There was the group who recognized and were prepared to acknowledge in this jubilant individual the one-time beggar. The other group poured scorn on this idea. "Oh," they said, "It's certainly someone like him, but it isn't him. It can't possibly be him - just an uncanny, resemblance. It's a case of mistaken identity." One group was prepared to accept that the supernatural – an event outside normal human experience – had taken place. The oth-



## OVERCOMING OBJECTIONS TO CHRISTIAN FAITH 31

er group frankly dismissed the supernatural and concluded that there just had to be a natural explanation. As we've said, the same trends are still found. Lots of people prefer to accept that there must be some natural explanation for Christ's miracles. In the modern world, in the scientific age, some would say it's illogical to still insist on miracles.

Let's pause and consider for a moment the question which the curious crowd asked the miraculously healed beggar: "What do you think of the man whom you claim opened your eyes?" That's the central issue isn't it: just who is Jesus? When people question the possibility of the miracles of Jesus, what they're essentially taking issue with is Jesus' claim to be the Son of God. For it's clearly not illogical, but reasonable – and indeed inevitable – to accept, without any reservation whatever, all the miracles of Jesus – if we accept that he's the Son of God. The Bible teaches that this is the most important question we face in our lives; our eternal destiny depends on our decision. Do you believe Jesus Christ is the Son of God? Some people say without thinking, "Oh, I accept that Jesus Christ was a good man, but nothing more than that." But the problem is that Jesus himself claimed to be more than that. In fact, he claimed to be the co-equal, co-eternal Son of the living God who created all things.

Now, few today, if any, would dispute that Jesus Christ was a historical figure. An awareness of what ancient historians have written has put that fact beyond dispute – at least for those who take the time to acquaint themselves with the facts. I mean historians with no connection to Christianity. Jewish historians like Josephus and Roman historians like Cornelius Tacitus. The fact they didn't write from a particularly sympathetic view only helps to

strengthen the case that Jesus Christ was definitely not some legendary figure. But who was he? It's clear who he claimed to be. As the Jewish religious leaders who were jealous of him, tried to build their case against him, they asked if he was the Christ, the Son of the Blessed (Mark 14:61,62). Jesus affirmed that he was. There was no secret about this. In fact, some time before, the Jews had picked up stones to stone him for what they considered to be blasphemy. Jesus had called God his father, and the Jews understood that he was making himself equal with God, and for this they would've stoned him (John 5:18).

So is Jesus who he claimed to be? Notice Jesus really did make those claims personally. I'm emphasizing that because some have taken the view that the Jesus of history and the Jesus of faith are two different things. As if Jesus' followers exaggerated matters out of all proportion to reality. A more common opinion is that Jesus did exist, and was a good man, a good moral teacher, one whose views are to be respected. But is that position credible? Remember Jesus himself claimed to be the Son of God. Good men don't tell lies. Jesus claimed to be the Son of God. Either that claim is true or it's false. If it's true, then he is who he claimed to be – he's Lord. But if his claim to be the Son of God was false, then, again, there are only two possibilities. Either he knew he was making a false claim – and so he's a liar or else he made a false claim without realizing it was false – now, if you think you're the Son of God when you're not, you must be a lunatic. So these are the only possibilities: Lord, liar or lunatic. Jesus could not have been only a good man. The historical record of Jesus' life – and the profound and lasting impact it's had around the world ever since - is one of the strongest, if not the strongest, evidence

### OVERCOMING OBJECTIONS TO CHRISTIAN FAITH33

for the existence of God. His was a life so powerful it reset the clocks 2,000 years ago, meaning that we date our calendar from his birth.

Across the centuries and cultures, the life of Christ stands supreme and impeccable. Atheist Bertrand Russell admitted that it was debatable whether the method adopted by Mahatma Gandhi when calling for Indian independence from British rule would have succeeded, except for the fact that it appealed to the conscience of a nation that had been influenced by the gospel. Today, in the city of Ahmedabad in central India, Russell's quotation greets each visitor. How remarkable is that! In a predominantly Hindu nation, a quote by an atheist testifies to the impact of Christ upon both East and West in the world today! Such has been the impact of 'a life so well lived' that it's felt around the world, in all its cultures. That unique testimony to the lasting impact through history of one short life brings us back to Jesus' claim to be God's Son. We've argued that the question of his identity is bound up together with the understanding that Jesus' miracles were totally authentic supernatural events. Taken at face-value, the miracles themselves were the credentials he presented in support of his claim to be the Jewish Messiah, the Son of God.

We see this is the case when to the Jews, Jesus proclaimed, "*The very works [meaning miracles] that I do bear witness of Me, that the Father has sent Me.*" These works he described as being those that his Father had given him to accomplish. It is clear then that he viewed them as his credentials to a disbelieving nation. The supreme credentials, of course, were the greatest miracles of all – his miraculous virgin birth and his resurrection. They're at once

reasonable if we accept that God exists – the God who has created all things. US chat show host, Larry King, was once asked whom he would most like to interview from across all the centuries. Among the names he put forward was that of Jesus Christ. The interviewer couldn't resist: "Mr. King, what question would you want to put to Jesus Christ?" Larry King replied, "I would ask him if he really was virgin-born because the answer to that question defines history."

He was absolutely right. For we're dealing here with an event that defines reality – that defines truth. The person of Jesus Christ is the last of four evidences for the existence of God which the Apostle Paul mentions at the beginning of his Bible letter to the Romans [Creation (1:20); Conscience (2:15); Communication (3:2); Christ (3:24)].

All that we've said stands or falls together. The case for God's existence is entirely reasonable. And from that starting point we can go on to accept that he's come down into human history in the person of Jesus Christ; coming for the very purpose of dying on that Roman cross just outside Jerusalem as a sacrifice for our sins. Suffering, dying, and rising again victorious from the dead in the power of God on the third day – perhaps the greatest miracle of all. The existence of God, the identity of Jesus Christ, the status of his miracles: all three of these belong together – each reasonable because it draws support from the others.

But we were talking of how God in Christ has visited us to provide a way back to himself for us. A way made necessary, because the Bible teaches that humanity, made in the image of God, fell morally and spiritually through original disobedience from per-

## OVERCOMING OBJECTIONS TO CHRISTIAN FAITH35

fection. This is the miracle of divine love: that God's Son came to die that we might have eternal life in him. This is the only way of salvation: simply by trusting in his shed blood. By His sacrificial death, accepted personally in faith, we are delivered from God's wrath and the hell our sins deserve. This Jesus who died, God has made both Lord and Christ. He is above all authority and there is a time coming when all in the tombs shall hear his voice, for he is the Resurrection and the Life. His resurrection is the assurance of future judgement, as he will sit as the Judge. How will you face him in that day? Admit you are a sinner, turn from your sin, believe on the Lord Jesus, who came to save you through his death, and receive him as your personal Saviour.

## CHAPTER 7 - ISN'T THE BIBLE FULL OF ERRORS?

Christians believe the Bible is ultimate truth; that it's God's Word for the human race; that in it the Creator has communicated with his creatures. There are people whose hearts are set against believing that. This chapter is not aimed at them, for they've no wish to be persuaded. But I've met many people – and I'm sure you have too – who quite casually say, "You can't trust the Bible. It's full of errors and contradictions." In my experience, when I try to engage them in conversation, I find that they are simply repeating something they've heard someone else say. I honestly don't think some who say this have actually ever sat down and read the Bible. So why do they say it? Often, I suspect, they use it as a way to avoid having to think about what are, for them, uncomfortable issues, such as their accountability to God.

Perhaps someone has voiced the objection to you, "But isn't the Bible full of errors?" How did you respond? Or it could be that you have doubts of your own. Either way, I hope this chapter will be of some help. Sometimes the sincerity of those who make this criticism is immediately suspect, for when asked for an example, they can't furnish a single one. Some may claim some alleged evidence. However, apparent contradictions there may be, but when we rightly understand the historical and scientific facts presented in the Bible (and for this we need the help of the Spirit of God), and when we also rightly interpret the historical and scientific facts from the world around us, we see there's no con-

## OVERCOMING OBJECTIONS TO CHRISTIAN FAITH<sup>37</sup>

tradition after all. Sir William Ramsay, who devoted many years to the archaeology of Asia Minor, has testified to Luke's intimate and accurate acquaintance with Asia Minor and the Greek East at that time. Although in his later years Ramsay came to be a champion for the trustworthiness of the New Testament records, his were judgments which he had previously formed as a scientific archaeologist and student of ancient classical history and literature.

When he said, "Luke's history is unsurpassed in respect of its trustworthiness," it was the conclusion his researches had led him to, in spite of the fact that he started with a very different opinion. He put it: 'Luke is a historian of the first rank...this author should be placed along with the very greatest of historians.' So Ramsay overcame his prejudice. For whatever reason, he had at first been disinclined to accept the reliability of the Bible as history – until he brought his relevant expertise to bear on the actual evidence. In fact, an outstanding Jewish archaeologist has stated that 'no archaeological discovery has ever controverted a biblical reference.' On the contrary, there have been discoveries that have completely vindicated the Bible. Characters, stories and books of the Bible which were once dismissed by critics, must now be taken more seriously by them as a result of evidence from outside the Bible which is consistent with the siege of Jericho, the walled-city, with David the great king of Israel, and with the historical setting of the Book of Daniel – to name a few.

It's easy to dismiss something if we refuse to even consider taking its claims seriously. But if we're sincere, and take the challenge to investigate properly then we, too, may be surprised. But external evidence is not the only test which the Bible passes. Another

er test of any piece of ancient literature is what might be called the 'internal test'. Basically, this test asks the question: 'Does it ring true?' Take, for example, the fact that the writers of the 4 Gospels write about themselves and their companions in ways that are far from flattering. Their failures are highlighted. Like Peter's shameful denial of Jesus, and the doubts Thomas had. We get to see them 'warts and all,' as it were. As when they're cowering for fear in that upper room in Jerusalem and describe their own total shock when Jesus appeared to them in resurrection.

There's a very real sense we're seeing the story as it truly happened. They write of an event they were unprepared for. Of course someone might say 'but this is just creative writing!' Think it through the whole way. We do know that not a few of these early writers - and other Christians - died a martyr's death. It's one thing to willingly accept death for something you passionately and sincerely believe in - but who would die for a lie? Who would die for a creative fabrication of their own making?

But just suppose, for the sake of argument, that you want to persist in believing that these men were living a lie and making the whole thing up. If that was their motive, and they were being as careful as you give them credit for being, then surely they wouldn't have introduced elements into the story which defied the conventions and customs of the society in which they lived. They would never have done that if they were desperately trying to be convincing. But in the unfolding drama, as recorded, of the resurrection, it's women who play a leading role as the first witnesses. They're prominent in the early record. Now bear in mind that, at this point in history and in that culture especially, the testimony of women was not considered valid in a court of law.



### OVERCOMING OBJECTIONS TO CHRISTIAN FAITH39

The Jewish religious leaders didn't talk with women – apart from their own wives presumably. So why weaken your own case? Why did they say women were the earliest witnesses – unless that's exactly how it was.

But those who at least have a superficial acquaintance with the Bible may point to two Bible references to the same incident which appear to give different information, for example one account saying two blind beggars were healed by Jesus; while the other record mentions only one. Fair enough, but there's no impossible contradiction is there? If there were two, then there most certainly was one. It's natural for eyewitnesses to focus down on different things. That's common in any court of law. It's even more common when you have spectators comparing views on a football match they've both watched together. You sometimes wonder if they really did see the same match, but of course you know they did. Now, there's one third and final test, alongside the external and internal tests we've thought about already. In the case of all ancient documents, we no longer have the originals. The materials they were written down on wore out long ago. But copies were made, and then these also were copied, and so the record of ancient events was passed down to us. This is true not only of the Bible, but also of, the record of Caesar's Gallic Wars, for example. So we only have copies of copies of copies. How, then, do the experts have confidence in what is reliable and what is not?

They gather up all the copies in existence and find out the date of the oldest copy. They then compare that date with the date of the original writing. If there are lots of copies and if the time gap between the original and the oldest existing copy is small, then

that gives a high degree of confidence that the copies we have are reliable. For example, in the case of the record of his Gallic Wars by Julius Caesar we have 10 copies known to us today, and they date back to 1,000 years after Caesar's death. On the strength of that, these documentary writings are believed to be trustworthy by historians. So that gives us a feel for the standard that's acceptable to those who routinely deal with these things. So now let's turn to the New Testament of the Bible. We find that lots of really old copies of what was written still survive – there are literally thousands of manuscripts in differing degrees of completeness – and dating back to only a 100 years since the time of the cross of Christ. So by the same standards, to a fair-minded person, who's really looking into the evidence, the Bible has to be accepted as an accurate record of events – at least if we accept any other piece of ancient literature, then we must accept the Bible.

I know it may seem confusing that there are so many differences in translated versions of the Bible today, but these differences are really not down to disagreement between the existing copies made from the original, but they reflect different styles of translation. While some variations exist, there's an overwhelming degree of agreement which exists among the ancient records. The bottom line is we can have confidence in the Bible we hold in our hands today. This fact was reinforced in 1947 with the discovery of the Dead Sea scrolls. These scrolls found well-preserved in a cave were found to contain copies of Bible books like that of the prophet Isaiah which were 1,000 years older than any other copy previously known to exist. And when they made the comparisons, they confirmed that there had been accurate copying. In fact, we know that the care taken in copying by hand was al-

## OVERCOMING OBJECTIONS TO CHRISTIAN FAITH 41

most unbelievable with very many detailed cross-checks being made. And what the Dead Sea scrolls prove is that the system worked amazingly well! For the Jews involved of course believed they were handling a sacred text.

But the Bible makes claims that the original writings were 'God-breathed' or inspired by God, a supernatural process which guided the 40 or so human authors over some one-and-a-half-thousand years. Is there anything testable which backs up that claim? The fulfilled prophecies found in the Bible are the proof that it's the inspired Word of God. For example, over 300 prophecies about the Messiah were exactly fulfilled in Jesus Christ. Some predictions were so improbable of fulfilment that no human insight could ever have foreseen them. If you read Matthew's Gospel, you'll discover a dozen specific ways the life of Jesus satisfied the Old Testament predictions for the one who had come as the Jewish Messiah. Isaiah, writing around 700 years before Christ's birth, foretold of Jesus that as the Messiah he'd be despised and rejected and suffer terribly (Isaiah 53). It was an incredible portrait he painted of his own nation not recognizing, but rejecting their own Messiah for whom they were longingly waiting. But, amazing as it was, we know it came true in Jesus' life and death. The evidence for the Bible being the Word of God, and Jesus being the Son of God, is overwhelming. The purpose of this divinely inspired book is that you may believe Jesus is God's Son, and, by believing, have life in his Name.

## CHAPTER 8 - WON'T A GOOD LIFE GET ME TO HEAVEN?

I'd like you to imagine some folks on the west coast of the United States preparing to swim out to Hawaii. Ambitious? I'd say so! The first swimmer is super fit, a top athlete, and manages to go 35 miles before giving up. The next contestant doesn't look quite as impressive and manages only 10 miles. The last swimmer to take up the challenge looks as though he's carrying rather too much weight. Sure enough, 100 yards is as far as he gets before having to be rescued.

What's all this got to do with overcoming objections to the gospel? Well we're trying to illustrate that a good life will never get anyone to heaven. True, some lives seem better than others – as far as we can tell – in the same way some of those swimmers looked more the part than others. But just as no swimmer, no matter how strong, had any hope of reaching Hawaii, neither has anyone – not even the best life – any hope of qualifying for heaven. If you want to put any names on the scale, popular suggestions for lives well lived – like Billy Graham and Mother Teresa – they fall hopelessly far short. But on what Bible facts is our illustration based? Is it really true that there's nothing we can do to make it to heaven by ourselves? This is a question that has long haunted the human race. It was on the mind of one particular man we meet in the Bible. Let me tell you about him.

Age was on his side. He was still a young man, and someone who was held in high regard by society. To cap it all, he was extremely wealthy. Rich, influential, even one of the 'religious sort'; sure-

## OVERCOMING OBJECTIONS TO CHRISTIAN FAITH<sup>43</sup>

ly he wasn't still searching? But he was, and his quest brought him one day to Jesus Christ. Politely, he addressed Jesus as "Good Master" (Luke 18). Jesus immediately turned to the young man and gently challenged him, "Why do you address Me as 'good'?" Wasn't the young Jewish enquirer familiar with the Old Testament which declared that no-one was good when measured by God's standards?

In any case, Jesus said, "Don't you know there is no-one good except God himself?" In this way, Jesus impressed upon the young man his claim to be the Son of God, equal with the Father. It was the full implication of correctly describing him as 'good'. There are still many people today who are prepared to recognize Jesus as a good man, but not as anything more. As Jesus pointed out on this occasion, that's not possible. We must either take him at his word as being the Son of God come down into manhood (see Luke 22:70), or else his claims were false – meaning he was a liar or lunatic, and so not a good man at all.

Returning to the young man in the story, it was that other implication from Jesus' words that must have shaken him by its very starkness: "There is none good ..." Surely a good life counted towards salvation. He had always tried to do the best he possibly could. And so his question had been, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" Now, as he listened to Jesus' words, the realization was perhaps just beginning to dawn upon him, that his life by itself, no matter how good, could never actually be good enough when examined by God's standards. This is the Bible's clear teaching from beginning to end: if we're relying on good deeds done in the hope of inheriting salvation, then our situation is hopeless, for God views even our best efforts as filthy rags. I'd

like you to picture two people: one on a mountain peak and the other in a deep valley. Such a large difference in height as measured above sea-level, but each hopelessly far short of touching the stars. It's exactly like that with our good deeds. To rely on them for salvation in the day of God's final judgement is utterly hopeless, for even if we're better by far than others as measured by human standards, we have still all sinned and fallen short of the infinitely higher standard of God.

That is the standard by which our eternal destiny is determined; not by any standard of our own. At the beginning of the modern era, at the time of the so-called Renaissance, a saying was popularized to describe the way people had begun to think: 'Man is the measure of all things'. But there's a follow-up question we must ask and that is: which man? Our minds range over the rich and the good, from humanitarian icons to freedom fighters ... to the likes of Hitler and Stalin. All men, all human. If 'man is the measure of all things', we ask again: which man? There's only been one man in the whole of history who has revealed to us God's absolute and infinitely high standard – and that's Jesus Christ. When we measure ourselves against the standard of his life, we see how far short we fall.

We may think we're doing okay until we properly examine the life of Christ. To use another simple illustration, imagine going into a shop to buy a new pair of shoes. Perhaps we're not fully convinced we really need a new pair, but someone else encourages us to go shopping. We say, "But these ones I have are still fine, I don't really need a new pair." Then we get to the shop and try one new shoe on to check the fit – just to satisfy our friend who's trying to persuade us we do need a new pair. It's only at

## OVERCOMING OBJECTIONS TO CHRISTIAN FAITH<sup>45</sup>

that moment when we stand in front of the fitting mirror in the shop and look at our feet – one with our old shoe on and the other with the new model – we suddenly see how shabby our old shoe has become after all. On their own, they looked all right. But side by side with the shining brand-new example, we have to agree it's time we treated ourselves to a new pair after all.

In the same way, we often fool ourselves into thinking there's nothing really wrong with us. But that's only until such time as we come face to face with God's 'new shoes' standard (Isaiah 64:6), and we compare our life with the life of Christ. That's the ultimate reality check. Jesus even called on the high churchmen of his day to turn and believe on him for salvation (John 3:3). Their moral life and all their church-going was no substitute. So the answer to the young man's question is clear from the Bible that there's nothing we can do to earn salvation; it's a gift received by faith only. The heavenly, like any other inheritance, is based on relationship, and only when we are in a relationship with the Lord Jesus which results from simple faith in him, can we be assured of a place in heaven.

While religion (the idea of good works) can be a stumbling block to some in coming to Christ, on the other hand there are those who say, "Oh, I'm not the religious sort." Perhaps they've been given the impression that a life of church-going, keeping the 10 Commandments, etc. is the passport to heaven, and they realize they are on to a non-starter. If that's where you are today, it may be that's an honest assessment on your part. You see the hypocrisy of outwardly trying to live a good life, while inwardly your thoughts and desires are evil. And you're right, for such attitudes equally break the 10 Commandments.

Jesus discussed the Ten Commandments with the young man we mentioned earlier, because if salvation could in practice be earned at all, it would be by keeping the works of the law. The young man claimed he had done this all his life, although he was clearly ignorant of their real depth. For inward attitudes are just as important as outward actions. Jesus said in his teaching that, for example, merely looking lustfully at a woman was the equal of actually committing adultery. Don't be fooled, for if you think the 'religious sort' is those who keep the whole law then none of us are of the 'religious sort'. Jesus discussed the law that day, and God gave it originally, so that his standard might be seen and the Holy Spirit might convict us of our sinfulness. God is holy and must punish sin. As seen from the law, we've all sinned. How then can we be saved from judgement? The good news is that there is a way, one way: come in brokenness to the cross of Jesus, repent of our sin, and there accept as our personal Saviour, Jesus the Son of God who died on that cross suffering at God's hands the punishment for our sins. Do thank him now for dying for you and rejoice in the gift of salvation. With the young man it was his riches, but don't let anything hold you back from coming to and following Jesus as his disciple.

Of course, there is a proper place for good works in Christian teaching. They are important; it's just that they come after salvation. They're the result, not the cause, of our salvation. In one of the places where I go to preach, the favourite Bible text is Ephesians 2:8,9 – which says: *“For by grace are we saved through faith, and that not of ourselves, it is the gift of God. Not as a result of works that no one may boast.”*



## OVERCOMING OBJECTIONS TO CHRISTIAN FAITH 47

This makes it very clear that salvation – the knowledge of our sins being all forgiven – is all of God's grace. His grace is the undeserved favour that he shows towards us. Undeserved, because it's not merited by any works which we've done. God gives to every true believer the gift of salvation. It's not a reward, but a gift we must simply receive through faith. For Christ himself finished the work of our salvation when dying on the cross for us (John 19:30,31).

But then the very next verse in Ephesians 2 explains that our new life which we have received in Jesus has been planned by God for the very purpose that we should be found doing good works. So it couldn't be clearer: before we receive salvation through God's grace, our good works counted for nothing – the Bible prophet describes them as being like filthy rags (Isaiah 64:6) – they could never produce or merit our salvation. But after humbling ourselves to receive God's gift of salvation, we understand God now expects us to live a life where good works play a very real part.

## CHAPTER 9 - HOW CAN YOU BELIEVE IN HELL AND A GOD OF LOVE?

I'm sure you've met this objection. Perhaps we have been emphasizing the love God commended towards us in that Jesus died for us to save us from the just penalty which our sins deserve, namely the lake of fire. Ah, the lake of fire: that's the cue for this objection: "You've just claimed that God's a God of love," they say, "but now you talk of hell-fire. How is it possible to believe in hell and a God of love? Surely," they continue, "if God really was a loving God he wouldn't send anyone to the lake of fire forever." There seems to be some force to it at first hearing, doesn't there?

But I doubt if those who raise this objection have ever stopped to analyse their own assumptions – the assumptions which are hidden within this objection they're making? Can you see what the questioner is assuming? They are assuming that there's something obviously wrong with the idea of God, especially a so-called loving God, sending anyone to the lake of fire. The hidden assumption is that this is somehow immoral. No loving being would ever do such a thing!

Now, it could be worth asking the questioner where this sense of morality, this gut feeling about the rights and wrongs of the situation, comes from. Jesus himself used the technique of questioning his questioners. It's not a game, but it can show the questioner the deeper issues that lie behind his own question – and so perhaps test his or her sincerity. Have they thought this through, or is it a second-hand objection, conveniently wheeled out to

## OVERCOMING OBJECTIONS TO CHRISTIAN FAITH<sup>49</sup>

avoid talk of God and of our accountability to him. It's especially relevant to do this if we suspect this objection is not the result of someone struggling with weak faith, but if we think the questioner really is implying that they have found in this objection a satisfying reason for not believing in God at all. A totally consistent atheist does not acknowledge the existence of evil, and claims not to recognize the difference between right and wrong. I've heard of this being taken to extremes in a debate between a philosopher who was an atheist and another philosopher who was a Christian. The atheist objected to the Christian's use of the term evil. Why? You may be asking.

Well, if he were to accept such a thing as evil existed, then good must also exist, for there's got to be a contrast whereby the one helps define the other, as being its opposite. But then if both evil and good exist, then it stands to reason that there are a whole lot of in-between values – some things not as good as other things – degrees of evil, if you like. In other words we end up with a whole spectrum arranged according to some sort of scale of values. That means we must have a moral scale, a kind of yardstick with which we intuitively measure morality or how good or evil some event is. But to have such a moral law also presumes there's a Giver of that moral law – which is, of course, what the Bible claims is indeed the case.

Back to our atheist philosopher who, naturally enough, wanted to side-step that logic by denying the existence of evil. He said 'evil' was a meaningless term for him. It's just a label that gets used by society for things which we don't like. The Christian philosopher decided to put the atheist's view to the test. 'Imagine there's a young child, a baby, lying here in front of us,' he said. 'If

I, or someone else, were to take a huge kitchen knife, and cut that innocent baby in pieces, would you not admit that would be an evil thing to do?' All eyes in the audience were now fixed on the atheist. 'I would not like that to happen,' he said, 'but I could not describe it as being an evil act.' There was a gasp from the audience. There were probably many who, before then, had not seen the existence of evil as actually presenting evidence for the existence of God. There was no question about who'd won the debate.

You remember we were talking about the objection to the Christian message which goes like this: 'How can you believe in hell and also in a God of love?' We were saying it's worth exposing the hidden assumption in the question which somehow implies it's immoral for a loving God to punish persons in the lake of fire. The point is by assuming some basis for morality (and so 'evil') – however imperfect in their understanding – they've actually fatally weakened any case against God's existence they may have thought they had. But some objectors may accept that there is a God, while refusing to consider it a reasonable thing for such a God to send anyone to eternal punishment. If they believe in God, they very likely will also accept that Jesus Christ was at least a good man, a great moral teacher. We should then focus on the person of Jesus Christ. He's presented in the New Testament of the Bible as someone who went about doing good; always helping people in difficulty, demonstrating more than anyone else the love of his Father, God ... but he – more than anyone else in the Bible – was a hell-fire preacher! The Bible's account of his life – which is consistent with sources outside the Bible, and indeed with the impact of his life around the world ever since –

## OVERCOMING OBJECTIONS TO CHRISTIAN FAITH 51

the Bible account of his life shows him to have been the kindest and truest of men. The issue of hell and a God of love comes into sharp focus in the person of Jesus Christ himself. He, the kindest and truest of men, taught repeatedly about the reality of hell; of the judgement to come. Jesus spoke of hell some twelve times as recorded in the four Gospels. Was he being untrue or unkind on those occasions? That doesn't fit at all. Much rather, because of who he is, and because of what he's like, he was giving fair warning to all so that we might by God's grace escape such a fearful reality as eternal punishment in the lake of fire.

It was because of his perfect knowledge of the reality of hell that Jesus came down in love to earth, to make possible, through his death for our sins, a way of escape for all who believe on him. The Bible says that 'all have sinned', and that this inevitably leads to 'death', for God must punish sin. Death, as we understand it in a physical sense here on earth, brings separation and feelings of remoteness and alienation. This is the essence of eternal death in the lake of fire: total separation and alienation from God. Jesus spoke of this final state - using such descriptions as 'eternal fire', 'outer darkness' and 'place of weeping'. These portray to us at least an agonising awareness of God's wrath, together with a total sense of loss and separation and self-loathing. Thank God that all who accept Jesus as Saviour will never suffer this fate.

But those who refuse to believe on Christ will die in their sins and where he is they cannot go. It couldn't be fairer — God will honour for eternity what we choose now. In the light of this, please take this opportunity of accepting Jesus now as your personal Saviour. He died on the cross to take your punishment instead of you, if you'll only repent and believe.

I know it's not popular to speak of punishment today, whether it's God's eternal punishment of sinners who refuse to believe in Christ's sacrifice for them, or just plain ordinary punishment within society. We much prefer to treat people instead of punish people nowadays. However, the reality is actually the very opposite of what our questioner thinks is fair. In real terms, there can be no loving justice for all unless there is punishment.

I was reminded of this when on the 26th of April, 2007, the verdict was announced in the Lucie Blackman murder trial in Japan. On that same morning, in the BBC radio's Today programme, on 'Thought for the Day', Anne Atkins spoke about a paradox. On the one hand, the accused had been found guilty and given a life sentence: on the other hand, the victim's family was still devastated at the verdict. Why? Because at that time he had not been found guilty of crimes specifically committed against her. But what's the point of them demanding more? Joji Obara already had a life sentence. The point, we were reminded, was Lucie. She was beautiful, she was young, she was loved. A dreadful sin was committed against her. If that isn't addressed, there's a slur on her worth.

I mention this because some say, "Why shouldn't God simply forgive every one of us – of all our wrongs against each other?' Well, if God simply forgave everyone without demonstrating justice, he would be suggesting that all the Lucies who have ever suffered injustice in the world don't matter. But they do matter. We all matter to God, and the point is our sins – meaning all our wrongs, not just crimes – devalue others, as well as offending God. So many times our thoughts demean, our words belittle. That's why on the appointed day to come, God will address with

## OVERCOMING OBJECTIONS TO CHRISTIAN FAITH53

total justice the wrongs which have been done. But there's good news: Jesus Christ, whose life as a man showed him to be actually more than a man, paid for human sin on the cross where he died. His words and the Bible's claims clearly declare him to be God's son, sharing our humanity for the deliberate purpose of dying sacrificially in order to satisfy God's justice on account of our sins. For us to receive forgiveness on this basis – which is both loving and just – all God asks us to do is to turn from our self-centred, self-choosing, self-serving ways and trust fully in his son, Jesus Christ, who served our sentence in his death on the cross for our sins.

## CHAPTER 10 - HASN'T SCIENCE DONE AWAY WITH THE NEED FOR FAITH?

I have had the experience of being met with a patronizing smile after raising 'the God issue' in a conversation. Many of those we talk to seem to make the assumption that science has done away with the need for faith. It's an understandable reaction. Scientific figures in the media spotlight have popularized certain scientific ideas in a way that makes them appear hostile to any faith in God. Take, for example, Stephen Jay Gould, lately of Harvard. He had this to say about human origins:

'We are here because one odd group of fishes had a peculiar fin anatomy that could transform into legs for terrestrial creatures; because comets struck the earth and wiped out dinosaurs, thereby giving mammals a chance not otherwise available (so thank your lucky stars in a literal sense); because the earth never froze entirely during an ice age; because a small and tenuous species, arising in Africa a quarter of a million years ago, has managed, so far, to survive by hook and by crook. We may yearn for a "higher" answer - but none exists. This explanation, though superficially troubling...is ultimately...exhilarating.'

Most people hearing that would tend to think 'that man is a scientific expert; he really knows what he's talking about. So weird as it may sound, it must be true.' Tragically, they may conclude that modern scientific understanding of how things really are, has done away with any need to believe in a Creator God - God has been replaced by 'time and chance', and no 'higher' an-



## OVERCOMING OBJECTIONS TO CHRISTIAN FAITH 55

swer exists. This conclusion is what Stephen Jay Gould finds exhilarating, although I confess I'm at a loss to understand why. Why should the idea that we're simply the random products of mere chance in a purposeless existence be in any way, shape or form, exhilarating?

But there again, an eminent professor has said it and so many people, hearing it spoken with such conviction, will take it on trust that all he says has been established by science. But has it? Is this fact or mere speculation?

Perhaps the most convincing way to demonstrate that it's speculation – and not fact - is to use the words of one of the world's most outspoken atheists today – someone who would, of course, totally agree with Stephen Jay Gould's sentiment. I'm talking about Richard Dawkins, author of best-selling books like 'The God Delusion'. He's always trumpeting the need to take an evidence-based approach to everything, to such an extent, that someone was once moved to ask him if there was anything he believed in without being able to prove it. His answer was both candid and illuminating. He said, "I believe, but I cannot prove, that all life, all intelligence, all creativity and all 'design' anywhere in the universe, is the direct or indirect product of Darwinian natural selection" (Dawkins quoted in the book 'Letter from a Christian Citizen' by Douglas Wilson, AV Press, 2007, in the foreward, p.xviii).

That, surprisingly enough, is a very fair statement. Dawkins is well known in the western world for his anti-God rhetoric. He's the kind of person the media would tend to turn to, to ask for a scientific perspective. But here, in his own words, he's candid

enough to say that what he holds is, in fact, a faith position. Of course, this must be so, if you think about it, as no theory of origins can be scientifically proved, for we weren't around back then. All the evidence available to us to observe and test exists, of course, in the present. It's only by one indirect means or another that we can infer from it something about the past. It's not something that can be done directly, so theories about the past must always be based on assumptions – and that's really another way of talking about beliefs. Michael Polanyi has gone so far as to state that human reason never operates in a vacuum – it never operates outside of a framework of basic beliefs. This means that to admit faith as being necessary to understanding something of creation is not different in principle from the usual way science operates. And indeed many famous scientists found a place for God in the framework of basic beliefs which supported their scientific research. This shows there's no conflict between science and religion; but only between the two opposed worldviews of naturalism and theism.

For example, Johannes Kepler who discovered the three laws of planetary motion said that to him the universe was a 'sacred sermon, a veritable hymn to God the Creator'. He added: 'O God, I am thinking Thy thoughts after Thee'. These men were the giants of the world of science. We only see further today than they saw, because we stand on their shoulders. Today, Stephen Hawking, who sits in Sir Isaac Newton's chair at Cambridge University, UK, is one of the best-known theoretical physicists of his generation. He has done ground-breaking research on 'black holes' (volumes of space from which no light can escape – having been trapped by a very massive object).

## OVERCOMING OBJECTIONS TO CHRISTIAN FAITH 57

But he poses a vital question when he asks: 'What is it that breathes fire into the equations and makes a universe for them to describe?' The fact that one of the brightest minds in science is asking the question, shows us that this is a type of question which science itself isn't able to answer. Science is basically all about asking, "How?" How the heavenly bodies move as they do. How various substances will react with one another. But science can't begin to answer the 'why' question: the fundamental question of why things are as they are. Science at best attempts a description of reality, but why reality should be as it is, is a different kind of question – a deeper, philosophical question.

And so we get into philosophical arguments based on the fact that every event has a cause, or – more carefully – that every thing that has a beginning must have a cause.

The argument goes like this:

1. Whatever begins to exist has a cause.
2. The universe began to exist.
3. Therefore, the universe must have a cause.

Probably most reasonable people would refuse to accept that the universe sprang into existence 'uncaused' out of nothing. Following the so-called 'Big Bang' theory, as we run the clocks backward in time we arrive at a point where the laws of science, as we know them today, break down. Put another way, what that means is not even scientists have a scientific explanation for what happened right at the beginning of time! So there's no need to

be in any way embarrassed by the majestic statement with which the Bible opens: 'In the beginning God ...'

As world-class philosopher, Alvin Plantinga has said: all explanations have to end somewhere. Materialists equally have no explanation for the existence of elementary particles: in their view they simply are. Scientific evidence which is consistent with there having been an actual beginning comes from a very basic and general law of science (known as the Second Law of Thermodynamics) which lies behind the fact that everything we see around us is gradually wearing out, implying there was a time when it was once 'brand new'. And so it's at least reasonable to argue, although perhaps not to everyone's satisfaction, that the universe, since it once began to exist, must also have a cause for its existence at the time it began. Christianity then asserts that the great uncaused First Cause of all things is the God of the Bible – which begins by answering the 'why' question which science can't answer. 'In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.'

We choose to believe that (accepting it, on God's own authority, from his Word, the Bible) – in a way that's really no different from the scientist who chooses to believe in chance. Faith is the only way we can prove God, faith is the proving of things not seen (see Hebrews 11:1,2). But this is not blind faith. There's evidence to support this faith. The things that are seen, give reasonable evidence for that starting point of faith (see Romans 1:20). In fact, the ultimate reality is that we are without excuse if we wilfully refuse to have God in our knowledge. Maybe the point can be brought home if we return the challenge – by asking our challenger if he or she can disprove God's existence. If they dared

## OVERCOMING OBJECTIONS TO CHRISTIAN FAITH 59

to claim they could, then what they're in effect claiming is that they've got infinite knowledge – for before I could even claim that no such thing as say, a rainbow-coloured stone exists anywhere in the universe, technically I'd need to know – ultimately by visiting – that in every possible location in the universe no such stone is to be found. Far less can anyone hope to prove that God does not exist.

*“And without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is and that He is a rewarder of those who seek Him” (Hebrews 11:6).*

## CHAPTER 11 - WHAT ABOUT ALL THE BLOODSHED IN THE NAME OF RELIGION?

One of the popular comebacks when talking to people about the Christian faith is to hear people respond and say 'Oh, don't talk to me about religion! What about all the blood that's been shed in the name of religion?' Often they'll add: 'There's been more blood shed in the name of religion than for any other reason.' Often it's a tactic to close down the conversation, but let's at least take the challenge seriously. I wonder if the person who raises this objection has ever sat down and really tried to estimate the number of people who have been killed by irreligion?

I know how people in the west tend to throw up the example of the Spanish Inquisition as an example of religious horror – and that's perfectly understandable. We should first point out that we are not in the business of defending it. But to put even that horror into perspective, what about comparing it with the scientific socialism of Communist countries which have killed 100 million (and still counting) around the globe? It's reckoned that Stalin alone may have been responsible for an estimated 30 million of those deaths. This is the Stalin who abandoned his seminary training and began to dogmatically deny the existence of God. But his daughter Svetlana said that her father when he was dying, sat up one final time from his death-bed and shook his fist at the ceiling. One has to wonder who he was shaking his fist at. But if we go back for a moment to the Inquisition which in the course of three centuries, killed perhaps 3,000 people, what we

## OVERCOMING OBJECTIONS TO CHRISTIAN FAITH<sup>61</sup>

find – as we put even that horror into perspective – is that this was fewer people than the Soviet Union killed on an average day.

There again, the scientific racism of Nazi Germany killed 40 million – and attempted genocide against Europe's Jews. It's well enough documented that this was the out-working of anti-God ideas – the result of irreligious philosophies. The nineteenth century German philosopher, Frederick Nietzsche (died 1900), had wanted to dismantle what he saw as the scaffolding effect of Christianity upon society. He felt that Christian morality stood in the way of progress. What Nietzsche wanted to do was to try an alternative foundation, a foundation without God. It was Nietzsche who made popular the statement 'God is dead' – and dramatically portrayed it in his parable called *The Madman*, which goes like this:

'Have you not heard of that madman who lit a lantern in the bright morning hours, ran to the marketplace and cried incessantly, "I'm looking for God, I'm looking for God!" As many of those who did not believe in God were standing there, he excited considerable laughter. "Why, did he get lost?" said one. "Did he lose his way like a child?" said another. "Or is he hiding? Is he afraid of us? Has he gone on a voyage? Or emigrated?" Thus they yelled and laughed. The madman sprang into their midst and pierced them with his glances. "Whither is God?" he cried. "I shall tell you. We have killed him – you and I. All of us are his murderers...God is dead, and we have killed him."

When Nietzsche was talking about killing God, he meant killing God philosophically, of course. He had little idea how costly this attempt would be in terms of human deaths. First of all, in his

own life and health. Because, for the last dozen or so years of his life he himself became the madman. Then along came his fellow-countryman, Hitler, to put Nietzsche's ideas into practice and to build on them. The world soon learnt of the horrors that follow when we de-construct the foundations of good thinking, and begin to build instead on the basic idea that God is dead, and life is senseless. Nietzsche in the 19th century actually forecast madness and violence in the 20th century based on the acceptance of his philosophy. This was fulfilled when Hitler gave copies of Nietzsche's work to Stalin and Mussolini. And when Hitler and Stalin built on these ideas, applying them to the fundamental values of society, disaster unfolded. As we say, Nazi Germany killed 40 million and Communist countries killed 100 million – all in the name of irreligion. Those who claim more bloodshed has taken place in the name of religion than anything else seem to have forgotten the terrible lesson from these fearful social experiments of the twentieth century.

And it's precisely these social experiments that support the Christian claim that the moral absolutes of the Bible are the best foundation for life! As Jesus said:

*"Therefore everyone who hears these words of Mine and acts on them, may be compared to a wise man who built his house on the rock. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and slammed against that house; and yet it did not fall, for it had been founded on the rock. Everyone who hears these words of Mine and does not act on them, will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand. The rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and slammed against that house;*



## OVERCOMING OBJECTIONS TO CHRISTIAN FAITH63

*and it fell - and great was its fall."* (Matthew's Gospel, chapter 7:24-27).

By the way, we fully accept that religious bigotry is a horrible and cruel thing. There's no way we would wish to be thought of as defending it. After all, it was religious bigotry that put Christ on the cross. That now brings us to emphasize the difference between religion and faith. Religion is all about trying to do what we think we can do for God; whereas the essence of the Christian faith is all about what God has done for us – in giving his own Son to die for our sins at the cross. Christianity is a living faith in a personal relationship with God through Jesus Christ. So we are not really in the business of defending what's been done in the name of religion in any case.

On the contrary, we would make the case that a genuine experience of Christianity that's truly Bible-based, is perceived today as not carrying the threat of violence, but rather being a force for peace in an increasingly violent world. In a public debate, the Oxford atheistic philosopher Jonathan Glover was asked: 'If you Professor Glover, were stranded at the midnight hour in a desolate Los Angeles street and if, as you stepped out of your car with fear and trembling, you were suddenly to hear the weight of pounding footsteps behind you, and you saw ten burly young men who had just stepped out of a dwelling coming towards you, would it or would it not make a difference to you to know that they were coming from a Bible study?' While the audience laughed, the professor admitted it would make a difference.

Of course the same could not be said of all world religions today, but that's to come back to the clear distinction we're making be-

tween what's done in the name of some religion and what's consistent with the true expression of biblical Christian faith. Christianity has a proven track record of changing violent, blood-thirsty people into peace-loving citizens. One of the most gripping examples of a changed life which I've come across recently is the story of Stephen Lungu. He tells it in his book 'Out of the Black Shadows'. The Black Shadows being the gang he ran with in Zimbabwe, back in the days in which it was called Rhodesia. Rejected by his father, and abandoned by his mother when they split up, Stephen grew up with an angry and bitter heart. One night he and his gang-members decided to petrol bomb a mission tent where a preacher was addressing hundreds of people. He made the mistake of first stopping to listen for a few minutes. He describes in his book how the preacher jabbed with his pointed finger: 'all have sinned'; 'the wages of sin is death', adding 'some here are not ready to die tonight'.

Misunderstanding that, Stephen couldn't work out how this preacher already seemed to know about their plans to kill as many people as possible in the tent that night. Well, the preacher that night went on to speak about how Jesus became poor that we might become rich. Stephen could relate to poverty all right, and quite fancied exchanging it for riches, so clutching his bag of petrol bombs, he was soon moving, almost involuntarily, to the front in a state of emotional and spiritual turmoil. The meeting was then interrupted when others started the petrol bomb attack which Stephen had meant to lead. At that point the preacher acknowledged Stephen's presence before him. "Can your Jesus save someone like me?" Stephen asked. "Yes," came the reply along

## OVERCOMING OBJECTIONS TO CHRISTIAN FAITH65

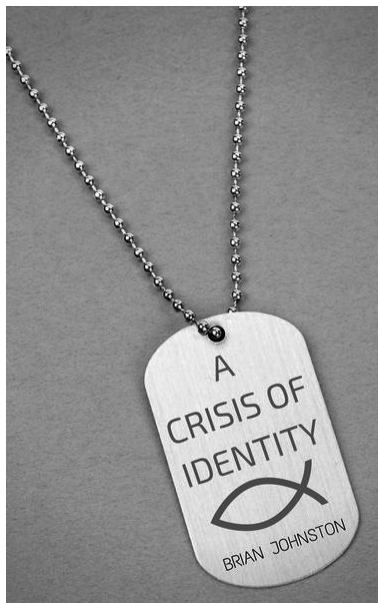
with a request to share a bit of Stephen's background information.

As Stephen told of his early rejection, the preacher himself began to cry. "Young man," he said, "I shall now tell you a story. Many years ago there was a 14-year-old girl who became pregnant." He went on to tell of how the father refused to take responsibility, so the girl dumped the baby in a toilet, but someone heard it drowning and rescued it, taking it to hospital. "I was that child," the preacher said. Stephen stared at him in astonishment. The preacher then read to him Psalm 27 verse 10: 'Though my father and my mother forsake me, the Lord will take me up.' Hearing that verse became the changing point in Stephen's life. "God," he cried, "I have nothing. I am nothing. I can't read. I can't write. My parents don't want me. Take me up, God, take me up. I'm sorry for the bad things I've done. Jesus, forgive me, and take me now'.

A throw-away child among the millions of Africa, but Jesus had found him – and turned his life round. To this day he tells others, all across Africa and beyond, of how God took him up. I pray this little book may be of some little help under God in equipping us to answer our critics, so that in the power of God they might be turned from their cynicism to a vibrant faith in Jesus Christ.



Did you love *Overcoming Objections to Christian Faith*? Then you should read *A Crisis of Identity* by Brian Johnston!



Issues of personal and collective identity seem everywhere today. Is gender fluid? Can a person self-define their gender? How should a person conflicted about their gender be counseled? When do a people have the right to self-determination? What makes a nation? In this absorbing book, Brian Johnston looks at identity from a biblical perspective - who does God say we are as humans, and what does he want our identity to be as Christians, both individually and collectively?

## Also by Brian Johnston

Healthy Churches - God's Bible Blueprint For Growth

Hope for Humanity: God's Fix for a Broken World

First Corinthians: Nothing But Christ Crucified

Bible Answers to Listeners' Questions

Living in God's House: His Design in Action

Christianity 101: Seven Bible Basics

Nights of Old: Bible Stories of God at Work

Daniel Decoded: Deciphering Bible Prophecy

A Test of Commitment: 15 Challenges to Stimulate Your Devotion to Christ

John's Epistles - Certainty in the Face of Change

If Atheism Is True...

8 Amazing Privileges of God's People: A Bible Study of Romans 9:4-5

Learning from Bible Grandparents

Increasing Your Christian Footprint

Christ-centred Faith

Mindfulness That Jesus Endorses

Amazing Grace! Paul's Gospel Message to the Galatians

Abraham: Friend of God

The Future in Bible Prophecy

Unlocking Hebrews

Learning How To Pray - From the Lord's Prayer

About the Bush: The Five Excuses of Moses  
The Five Loves of God  
Deepening Our Relationship With Christ  
Really Good News For Today!  
A Legacy of Kings - Israel's Chequered History  
Minor Prophets: Major Issues!  
The Tabernacle - God's House of Shadows  
Tribes and Tribulations - Israel's Predicted Personalities  
Once Saved, Always Saved - The Reality of Eternal Security  
After God's Own Heart : The Life of David  
Jesus: What Does the Bible Really Say?  
God: His Glory, His Building, His Son  
The Feasts of Jehovah in One Hour  
Knowing God - Reflections on Psalm 23  
Praying with Paul  
Get Real ... Living Every Day as an Authentic Follower of  
Christ  
A Crisis of Identity  
Double Vision: Hidden Meanings in the Prophecy of Isaiah  
Samson: A Type of Christ  
Great Spiritual Movements  
Take Your Mark's Gospel  
Total Conviction - 4 Things God Wants You To Be Fully Con-  
vinced About  
Esther: A Date With Destiny  
Experiencing God in Ephesians  
James - Epistle of Straw?  
The Supremacy of Christ  
The Visions of Zechariah  
Encounters at the Cross  
Five Sacred Solos - The Truths That the Reformation Recovered

Kingdom of God: Past, Present or Future?  
Overcoming Objections to Christian Faith  
Stronger Than the Storm - The Last Words of Jesus  
Fencepost Turtles - People Placed by God  
Five Woman and a Baby - The Genealogy of Jesus  
Pure Milk - Nurturing New Life in Jesus  
Jesus: Son Over God's House  
Salt and the Sacrifice of Christ  
The Glory of God  
The Way: Being a New Testament Disciple  
Power Outage - Christianity Unplugged  
Windows to Faith: Insights for the Inquisitive





## **About the Author**

Born and educated in Scotland, Brian worked as a government scientist until God called him into full-time Christian ministry on behalf of the Churches of God ([www.churchesofgod.info](http://www.churchesofgod.info)). His voice has been heard on Search For Truth radio broadcasts for over 30 years (visit [www.searchfortruth.podbean.com](http://www.searchfortruth.podbean.com)) during which time he has been an itinerant Bible teacher throughout the UK and Canada. His evangelical and missionary work outside the UK is primarily in Belgium and The Philippines. He is married to Rosemary, with a son and daughter.



## About the Publisher

Hayes Press ([www.hayespress.org](http://www.hayespress.org)) is a registered charity in the United Kingdom, whose primary mission is to disseminate the Word of God, mainly through literature. It is one of the largest distributors of gospel tracts and leaflets in the United Kingdom, with over 100 titles and hundreds of thousands despatched annually. In addition to paperbacks and eBooks, Hayes Press also publishes Plus Eagles Wings, a fun and educational Bible magazine for children, and Golden Bells, a popular daily Bible reading calendar in wall or desk formats. Also available are over 100 Bibles in many different versions, shapes and sizes, Bible text posters and much more!